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Problems of involvement and detachment in the writings of Norbert Elias

ABSTRACT

Elias's great work, *The Civilizing Process* (2 vols), was originally published in the inauspicious year of 1939. Elias wrote it as an associate of Mannheim's Frankfurt circle. The Second World War, and his fraught attempts to establish himself in British academic sociology in the first two decades after 1945, plunged his works into obscurity. Only now, as his early publications are starting to become available in English, is the resonance and insight of his sociological method coming to be widely appreciated. This paper considers the main features of the figurational approach and critically assesses its value.

Norbert Elias's writings have not been well digested in western sociology. His supporters praise him to the heavens for producing a 'democratic', 'humanistic' and 'liberating' form of radical sociology. While his detractors find in his life's work (the production and refinement of 'figurational sociology') merely the means to call everything into question and criticize nothing. In this paper I shall consider what claim, if any, Elias's work has upon our attention. My discussion is divided into three sections. The first section examines the main features of Elias's sociological method. Section two takes a critical look at Elias's method. The concluding section explores the question of why Elias's work has produced a mixed response of strong opinions in western sociological circles.

1 POSITION AND METHOD

Elias's position is a realist position. The task of sociology, he writes, is 'to bring our symbols more closely into line with what has actually occurred when the whole world of animals and humans developed'. The standard objection to sociological realism is that it neglects or
marginalizes subjective choice in human affairs. Giddens, Bauman and Smith have each accused Elias of falling into this trap. There is no question that Elias’s major work, *The Civilizing Process*, contains a great deal of material which is grist to the mill for this criticism. For example, in the concluding section of volume two, Elias himself affirms that the basic conclusion of his analysis is that

the constraints to which the individual is subject today, and the forces corresponding to them, are in their character, their strength and structure decisively determined by the particular forces engendered by the structure of our society . . . by its power and other differentials and the immense tensions created by them.

This seems to be clear enough: human action is ‘decisively determined’ by real objective forces which exist independently of consciousness. Elias makes the point so forcefully that there is a real danger of allowing matters to rest there and dismiss his work as an example of naive realism. Yet this would be to ignore some of the most distinctive features of his approach to sociology. For although he argues that there is a real objective world which exists independently of consciousness, he also insists that this world is ascertainable and manageable. Indeed, he maintains that the most important reason for studying the real world is to act upon it. Perhaps this point is most transparent in Elias’s post-war writings on epistemology and science. Nevertheless, only a limited reading of *The Civilizing Process* could miss the seminal importance of this theme in his thought. For example, in the 1936 preface to the study Elias expressed the hope that, through sociological enquiry,

we shall one day succeed in making accessible to more conscious control those processes which today take place in and around us not very differently from natural events, and which we confront as medieval man confronted the forces of nature (emphasis mine).

Critics who have noticed this theme in Elias’s work have used it to launch another line of attack. Thus, Alt and Mulkay criticize him for trying to make bankable again the old positivist notion that the sole justification of science is to subject the human and natural world to the domination of social interests. In Mulkay’s own words, the only criterion he (Elias) gives to identify object-centred knowledge is its “capacity to control the course of events”. A number of implications derive from this point and Mulkay and Alt, in their own distinctive ways, work through them assiduously. Thus, they accuse Elias of neglecting the social context of human knowledge. He is judged to endorse uncritically the dominant epistemology which applies ‘practical utility’ as the ‘invariant criterion’ to validate or falsify knowledge.
This, it is said, leads Elias to make ingenuous assumptions about scientific knowledge. To be specific, he is regarded to argue that science is impartial and that, viewed historically, the attempt of scientists to reach objective understanding of the real world has been 'a long march of progress'.

These criticisms are certainly very serious. However, they can only be defended by ignoring what many would see as Elias's most significant contribution to the sociology of knowledge: his analysis of 'process reduction' (Zustandsreduktion) tendencies in western social science. In Elias's view the tendency to reduce everything which is observed and experienced as dynamic into static conceptual categories is the cardinal error of contemporary western social science. It maintains the forest of false conceptual dichotomies which, Elias contends, mars the capacity of sociologists to see things as they really are. As examples, he mentions the dichotomies between individual and society, social statics and dynamics, base and superstructure. Against all of this, Elias makes a fervent appeal to develop social theories which conceptualize all aspects of human societies in terms of movement and process. So strong is this that Elias himself occasionally refers to figurational sociology as a 'developmental' or 'processual' approach to the study of social phenomena. By this he means an approach which is non-reifying, non-deterministic and committed to studying social relations as relatively open-ended processes.

It is worth mentioning this because it patently shows that the figurational approach is, in fact, diametrically opposed to any tradition of social enquiry which seeks to construct everlasting, universal statements about the nature of social life. Elias indeed submits that the aim of science is to reveal the underlying structure behind perceived natural and social data. The most vivid error of his critics is to assume that this structure is conceptualized as static and unchanging. For Elias's analysis of process reduction systematically repudiates the notion that structures exist out of time. The proposition that the symbols of science may, in the course of time, become less adequate in representing reality is perfectly consistent with this general argument. Scientific knowledge, argues Elias, is a corollary of the structure of human groups. If the structure of human groups is not static and unchanging why is it necessary to imagine that the criteria and content of scientific knowledge behave differently?

This is a very complex question. Although there are no logical reasons to suggest that a particular scientific theory is intrinsically superior to its rivals, Elias acknowledges that scientists regularly argue precisely this case. To explain this as a mere consequence of process reduction tendencies simply muddles the issue. For process reduction tendencies in language and thought are not natural, immemorial features of social life. Rather they are merely the corollary of the structure of human groups. From this baseline
position, Elias tackles the question of distorted meaning in science on at least three analytically distinct levels: involvement and detachment; the concept of figuration; and the civilizing process and science. In the next three subsections I will work through each level in turn.

Involvement and Detachment Elias maintains that socialization is basically a process of status acquisition. By being born into a family at a certain time the individual is empowered with resources to participate meaningfully in everyday life. Long before Foucault, Elias argued that the empowering of the self also provides the basis for the subjugation of the self. By defining the self as a unique entity, socialization places the individual in a specific social position with attendant rights, duties and obligations vis-à-vis others. Elias sees this as an involuntary process i.e. babies do not select the families that they are born into. Socialization then involves the individual with specific background assumptions, values, orientations etc. Involvement in Elias’s work is a dualistic concept. He recognizes that involvement with culture, language and citizenship is a precondition for interpreting the world; at the same time, he endorses the view that involvement imposes a partial perspective on social life which can generate fateful oppositions in social orientations and human relations.

The argument is very prominent in Elias’s writings. Prima facie, it undermines my opening claim that Elias’s methodological position is a realist position. What the discussion of involvement appears to show is a retreat into idealist assumptions and forms of reasoning. There is no centre, no independent reality, no terra firma in the world. Instead the world seems to be portrayed as the mere expression of ‘involved’ consciousness. Thus, from a realist standpoint, Elias’s approach is twice damned: not only does it smuggle in idealist presuppositions, it also carries the torch of relativism in the implication that judgments of reality are relative to a particular ‘involved’ worldview and only valid within it.

I shall come to Elias’s rebuttal of idealism in the next subsection when I consider his concept of figuration. The charge of relativism warrants an immediate response. It is indeed the case that Elias maintains that comprehension of the connections between perceived data is culturally and historically relative. However, his claim that cultural and historical variations in knowledge are demonstrable facts makes no concession whatsoever to the idea that the social perspectives associated with each variation are equally valid and equally true. Elias’s concept of detachment is intended to make this clear. By this he means a disciplined, qualified exercise in ‘self distancing’. The individual ‘stands back’ from ‘reflected’ objects of thought in order to see them ‘afresh’. Elias claims that generations of scientists have contributed to the growth of detachment. They have led the move from the dogmatic and semi-mystical characteristics of traditional
systems of thought. This is reflected in the high levels of control which human beings now exercise over natural phenomena. Elias's critics are right to point to the importance of this theme in his work. Where they err is in the suggestion that control is the only criterion that he gives to identify scientific knowledge. His concept of detachment is based on the proposition that scientific methods are more objective, testable and accurate than traditional approaches. The concept of detachment is antithetical to relativism because it insists that scientific knowledge is not only different from other types of knowledge but also more accurate and truthful.

The concept of figuration Scientific knowledge is engendered and disseminated in social figurations. A figuration, explains Elias, is 'a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people.' The argument is not that the structure of groups is a product of social consciousness but, rather, social consciousness is a product of the structure of groups. Idealism is therefore discounted as a tenable sociological position.

Elias maintains that the failure to recognize that scientific knowledge develops in social figurations is the Achille's heel of the influential work done by Popper and Kuhn on the theory of science. Popper's zeal in pursuing what he calls 'the logic of scientific discovery' falters on the misplaced assumption that there is a single model of science. In fact, scientists have developed different models in response to the complexity of their subject matter. Thus, physicists, who study processes where levels of integration are fairly low and action is regular and predictable have tended to see the production of everlasting theories which express universal laws as the highest expression of scientific endeavour. In contrast, biologists, whose turf covers processes where levels of integration are more dense and where action is less regular and predictable, have given a higher value to the production of accurate observation and typological systems. They have been far more sceptical of the validity of deductive theory. When the full range of contributions to the scientific figuration is considered the picture becomes far more complex. This is not only because there are many more approaches to be taken into account. In addition, each approach is associated with qualitative differences in the data under review. For example, sociologists examine process data where levels of integration are polymorphous, multi-layered and subject to rapid change. Elias argues that Popper's failure to recognize differences within the scientific figuration leads to the fatal mistake of underestimating the significance of power relations in structuring scientific knowledge. In particular relations of domination and subordination between the natural and social sciences are neglected. The historical success of natural scientists, notably physicists and chemists, in mastering aspects of the natural world has elevated their representatives
into dominant positions in the scientific figuration. Their training and general orientation encourages them to equate science per se with the attributes that typify their own characteristic procedures and objectives. According to Elias, Popper’s approach entirely misses the important social and historical fact that social scientists are subject to ‘a manner or style of thinking which has proved highly successful in men’s dealing with physical events, but which is not always appropriate if used in their dealings with others’.12

Elias is no more conciliatory to Kuhn’s work. He accuses him of giving a new lease of life to the old positivist thesis that reason plays the main part in the construction of knowledge. The emphasis on reason leads Kuhn to found his theory upon two false conceptual dichotomies. The first of these is the dichotomy between ‘normal’ and ‘revolutionary’ science. For Elias, the main objection to this is that it presents social change as a schismatic process. ‘Revolutionary’ science is portrayed as an apocalyptic rupture from ‘normal’ science. Blinding truth replaces blinding error. Against this Elias is committed to examine social change as a structured process of interdependence. The concept of figuration aims to emphasize that no social phenomenon exists alone, and none can be examined self-referentially. The second dichotomy is between the ‘scientific community’ and ‘society’. Reading Kuhn it is sometimes easy to forget that scientists live and work in societies. Their involvement with the ideas and movements of the time does not cease when they enter the research lab. Elias argues that it is essential to study science as an aspect of society. Why is this essential? And what further light does it shed on Elias’s sociological method? In order to answer these questions it is necessary to turn to his theory of the civilizing process and the emergence of science.

The civilizing process and science Figurational sociology seeks to study changes at the atomic level in terms of the structure and dynamics of relations at the composite (figurational) level. Elias’s discussion of the case of the emergence of scientific detachment in the course of the civilizing process makes this clear. Thus, in Europe, as the Middle Ages wane, populations grow, they become more concentrated in urban—commercial centres, the division of labour develops, trade and a money economy expand. Gradually, the state establishes a monopoly of the use of physical force and a monopoly of taxation. The ‘chains of interdependence’ between people lengthen and multiply. As people grow more dependent upon each other for their employment, subsistence, education, security, comforts etc, their personality structure and social attitudes change. At first, it is the nobility who cultivate higher standards of self restraint and refinement in interpersonal conduct. However, notably from the Renaissance onwards, this behaviour is increasingly imitated by the lower orders. This provides the incentive for greater refinement and decorum in the
behaviour of the high born which, in turn, provides a further incentive for a reaction from the lower orders etc. Slowly, the idea of proper public conduct establishes a foothold in popular culture, and the discrepancies in manners and civility between groups and classes diminish.

Paradoxically, one result of the greater factual interdependence between people was to fuel a demand for the recognition of individual rights and freedom. As the will of the individual becomes increasingly subject to the actions of others, and as pressures for self restraint expand to fill nearly every crevice of public and private life, the premium upon individual freedom becomes very high. Thus, in religion, art and literature, non-conformity and dissent start to make a mark. These ‘individualizing’ tendencies in inter-personal conduct find their parallel and, in time, their justification in the expressions of ‘transcendental philosophy’. A paradigm of science emerges which posits an existential barrier between the ideas ‘within’ the self and the so-called ‘external’ world. Philosophers and natural scientists seek to legitimate their aspirations for intellectual freedom by unravelling the secrets of the world and producing universal statements and laws about natural and social phenomena. Together, they ransack nature and history in search of first principles, death defying truths and eternal wisdom. The pursuit of hidden knowledge led to many important discoveries and breakthroughs. Their practical application conferred unprecedented power and prestige upon natural scientists. In this way, little by little, the methods of natural science became venerated as the apotheosis of scientific endeavour.

II CRITICAL DISCUSSION

At this point it may be helpful to summarize the main features of Elias’s methodological position. ‘The truth is the whole’ says Hegel. The figurational approach endorses this view by being global in its terms of reference. Changes in personal behaviour are studied as aspects of transformations in the structure of human figurations. Figurational sociology adopts a realist view of life. For Elias, scientific theories refer to processes in nature and society which really do exist. At all times however he is careful to stress that they can only be approximations of the truth i.e. finite statements whose ‘object adequacy’ changes as structures of interdependence between people change. The figurational approach applies a power perspective to the study of social life. Power is seen as an aspect of every human relationship. Like Foucault, Elias is strongly critical of one-sided views of power which fasten upon only its repressive or enabling characteristics. Power, maintains Elias, is both repressive and
enabling. The remaining feature of the figurational method that I wish to draw attention to in this summary is its insistence on the need to examine natural and social phenomena in terms of process. The Zustandsreduktion tendency in social science is identified as a major obstacle in producing social theories with high object adequacy.

So far, the discussion has dwelt upon the key themes in Elias’s sociological method. It has been, overwhelmingly, a descriptive exercise. Where critical analysis has intervened it has been confined to disentangling Elias’s argument from the arguments that his critics wrongly attribute to him. Identifying what Elias really says is a game that can easily become a preoccupation. In the hands of some of his disciples it has produced an unattractive blandness which wallows in the ‘greatness’ of Elias’s achievement and recognizes no faults in his work.¹⁵ In the next few pages I shall take issue with this view. My purpose is not to gratuitously knock down what others have built up. Indeed, it ought to be quite clear by now that I do indeed regard Elias’s methodological writings as deserving much wider attention than they have received hitherto. Without doubt they are among the most challenging and perceptive in the field. Nevertheless, there are serious omissions in his work. Justice is not done to the agenda which his work sets before us by ignoring them. Four points must be made.

In the first place, it is astonishing that Elias, a leading opponent of dualism in the social sciences, should place the dichotomy between involvement and detachment at the heart of his sociological method. Plainly this invites the same mistake of reification that he deplores in the work of others. It is also a leap into idealism which casts a shadow over the self proclaimed realism of the figurational approach. Figurational sociologists cannot have it both ways. On the one hand they bask in the radical sounding pledge to study how people ‘actually proceed, rather than trying to legislate about how they ought to proceed.’¹⁶ On the other hand, they judge meaning by a concept of detachment which has no empirical basis, and study pure involvement as a social phenomenon which is restricted to ‘small babies’ and adults suffering from rare types of mental disorder.¹⁷

The second point falls in behind the first. The highest ambition which Elias discerns for the modern sociologist is ‘the destruction of myth’.¹⁸ The method that he commends to this end is ‘the detour via detachment’. Figurational sociology stands or falls on the claim of bringing a consistently detached attitude of mind to bear upon the study of social relations. Yet readers intent upon practising the method of detachment must whistle in the dark. Elias supplies no guidelines, no mechanisms, no drill for attaining detachment. Indeed, the trend of his discussion denies the validity of such a method. Method requires conscious and planned procedure. Detachment is a blind, unplanned aspect of structural transformations in human figurations. There is then an unresolved tension in Elias’s whole
treatment of questions of involvement and detachment. He certainly maintains that the brandmark of scientific detachment is that its propositions reflect objective reality. At the same time he recognizes that the scientific statements which people articulate and encounter may be expressions of 'involved' consciousness. The question is how can detachment be differentiated from involvement? For Elias, the answer is obvious: time (the 'long term developmental perspective') is the ultimate arbiter of fact and fiction. Were it not for the subtlety and insight that Elias's practice of figuralational sociology has regularly achieved over the last fifty years, this might be taken as a dangerous platitude. Battles over questions of involvement and detachment may be rooted in history, but their effects are felt in the present. Elias himself argues that history must be studied as a relatively open ended process i.e. it sets the conditions for relations in the present, but does not determine them. 'Retrospective wisdom' is therefore a dubious standard of truth to differentiate current statements of detachment from statements of involvement, theory from ideology. Similarly, it is a feeble defence against the powerful, involved attitudes of mind which grip our own time.

The third point connects up with the remarks made in the last paragraph. It refers to the relation between knowledge and power in figuralational sociology. Elias argues that social life is process. No proposition or theory can be confirmed because nothing stands still. The movement of human figurations is blind. In other hands these conjectures have led to the denial of truth. Barthes, Derrida and Foucault, like Nietzsche before them, regard ideas of reason and scientific objectivity as manifestations of the will-to-power. If Elias refrains from embracing this relativist conclusion it is not because his discussion of involvement and detachment lacks impulsion towards it. His discussion of involvement repeatedly shows that statements which claim 'high object adequacy' to the world as it really is are very often distortions of the world which reflect personal or group interests. At the same time, as I have already noted, his advocacy of science is based on the thesis that, in the long run, the accumulation of scientific knowledge is the accumulation of truth. What this neglects is that ideologies of science are productive forces in society. They play a major part in perpetuating relations of domination and subordination between classes, races, nations and sexes. Their banishment will not be achieved by the mere exposure of the false conceptual dichotomies that litter the field and influence relations within the scientific figuration. To argue otherwise is to endorse a basically rationalist view of social relations in which human interests and human knowledge are presented as slowly converging to produce a factual, precise view of the world. It is an argument which Elias seems to slide into on several occasions in the course of his discussion. For example, in an article which he published in 1971 he writes, 20
men may fashion their knowledge of society in accordance with what they perceive as their immediate interests, but they may also fashion what they perceive as their immediate interests in accordance with their knowledge of society. In fact the better informed they are, the less ideological, the more object-augurate their knowledge of society is, the greater is their chance that it can serve their own interests.

This brings me to my fourth point. I have suggested that the account of knowledge which Elias sets out has rationalist overtones. Thus, it recognizes that warring values exist in science but characterizes them as mere distortions of the truth. The historical task of figurational sociology is to bring these values into line by the systematic destruction of myth. Yet if the rationalist notion that factual, testable theories are fated to replace myths, religious beliefs, metaphysical speculations and ‘all unproven images’ is present in Elias’s work, it rides on the back of an underlying pragmatism which is stronger still. Figurational sociology is firmly embedded in the *longue durée*. It studies the growth of detachment in human knowledge and the ‘civilizing’ transformation in patterns of violence as long term trend-maintaining processes. Data which confirm the basic theorems are assimilated as proof of the worth of the figurational approach. Yet data which appear to falsify the same theorems are also assimilated by either (a) assigning them a transient status, or (b) denying their negative significance. The high tolerance shown to data which appear to run counter to the figurational approach is revealing. An important claim made by Elias is that the competent application of the figurational approach will dramatically improve human orientation. In fact, figurational sociology has no solid predictive content. Its role is reactive. In this way it achieves relevance to changing social relations, but at the cost of abandoning any pretence of theoretical explanation.

III CONCLUSION

Elias’s sociological method combines sensitivity to change with scepticism about the validity of ultimate moral values of any kind. His attack upon static thinking equates moral value with myth. ‘The sociologist,’ he writes, 21 ‘should not be required or expected to express his convictions about how society *ought* to develop’ (emphasis his). Moral convictions are legislative, reductionist, unscientific. They are examples of process reduction, vessels of involved thought. Elias therefore refrains from making a detailed critique of current moral and political values. His writings include no alternative manifesto, no plans for the future. In place of them he suggests that a more accurate
understanding of the structure and dynamics of figurations is the true path to improve the orientation of human beings.

The question of moral values conveniently illustrates the main reasons for the mixed reaction to Elias's work. The course of sociology in this century has been heavily influenced by Max Weber's debate with the ghost of Karl Marx. In particular, Weber's treatment of the quandaries surrounding moral value-choice has left a deep mark on sociological debate. Weber fully accepted that moral positions cannot be sustained by rational argument. Nevertheless, he regarded subjective moral value-choice as a vital test of personal authenticity. In acting upon the world a person encounters competing social interests. This is necessarily the case, he insisted, because the moral world consists of a multitude of irreconcilable value positions. To make a subjective moral value-choice is therefore to declare an opposition and, in opposing, to pit one's will against the strength of others. For Weber then, subjective moral value-choice always mobilizes critical consciousness because it inevitably clashes with other value positions. In contrast, Elias rejects subjective moral value-choice as a futile ideal. Like Weber, he stresses that reason alone cannot establish a necessary connection between the intentions behind a moral choice and its consequences. However, his main criticism of Weber's position is that it assigns too much autonomy to social actors. Before persons can be held accountable for their actions, they must first have been reared and nurtured by others. As we have seen, Elias's highly developed sense of the contingencies which surround the choices and actions of persons is an indelible feature of his work. It derives from his fundamental thesis that individuals exist only in figurations. From the standpoint of figural sociological this is a transcendental fact which renders the whole of Weber's agonized interrogation of subjective moral value-choice defunct. Individuals are never free to choose what they ought to do or how they should lead their lives, because their lives are always involved with the lives of others.

If some who believe that sociological study is disfigured by the fast moving inflamed passions of the day find this position congenial, many others regard it to be evasive and unsatisfactory. It has generated the suspicion that Elias's critique of process reduction tendencies simply operates as a pretext for never making any commitment. This has certainly obstructed the spread of his ideas. What Adorno said of Jaspers, one of Elias's teachers, might also be said of Elias himself: 'the man never pins himself down: the world is all too dynamic.' Yet perhaps such comments underestimate the challenge which figurational sociology poses. In a few words, it is to purge sociology of all reifying tendencies and to expose the concept of individuality as an outright myth. This is a considerable cause. It raises political and intellectual questions of a very fundamental kind.
However, it must be said that the signs that sociologists are now coming to terms with them are no stronger than they were nearly fifty years ago when Elias broached them in the opening pages of *The Civilizing Process*. Thus, time, the ‘ultimate arbiter’ in Elias’s writings may be invoked as the sternest judge of the practical use of figuralional sociology.

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