Dunning, Eric, and Jason Hughes. "A relational 'turn'? The future prospects of figurational sociology." *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 201–207. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780933405.0007>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 13:48 UTC.

Copyright © Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Conclusion

A relational 'turn'? The future prospects of figurational sociology

It is probably fair to say that sociology at the moment is characterised by the dominance of a culture of discussion and critique over a culture of testing and research. Such a situation seems to have come about largely in conjunction with the rise to prominence of social – as opposed to sociological – theory (Mouzelis 1995) and the various strands of what have come to be known as 'cultural studies'. As we have seen, Elias was in favour of discussion and critique but he always insisted that they should go hand in hand with research and 'testing'. Institutional pressures for sociologists to be 'research active' appear, by and large, to have done little to rectify this state of affairs.

In the UK at the time of writing, for example, the periodic government research audit called the Research Excellence Framework (REF) (formerly the Research Assessment Exercise) has arguably broadened the divide between theory and research within academic sociology. In this review, a panel of subject experts (key academics from leading institutions) assess the output both of individual academics and of the departments to which they belong. Individuals and departments are awarded between one and four stars according to the perceived quality of their published outputs, the research grants they have been awarded, and various other 'indices of esteem'. The REF is the spearhead of a set of competitive pressures faced by sociologists and other academics in the UK compelling them to seek to be published in the 'right journals', to get funding from the 'right' funding councils, to publish books with the 'right' publishing houses, and so forth. Much has been written about the implications of the RAE/REF, but suffice it to say that books like Marx's *Kapital*, Durkheim's *The Division of Labour*, Weber's *The Protestant Ethic*, or indeed, Elias's *On The Process of Civilisation*, would have been difficult, perhaps impossible, to produce within the competitive dynamics of what we might call the REF/RAE climate. In a similar manner, scholars from other disciplines, including the astronomer Copernicus (to whom we have referred on more than one occasion in this book) and, as another instance, the progenitor of modern mathematical logic, Friedrich Gottlob Frege, would have been equally disadvantaged (Gillies 2006).

This prevailing set of competitive social dynamics seems, with a few notable exceptions, to have compounded a more general tendency for sociologists to focus on highly specialised social issues, over short time-spans, and to neglect

long-term social processes, and associated broader overarching questions about human societies – a characteristic neatly encapsulated in the title of Elias's (1983a) article, 'The retreat of sociologists into the present'. Comparative and developmental sociological research involves relatively long planning or 'lead-times', the requirement for sustained levels of continuous funding and support, and the need to look beyond the immediate social issues of the present – demands which do not sit well with the timeframes of the REF/RAE climate, or with the growing requirement for research to have clearly identifiable 'pay-offs' or 'impacts' for specific 'user groups'. Paradoxically, as Elias has suggested, it is arguably only through an engagement with such longer-term processes and frames of reference, and only through a relatively high degree of detachment from immediate social pressures and the demands of specific 'user groups', that sociologists will be able to begin to develop knowledge with sufficient reality-congruence to form the basis for interventions in the sphere of human figurations since the latter have a lower level of intended relative to unintended consequences than is the case in the physical and biological sciences. For Elias, although he never used the term, the envisaged key 'user group' for sociological knowledge would have been 'humanity as a whole' or all the interdependent participants in given sets of figurational dynamics. However, these premises are considerably at odds with dominant trends in contemporary sociology, perhaps especially in the United Kingdom.

It is difficult to say anything specific about the current state of British sociology, let alone sociology more generally, without engaging in sweeping over-generalisations. Indeed, perhaps the least contentious point to make is that British sociology, as is indicative of the more general sociological crisis we have discussed throughout this book, is currently marked by a great deal of paradigmatic heterogeneity, diversity of interests, and inter-school tensions. It is perhaps also not so controversial to claim that, at its current stage of development, sociology in Britain has no clearly distinct boundaries from the disciplines of cultural studies and philosophy. In tandem with the broad tendency that we noted earlier for sociological research to neglect long-term processes and focus on highly specialised fields of investigation, there is also a tendency towards a preoccupation with the cultural sphere and the reading of its (inter-) textuality – a tendency which has involved '... endless terminological disputes and esoteric debates about the disappearance of reality' (Rojek and Turner 2000: 639). As Rojek and Turner suggested (2000: 640), in the context of a general funding shortage in the social sciences, current trends in academic publishing, and the REF/RAE environment, academic sociologists are rewarded '... for exegesis and penalise[d for] long-term qualitative and quantitative work'. Under such conditions, the sophisticated theoretical insights of specialists in 'decorative social theory' are used not so much to 'guide', but to adorn, embellish, and otherwise lend ostensible veracity to such funded empirical studies.

To formulate the problem provocatively: in much sociological research, theory is rather more 'tasted' than 'tested'.

Of course, large-scale sociological research still takes place, and some of it is indeed historical and comparative. And not all sociology is pre-occupied with questions of inter-textuality and the supposed 'disappearance of reality'. Nonetheless, it is perhaps not inaccurate to suggest that the tendencies observed above have become pervasive, and have come to dominate many, but by no means all, debates within the field. It is perhaps rather less contentious to argue that, in its current state, there is little consensus regarding the future direction of sociology, and indeed, the overall purpose of the sociological enterprise. It is this need for a degree of consensus concerning the purpose and direction of sociology that underpins Elias's call for a climate of research and testing. In placing stress upon the 'testing' of sociological concepts and theories, Elias was not supporting a 'scientistic' view of the subject, that is, one whose practitioners seek to emulate the natural sciences and predominantly use quantitative and experimental methods. Rather, he was advocating a model of the sociological enterprise in which professional sociologists share a commitment to the generation of 'advances' in knowledge of the social world. Thus, for Elias, the notion of 'testing' necessitates the development of an inter-generational body of social scientists concerned with establishing over time and with higher degrees of certainty whether any particular models of the social universe, and in particular, ideas concerning the structure, 'direction', or even enduring characteristics of social processes, have utility in the sense of 'fitting' more with what is shown to hold in the course of subsequent research-based investigations.

However, Elias's stress on the centrality of research for the process of testing sociological knowledge is not without its critics. Indeed, the self-professed data-dependency of Elias's concepts and theories has played a part in leading his sociology sometimes to be described as 'non-explanatory, purely descriptive' (Zubaida, cited in Dunning and Mennell 2003). Working in the same direction is the fact that Elias argued against the adequacy of causal, factor and law-like explanations at the human-social level of reality. Such explanations are fitting, Elias used to argue, as far as the structurally relatively simple and relatively slowly-changing physical and chemical levels of the universe are concerned. At the more complex and rapidly-changing biological and human-social levels, by contrast, what are needed are structure-and-process concepts and models. Darwin's theory of biological evolution is one example. Elias's theory of the relations between civilising processes and state-formation is another.

Elias's insistence on the testability/refutability of concepts and theories is contradicted by a widespread judgement that holds the opposite. For example, Smith (1984) argued that the theory of civilising processes is 'irrefutable'. Such an argument was echoed by Leach, the anthropologist, two years later when he suggested that the theory is 'impervious to testing' (Leach 1986).

In 1988, Armstrong similarly wrote that Elias's theory 'is a fusion of untestable and descriptive generalisations' (1998: 317). Giulianotti even went so far in 1999 as to claim that Elias introduced the concept of 'decivilising spurts' in order 'to rebut ... counter evidence' (1999: 45). As we showed, Elias dealt with decivilising processes from the beginning. Moreover, despite such criticisms, there is a growing body of research-based investigations which have 'applied', 'tested', 'developed' and 'revised' Elias's ideas precisely in the manner that these critiques suggest is not possible. Mennell (1985; 2007) has attempted to test the theory in two main ways: firstly by means of a comparative study of the development of tastes and eating in England and France; and secondly by means of a comprehensive study of the American civilising process. Similarly, Elias and Dunning (1966; 1971c; 1986; 2008) attempted a limited test of the theory by reference to leisure and sport. Other tests have been carried out by Goudsblom (1992) regarding fire; Hughes (2003) regarding smoking; Spierenburg (2008) regarding murder; Wouters (1977, 1986, 2004, 2007) regarding 'informalisation'; Waddington (2000) and Waddington and Murphy (1992) regarding sport and drugs; Maguire (1999; 2005) regarding sport and globalisation; Sheard (2004) and Sheard and Murphy (2008) regarding boxing; Dunning and Sheard (1979; 2000) regarding rugby, and Malcolm (1997, 1999, 2000, 2012) regarding cricket, to name but a few.

Further tests of Elias's theory will have to draw a distinction between at least two aspects: his conclusions regarding the overall directions of European civilising processes and his conclusions regarding their socio- and psycho-genesis. As to the question of directions, Elias's theory would be successfully refuted if it could be shown empirically that the *overall* trend of European development in the time-frame he considered – roughly from the Middle Ages to the period after the First World War – was not in a civilising direction in England and France. (As we saw in previous chapters, he began to trace the more or less simultaneous decivilising development of Germany in *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012b), and took the analysis considerably further in *The Germans* (1996).) Decivilising developments since that time – for example, of the kind shown in trends of violent crime throughout the West since 1960 (Spierenburg and Body-Gendrot 2007; Pinker 2011) – would not refute the theory or require it to be substantially revised unless it could be shown that they had occurred as a result of changes that Elias's theorisation would lead one to expect to produce consequences of a predominantly civilising kind. In other words, demonstration of the occurrence in Western Europe of greater or lesser long-lasting decivilising changes during and after the Second World War would not, *ipso facto*, constitute a refutation of Elias.

This discussion of Elias's and other figurational sociologists' analyses of decivilising as well as 'civilising' processes brings us to the second aspect. In order to test Elias's theorisation of the socio- and psychogenesis of European

civilising processes further than has been accomplished so far, attention will have to be paid to how Elias theorised the complex interrelationships and interactions between, on the one hand, *social structural* developments such as state-formation, pacification under state-control, growing trade, growing wealth and the monetarisation of social relations, the lengthening of interdependency chains and functional democratisation, and on the other hand, normative, behavioural, and personality developments at the levels of manners and habitus. Attention will have to be paid in these regards to the balance of similarities and differences in the developmental paths of culture areas, nations, classes, regions, ethnic minorities, males and females, etc. In short, the aim should always be to push the frontiers of knowledge and understanding beyond what was bequeathed by Elias. This should involve investigating hitherto unexplored geographical, cultural, and problem areas and the development of new concepts and explanatory propositions. Goudsblom's (1995) study of fire and what he calls 'the anthroposphere' are examples.

As a result of such applications and empirical assessments of Elias's ideas, a number of criticisms of his work have been advanced, sometimes by those who worked closely with him. For example, Dunning began to develop a criticism of Elias as early as 1969 when he suggested that greater attention should have been paid in their essays, 'The Quest for Excitement in Leisure' and 'Leisure in the Sparetime Spectrum' (both reprinted in Elias and Dunning 1986; second edition, 2008) to questions of identity and identification because ego-involvement and meaningful identifications are preconditions for the full arousal of excitement in the context of sport and leisure events. More particularly, for emotional arousal, for 'the gears of one's passions to be engaged', one *has to care*, to be *involved* (see Dunning 1999). Later, Dunning suggested that, in *On The Process of Civilisation*, Elias operated with a concept of violence that is too general and that he failed to recognise that implicit in his work is the idea of a continuum running from highly affect-charged or expressive violence at one pole to violence of a cooler, more rational and instrumental kind at the other (Dunning 1986; 2008). In his *Sport Matters*, Dunning is also critical of Elias's discussion of sport and leisure activities as counters to 'stress tensions', arguing that Elias and he had deliberately shelved that thorny issue in their joint work (Dunning 1999). Finally, in their essay 'On the Balance Between 'Civilising' and 'Decivilising' Trends in the Social Development of Western Europe: Elias on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust' (1998), Mennell and Dunning agreed with the judgement of Austrian figurational sociologist, Helmut Kuzmics, when he suggested of Elias's study of the Germans that: 'In some respects, Elias's interpretation seems to be biased – Prusso-centric '*kleindeutsch*' and Protestant' (Kuzmics 1994: 11,12). Mennell and Dunning added:

Such a judgement is plausible and worthy of further research. It might help to explain such lacunae in Elias's work as his failure to seek an explanation for such facts as that the Nazi Party originated primarily in Munich and that its leader was

an Austrian. The plausibility of Kuzmics's judgement is, in our opinion, reinforced by the fact that it is based on a thorough understanding and appreciation of Elias's contribution and a thorough knowledge of German history, social development and the relevant sources. It grows, that is, out of original research and is not expressive of an essentially philosophical/ideological 'quick-fix'... (Dunning and Mennell 1998: 354)

In relation to Elias's specific work on civilising processes, established-outsider relations, violence, etc. at least, it is manifestly the case that his ideas can be revised, refined, and sometimes rejected through research-based investigations. However, what of Elias's much broader vision of sociology as a whole committed to the establishment, revision and building-up of a central corpus of knowledge – the 'inter-generational' sociological enterprise discussed above? Loyal and Quilley (Loyal and Quilley 2004; Quilley and Loyal 2005) have argued that Elias's work itself might constitute a partial foundation for the development of a 'cumulative science of social processes' – a 'central theory' for sociology more generally. It is worth quoting their arguments at length. They wrote:

In our view, it is time to review the sociological contributions of the twentieth century, with a view to identifying the beginnings of a cumulative science of social processes. The unifying features of [such a] project would be six-fold:

1. A commitment to the idea of sociology as a science, in the sense identified earlier.
2. An epistemological recognition of the relationship between the various biological and social planes of integration inevitably involved in all areas of human science.
3. The explicit recognition of both the differences and interactions between evolutionary, developmental and historical processes.
4. A commitment to theoretically informed empirical studies, framed in such a way as to permit cross-fertilisation, comparison, testing, reformulation, elimination and revision of competing hypotheses about connections between events and processes in the social world.
5. In the conduct of research – an orientation towards greater detachment and the progressive/cumulative establishment of institutional checks and balances and the fostering of greater secondary involvement and less directly 'political' and/or normative engagement.
And (somewhat paradoxically),
6. In relation to the longer-term explanatory significance of sociological knowledge, the commitment to more realistic social, economic and political-regulatory interventions drawing upon a more reality-congruent stock of social scientific knowledge.

Quilley and Loyal (2005: 848-849)

A particular strength of Loyal and Quilley's sociological manifesto as outlined in the passage above is that, while it effectively distils many of the key principles of Elias's approach, it does so in a manner that leaves the metaphorical 'door open' to a range of complementary perspectives. The prospects for such a model

to become established within the discipline are, of course, more open to question. It is rather unlikely that sociologists, at least in the current climate, will come to rally around a single approach in the manner implied by the notion of a 'central theory'. This is the case not least because such an undertaking falls foul of the prevailing '*habits of good sociology*' discussed in the previous chapter. Moreover, sociology as an academic field has been characterised over the past few decades by repeated 'ground-clearing' exercises, perhaps most notably Gouldner's *The Coming Crisis*, or attempts at presenting a unified perspective, notably Giddens's *The Constitution of Society*, which have, for reasons we have discussed in various parts of this book, yielded little in the way of paradigmatic conciliation or resolution (on this, see Kilminster (1998)).

Nonetheless, it is perhaps not so unrealistic to anticipate a future in which the 'decorative turn' in sociology might be displaced by a 'relational turn' (see, for example, Emirbayer 1997), and where the beginnings of a common sociological enterprise of the type envisaged by Elias might come to be established: a future in which some provisional agreement, particularly a commitment to a culture of research and testing, and to cumulative developments in the fund of knowledge about the social universe, may be established. Whether such an enterprise is based upon the work of Elias, or any other sociologist who shares a commitment to the key principles we have discussed in this chapter, is in many respects immaterial. A 'central theory' as we envisage it would not be a final, finished, all-encompassing paradigm which 'finally wins the day' as the cornerstone for all sociology, becoming a *sine qua non* before the discipline can proceed. Rather, it would emerge *via* a gradual, probably non-linear process which would be marked at an early stage by the establishment of a common set of objectives and basic principles. As we hope to have shown in this book, the work of Elias provides a particularly promising basis for such a transformation of sociology.