

Thomas Salumets, ed.

Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies

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In a recent poll conducted by the International Sociological Association, Norbert Elias's *magnum opus The Civilizing Process* was rated as the sixth most important sociological text of the Twentieth Century. However, it is only in recent years, particularly in response to literature on the sociology of the body and emotions (see, for example, Shilling 1993; Burkitt 1991, 1999; Scheff 1990, 1994) that his work has come to be given the widespread attention and appraisal that it deserves. *Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies* is a collection of essays which illustrate the range of topics to which Elias's ideas have now been applied: from cancer narratives to cyberspace; from medieval poetry to financial markets. The text as a whole serves to link the work of Elias to contemporary social and sociological problems, themes, issues and conceptual debates. The distinct contributions made in each chapter are united by a common theme: that of taking Elias's work further — both through critical engagement with his key concepts and ideas, and through the application of these in new and existing avenues of research.

In compiling and introducing the book, Salumets's central aim has been to promote the centrality of human interdependencies in sociological analysis. As he proposes, the chapters in the text '...all bear witness to Elias's innovative achievements and his ability to inspire confidence in the mutual dependence of human beings' (5). But this central aim belies more than the simple championing of a cherished principle. It is an attempt to counter a pervasive myth in Western thought: that of the closed-off individual, *homo clausus* (to use Elias's terminology), and instead to advance an *homines aperti* conception of human beings — as always 'open' and mutually dependent (the issue of *homo clausus versus homines aperti* conceptions of human beings is discussed in some depth in the chapter by Thomas Kemple).

Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies is not really intended as an introduction to the work of Elias (for this, see for example, Mennell 1989; Hughes 1998; Van Krieken 1998; and Fletcher 1997), though it contains some useful expositions of core concepts, and some biographical material (particularly in the chapter by Hermann Korte). The book is aimed more at the reader who already has some familiarity with Elias's ideas and who is interested in how these have been applied and developed by subsequent 'figurational' sociologists. Out of the range of themes presented and considered, three stand out as particularly important and timely.

Firstly, the question of 'method' in Elias's sociology — to date very little has been published on this issue. However, in this book it is addressed by two authors in particular (Thomas Scheff and Helmut Kuzmics). Given the prominence of 'methodology' as a topic for debate in much contemporary sociology, it is perhaps surprising that, throughout his work, Elias was somewhat reluctant to provide an exposition of his methodological stance. Elias himself was, in fact, highly critical of the very term 'methodology' — he considered it to be very largely a philosophical construct, one which, in some ways, related to a variant of Kantian apriorism: the need for timeless, universal standards to act as the arbiters of 'truth claims'. Elias was highly critical of what he considered to be the fetishistic tendency in much contemporary sociology to assess the worth of a sociological study in

terms of its 'methodological purity' more than its utility within a knowledge process or, perhaps better, its 'congruence' with the subjects-objects of study in the course of further research-theorising. However, in informal conversations on the matter Elias was known to have stated that while he did not have a 'methodology' as such, he may indeed have had a 'method'. Elias's method has, for a long time, remained an implicit part of his writing: something which is at once deeply embedded, yet, remarkably consistent. In part, it is the *explication* of Elias's method that has been undertaken by the authors Scheff and (perhaps more centrally) Kuzmics.

Scheff aims both to formalise Elias's method and to develop concepts to help future researchers make use of it. He points towards three main stages in Elias's method and develops orientating concepts — *part-whole morphological analysis*, etc. — in order to highlight the different *levels* of analysis it involves. Scheff also uses this conceptual scheme to promote what he considers to be some of the less-developed aspects of Elias's analyses, and, in so doing, advocates a kind of 'sociological good practice' for future researchers. Kuzmics is more interested in Elias's treatment of literary sources as evidence, and, at the same time, in the literary qualities to Elias's work. Kuzmics explores how Elias used his (Elias's) writing simultaneously to convey ideas and to act as a vehicle for his analytical method.

A second important theme considered in various chapters of the book is the question of whether events in the twentieth century such as the Holocaust in Nazi Germany, and in a less dramatic way, the waves of change associated with the 'roaring twenties' and 'swinging sixties', constitute a refutation of Elias's central thesis on civilizing processes. In this connection, the issue of 'de-civilisation' is centrally considered by Stephen Mennell. Mennell shows how 'civilising' and 'de-civilising' processes can be understood as 'two-sides of the same coin' rather than as diametrically opposed shifts, each involving a 'reversal' of the other. Mennell also answers the critics who, very unfairly, have suggested that Elias's work is teleological or evolutionary. In a similar manner, Wouters explores more recent shifts in the character of emotion management in relation to increasing levels of permissiveness in Western societies. Wouters provides a lively analytical discussion of these processes of 'informalisation' and forcefully argues that decreasing levels of 'social distance' between classes and the sexes do not, necessary, involve corresponding decreases in levels of self-constraint.

A third distinctive contribution of the book is in the applications of Elias's work to relatively recent social phenomena. Perhaps the best example of this is the chapter by Jorge Ardití on the development of 'netiquette' — the rise of standards of behaviour, particularly concerning the use of 'bandwidth' and language on the internet. Ardití proposes that the primary function of netiquette (like any kind of etiquette) is to help us to 'navigate' through an order, and also to help bring that order into being. He states that, since the internet is not already an order embedded or implicit in our cultural *habitus*, netiquette has emerged to help us navigate it. Ardití is interested in rescuing 'cybersociology' from the so frequently encountered metaphysical concepts such as those with the prefix 'virtual', and, in keeping with a central theme in the text, in placing human relationships at the centre of our understanding of what is currently labelled as 'cyberspace'.

There are many other important issues addressed in the book — sexuality; the shifting balance of power between the sexes; the North American civilizing process; the concept of 'nation' — which, taken as a whole, offer a valuable contribution both to the growing literature on figurational sociology,

and to the sociological literature relating to the broad range of fields considered.

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Jason Hughes is currently using the work of Norbert Elias in relation to the study of tobacco-use. A book based on this research entitled *Learning to Smoke: Tobacco Use in the West* is to be published with the University of Chicago press later this year.

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