

Norbert Elias.**Early Writings.** Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

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Norbert Elias.**The Court Society.** Translated by Edmund Jephcott.

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The story of how Norbert Elias's first great work, *The Court Society*, finally appeared in print is even stranger than the publication history of his masterpiece, *The Civilizing Process*. Where the latter lingered in obscurity after its first appearance on the eve of World War II from a small Swiss press, and was only reissued with new material in the late 1960s (later to be translated into English in separate volumes that were not clearly connected to one another), the former was almost entirely lost to oblivion for over thirty years. As Stephen Mennell tells us in his "Note on the Text" to this second volume of Elias's *Collected Works* in English (18 volumes are planned), Elias submitted the first version of the text under the supervision of Karl Mannheim in Frankfurt as his *Habilitation* – a qualifying work for an advanced academic career in Germany – shortly before Hitler came to power in early 1933. But when Elias went into exile in Paris (and then London) soon after, he was unable to present it publicly or bring it to print. Apparently, the manuscript only resurfaced to Elias's great surprise when he was moving house in Leicester in the summer of 1966, at which point he quickly began reworking it for eventual publication in 1969. (The original manuscript has since disappeared; the present edition is a revision of the translation first published in 1983.) As Mennell goes on to note, this time-gap gives *Die höfische Gesellschaft* a curious dual status as "both a precursor of Elias's magnum opus, *The Civilizing Process*, and a weighty extension of his theory of civilizing processes" (xiii). Along with the previously unpublished *Early Writings* from 1914 to 1935 included in the first volume of Elias's *Collected Works*, *The Court Society* invites us not only to consider the extraordinary intellectual project of his long career as a magnificent work-in-progress, but also to encounter his distinctive way of approaching history in light of contemporary concerns, that is, to discover with him the presence of the past.

This double character of the text – from its having been written in both 1933 and 1969 – is not only the result of a peculiar accident, but can be understood to be integral to the work's methodological and theoretical scope as well. The opening two chapters (the first of which was written in the later period) develop Elias's signature style of asking sociological questions to a set of empirical materials circumscribed by critical historiography (and which can be compared to earlier attempts in his more philosophically dense doctoral dissertation on "the concept of history", included in the *Early Writings*). For the scholar working in this mode, he argues, "contemporary circumstances decide how he sees 'history', and even what he sees as 'history'" (8). Here, the temporal and geographical parameters of the field are set quite precisely to cover the transitional period of the *ancien régime* in France from feudal agrarianism to industrial urbanization. In effect, the work fleshes out the era that concludes *The Civilizing Process*, and the area of the world that gave birth to the notion of "civilité," from the reign of Louis XIV in the 17th century (with some comparisons to his predecessors, François I and Henri V) to that of Louis XVI in the 18th (with a concluding chapter on the French Revolution and its aftermath). The general problem he poses is how to discern the uniqueness of

unrepeatable phenomena – the “greatness,” “genius,” “creativity,” and “charisma” of a ruler – while bringing what is usually treated as unstructured background phenomena into the foreground as a patterned figuration: “Which development in a structure composed of interdependent people, which figuration of human beings, allows the formation of a central position with the particularly great freedom of decision that we call ‘absolutism’ or ‘autocratic rule’?” (24). Elias explores these questions in the first instance through a series of graphic displays that demonstrate how the ground plans and architectural designs of the court palaces express social distance between servants, bourgeoisie, aristocrats, and other occupants in terms of the spatial proximity between living, sleeping, dining, working and ceremonial quarters. Thus, out of the court-aristocratic-bourgeois figuration of the *ancien régime* emerged a set of hierarchical classifications and cultural distinctions between social living spaces which would be important for later periods, as noted by the *Encyclopédistes*: “We speak of *la maison* of a bourgeois, *l’hôtel* of a noble, *le palais* of a prince or king” (59).

The most meticulously researched and compellingly presented chapters of the book are those that address what Elias calls *the psychogenesis of self-discipline*, and which thus provide an interesting complementary elaboration on the famous discussion of “The History of Manners” in Part II of *The Civilizing Process*. Especially fascinating are the detailed descriptions of the king’s bedroom as ‘the theatre of a peculiar ritual’ in which social hierarchies are reproduced via psychological control.

“[T]he meaning of etiquette for Louis XIV ... is not matter of ceremonial, but an instrument for the ruling of subjects. If power exists but is not visible in the appearance of the ruler, the people will not believe in it. They must see in order to believe. The more a prince distances himself, the greater will be the respect shown to him by the people” (128).

Such distancing nevertheless requires precisely regulated relationships of proximity and intimacy, of visibility and invisibility, that disregard boundaries later drawn between public and private spheres. In particular, the ceremony of the *levée* – the meticulously ordered sequence of no fewer than five of morning *entrées* in which certain people are permitted or obliged to enter the king’s chamber to perform certain duties – projects a dramatic image of how useful functions (and the people who fulfill them) are assigned specific prestige-values. As Elias notes, “while we like to objectify or reify everything personal, court people personify the objective” (110). His documentary sources derive for the most part from the circulation of memoirs, letters, and aphorisms among the members of the court society, often those in a precarious or declining position, such as the Duc de Saint-Simon. As he emphasizes throughout (and highlights again in an appendix on the “intendant” in charge of the estate management of economic affairs), the minutiae of these exacting displays of etiquette must be viewed as part of a broader struggle between the aristocratic ethos of rank, status, and spending, on the one hand, and an emerging bourgeois ethic of wealth, occupation, and saving, on the other. And yet all members of the court society are subject to the civilizing process, that is, to the trial (*Prozess*) of courtesy and civility which aims to curb violent affects and outbursts of passion in favour of increasingly more refined, calculated, and pacific codes of conduct.

The analysis of the intimate particularities of everyday life at court is expanded in subsequent chapters through a broader examination of what Elias elsewhere calls *the sociogenesis of rationalization*. In the present work this thesis is developed less with reference to the pattern of state formation through the monopolization of power (armies) and wealth (taxes) than in terms of a delicate balancing of tensions within the shifting social figuration of the king and his court. The epic scope of Elias’s larger project becomes evident in the course of examining how the land-base of

Henri IV's rule ("the last knightly king") was undermined during the reign of his successor by an influx of precious metals from abroad: "The courtly king distributing money or pensions, with all his personal moods, actions and feelings, directly and permanently surrounded by suitors, had power over a wider circle of people than any feudal king. His money gathered people to him" (169). By further concentrating the courts scattered across the countryside into a centralized urban location at the Palais de Versailles (accommodating as many as 10,000 people in the process), Louis XIV had to pander to the social and economic insecurities of his coterie while exploiting the conflicts between competing groups: "So the nobility, with their shrinking financial basis, needed the kings in order to resist the pressure from the bourgeois strata with their growing wealth, and the bourgeois corporations needed the kings to protect them against the threats, the presumption and the one-sided privileges of a still semi-knightly nobility" (181). Elias emphasizes that these dynamics may best be conceived not simply as an evolving system from mercantilism to capitalism, as the formation of isolated groups or individuals constituted as *homo clausus*, or as a blending of the ideal types of patrimonialism and bureaucracy, but rather as a mobile figuration of class and status positions within a network of interdependences.

That Elias has in mind an historical trajectory that extends well beyond the collapse of the *ancien régime* and the demise of Louis XVI in the French Revolution is made especially clear in the brilliant penultimate chapter, written for the published version, "On the sociogenesis of aristocratic romanticism in the process of courtisation". Here he argues that the affective dimension of courtly life is not so much eliminated through rationalization as it is displaced through romanticization. In particular, he locates a nostalgic longing among the aristocracy for a supposedly pastoral, rustic, bucolic, artisanal, and chivalrous world that is now faded or in decline: "The past took on the character of a dream image. Country life became a symbol of lost innocence, of spontaneous simplicity and naturalness" (231). In a way that recalls his vivid analysis of a series of late 15th century woodcuts depicting "Scenes from the Life of a Knight" in *The Civilizing Process*, here he cites examples from poetry (Ronsard), painting (Poussin), and especially prose fiction (Urfé) in order to document the aristocratic desire for clarity and security, the wish to "*vivre plus doucement et sans contraintes*" in an age of uncertainty and impending upheaval (here quoting from Urfé's drama of court life serialized from 1607-1627, *L'Astrée* 263-282, at 279). These reflections thus indicate the historical sources of what he had earlier called "the kitsch style" in a remarkable 1935 essay included in the *Early Writings*. There he argues that the peculiar character of an age undergoing transition becomes visible from its negative aspect – from expressions of anxiety and ambivalence regarding change, as well as contempt for decadence and lapses of taste among the politically defeated and disempowered. Thus, the aesthetic complaints of the declining aristocracy in the epoch of the *ancien régime* offer an interesting comparison to the tragic dilemma faced by artists and art dealers in the bourgeois age of "kitsch", a word which appears to derive from the specialist milieu of early 20th century Munich where "sketches" were marketed out of economic necessity to American tourists: "The term 'kitsch' is nothing other than an expression for this tension between the highly formed tastes of the specialists and the undeveloped, unsure taste of mass society" (92). Although the contemporary climate of resentment and rage of the 1930s is only implicitly addressed in this piece, these issues are explicitly invoked in three important essays included in these volumes: Elias's 1929 examination of "The Sociology of German Anti-Semitism" (which outlines the social, intellectual, and economic conflicts of interest between conservatives, liberals, and socialists regarding "the Jewish question"), his 1935 essay on "The Expulsion of Huguenots from France" (which describes Louis XIV's notorious "*dragonnades*" of the late 17th century in terms that recall the pogroms of the 1930s), and an appendix to *The Court Society* written in the late 1960s, "On the notion that there can be a state without structural conflicts" (which compares the tensions

and antagonisms that formed the power-base of the absolutist rule of Louis XIV with the conflicts that Hitler exploited under the industrialized conditions of National Socialism).

Under the mentorship of Mannheim in Frankfurt, and within an academic milieu that included Adorno, Horkheimer and others associated with the Institute for Social Research, Elias embraced what he came to view as a cultural revolution from which he hoped “a new intellectual” would emerge. As he implicitly suggested in his doctoral dissertation on the philosophy of history (and in his first plan to write a *Habilitation* on “The Emergence of the Modern Natural Sciences”), and as he explicitly announced in his response to Mannheim’s lecture on “Competition” at the 6th meeting of the German Sociological Association in Zurich (all included in the *Early Writings*), Elias envisioned the formation of a responsive intellectual stratum which would finally be released from a scholastic or Kantian “stasis” into a kind of Goethean “flow”, a “free floating intelligentsia” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*) which would nevertheless sustain its ties to local interests and changing realities (68). Reading *The Court Society* today from this point of view thus allows us to locate it as a precursor to other studies of the “total institutions” of modernity, alongside Marx on the factory, Foucault on the prison, Agamben on the camp, and Goffman on the asylum (the latter almost certainly influenced by Elias). It is not surprising that Pierre Bourdieu used *The Court Society* in his later work to explain the “disinterested” exchange of symbolic capital among the members of the educated “state nobility” of contemporary France in their competitive pursuit of power and prestige (see *Practical Reason*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998, pp. 26-27). And Achille Mbembe has also cited Elias’s study to suggest that, along with techniques for managing land, labour, and populations, colonial administrators have exported codes of “*civilité*” and standards of “*courtoisie*” inherited from a distinctively European cultural heritage (see *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, pp. 37-38). Just as Elias was able to expose the dynamics of class and status within a relatively neglected historical period through critical sociological scrutiny, and just as he was again able to breath new life into the study of the milieu of the courts through comparisons to present-day tendencies toward totalitarianism and dictatorship, so too is it still worthwhile for us to take up the challenge he posed to “the new intellectual” by reading his work in light of our own circumstances and concerns.

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