Dunning, Eric, and Jason Hughes. "Working with Elias." *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 17–49. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780933405.ch-001>>.

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Working with Elias

Our task in this chapter is, firstly, to introduce readers to Elias as a person and, secondly, to develop a view of how and why he came to develop an approach to sociology which still continues to be regarded in certain quarters as outmoded, or at best as esoteric, and yet which in other circles has gained growing acclaim, and has come to be considered as one of the most innovative and important contributions to sociology of the twentieth century. In relation to this undertaking, this chapter is about working with Norbert Elias in a number of senses. It is about the fact that Eric Dunning studied and worked with Elias intensively and in person from 1956 to 1978 (the year Elias left England and returned to the continent), and somewhat less intensively from 1978 to 1990 – the year in which Elias died. Dunning's experience of working closely with Elias will be drawn upon as a source of biographical data, and as a means of providing a fuller sense of the interplay between 'Elias the person' and 'Elias the sociologist'. This chapter is also based upon Jason Hughes having been introduced to Elias's work by Dunning and the fact that the two of us have extensively 'worked with' Elias's ideas and approach in relation to a range of different topics.

In addition, this chapter is about some of the issues surrounding others 'working with Elias'. We think a book such as this is necessary in part because of the somewhat enigmatic position Elias's work currently occupies within the discipline. As we suggested earlier, since his death in 1990, Elias has come increasingly to be regarded as one of the leading sociological figures of the twentieth century, a 'classical' sociologist on a par with earlier figures such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and (Max) Weber. And yet this growing recognition of Elias's importance has thus far not been matched by a corresponding rise in his influence on subsequent generations of scholars. While the numbers are growing, including outside of what might be called the traditional centres of figurational sociology in Leicester and Amsterdam, relatively few sociologists have come to 'pick up the baton' and participate in the 'relay race of knowledge' that Elias envisaged; his work still remains somewhat at the margins of the discipline. Our central aim here is thus partly to make sense of this enigma, but also to play our part in redressing it through developing one of the core arguments advanced throughout this book as a whole: namely that, despite the impression held by some that his work is a relic from a bygone age, Elias's contributions to the subject represent *a* basis – but by no means the only one – for a move beyond the fragmentation and crisis in which sociology

currently finds itself engulfed, as we outlined in the Introduction to this book. To commence this line of argument we first turn to Elias the person, exploring in particular the interplay between his biography and the development of his distinctive sociological approach.

Norbert Elias: A brief biography and some autobiographical insertions

Norbert Elias was born in June 1897 in Breslau, a city of some 500,000 inhabitants in the eastern part of the then recently unified German *Kaiserreich*, that is 'Imperial Germany'. Following Germany's defeat in the Second World War, Breslau was incorporated into Poland and given the name of Wrocław. Elias lived a long life and died in his home in Amsterdam in August 1990. In September 1999, a commemorative plaque was ceremonially unveiled on a wall of one of the houses in Wrocław where Elias had lived as a child.

Elias was of Jewish descent. His father, Hermann, was a prosperous textile merchant, and he and Elias's mother, Sophie, were sufficiently well off to be able to send the young Norbert to Breslau's distinguished humanistic *Johannesgymnasium*. In English, it was what we used to call a 'grammar school'. There, Elias received a German classical education, above all a grounding in Latin, Greek, French, mathematics, science and such classics of German literature as the works of Goethe, Schiller, Heine, Mörike and Eichendorff. This classical education was repeatedly put to good use by Elias in the course of his long and eventually distinguished career.¹³ In 1987, he was to publish a volume of poems, two of them in English, under the title *Los der Menschen* ('The Human Lot') (Elias 1987b).

At the *Johannesgymnasium*, Elias became the member of a select group which met with a teacher to discuss the works of Kant. It was while at the *Johannesgymnasium* that he formed the ambition to pursue an academic career and learned that, as a Jew, he would encounter stiff hurdles in seeking to pursue his goal. The First World War broke out in August 1914 and, after graduating from the *Johannesgymnasium* in 1915, Elias enlisted in the Kaiser's army, joining the Signals Corps and seeing action on both the Eastern and the Western fronts. From that point in 1915 onwards, Elias's experiences provide some clues regarding why he developed a sociological interest in such problems as: (i) violence and civilisation; (ii) the relations between individuals and the societies they form, also referred to as the 'agency-structure dilemma'; (iii) the related problem of the relations between 'micro' and 'macro' phenomena; and (iv) the relations between 'the private' and 'the public' parts of social life. Kilminster (2007), Russell (1997) and, indeed, Elias himself (1994), have related this orientation to his Jewish origins and socialisation

within the *relatively* non-oppressive Jewish culture. Elias's own vivid words are revealing in regard to how he formed his sociological perspective. In a series of interviews conducted by Arend-Jan Heerma van Voss and Bram van Stolk in Amsterdam in 1984, he replied to their probing about the First World War by saying concerning his recollections of the years before 1914 that he had felt very secure in that period largely as a result of the prosperity of his parents and their love for him, especially his mother's. He continued:

in the world in which I lived ... I never heard the rumbling of the approaching thunderstorm. For me the world only changed with the war. I still cannot really quite understand how I coped with this situation; the change from the complete security of my family to the complete insecurity of the army. Suddenly my parents were no longer there. (Elias 1994: 14)

Regarding his years spent on the Western-front, Elias said:

I still remember the dugout. We lived underground ... It wasn't just a trench, more like a mole's burrow. I still remember very vividly wooden steps going down, and then there were two narrow rooms deep down under the earth. When there was a near miss, lumps of earth came down the steps, the whole thing shook, and anyone outside was hit. I do not think that I was even in the most advanced trenches, because our task was to maintain the telegraph lines between the front trenches and headquarters. We were always sent out to mend the wires which were constantly being hit, and sometimes, during a barrage, one simply went into a shell crater and tried to sit it out ... I remember one comrade being wounded next to me, and we had to bring him back ... I have a vivid recollection of going to the front, of dead horses and a few dead bodies and that underground shelter ... Then there is some feeling of a big shock, but I cannot recollect. I cannot even remember how I got back. (Elias 1994: 26–27)

Like many young soldiers in the First and Second World Wars, whichever side they were on, Elias was not only traumatised by his war experiences but radicalised as well. He had been politicised as early as 1913 as has been shown by Hackeschmidt (1999). That was the year in which Elias joined the German radical Zionist youth organisation, the *Blau-Weiss Bund* (Blue-White League), a context in which he was to meet such subsequently prominent social/cultural science figures as Erich Fromm and Leo Strauss. Hackeschmidt suggests, in our view persuasively, that parts of Elias's theory such as aspects of 'his figurational model and his scholarly credo of "handing on the torch", can be traced back ... to his days in *Blau-Weiss*' (Hackeschmidt 1999: 73). Hermann Korte (1988: 63ff) has suggested that the Zionist radicalism of this phase in Elias's life is to be attributed largely to the effects on him of the war. In our view, however, to that has to be added the frequent radicalism of youth, especially of an 'outsider group' which is what the Jews in Germany at that time were. As Kilminster (2007: 26ff) shows, Elias himself later acknowledged the part which being a member of a 'stigmatised outsider group', especially of a radicalised younger generation who had come to doubt the wisdom of their

parents, played in the shaping of his sociological thinking. Most important of all, however, is the fact that, by 1929 at the latest, and although he had earlier been associated with the secular part of *Blau-Weiss*, Elias was coming to abandon his youthful idealism for a more hard-headed realism. Before the 1914–18 war and in 1919 and 1920, he could dream of setting up a utopian society in Palestine but, by 1929, in an essay ‘On the Sociology of German anti-Semitism’, he had reached the conclusion that:

in the present social state, there is no chance of a therapy, of a full-scale healing of the social body from the evil of anti-Semitism. The surge of anti-Semitism is the function of economic and social developments that cannot be altered by the small group of German Jews and scarcely influenced by them to any degree. The Jewish community in this regard is far more driven than driver. From such an understanding and in conjunction with other experiences, one can draw the conclusion that a social order in which a group of gifted, often spiritually and intellectually rich and creative people are consciously downgraded, devalued and so powerfully crippled is not worth preserving and must be fought against. It can also lead one to decide to go to Palestine, because the fight for a national home for Jews appears more promising than the fight for social equality for Jews in Germany. For those who are unwilling to draw such conclusions, there remains only resignation. A clear understanding of one’s own position is preferable in any case to self-deception. That is, one thing always remains possible for German Jews as an answer to anti-Semitism: they can accustom themselves to the unobtrusive, determined and self-aware demeanour that is the only way of behaving appropriately in their position. (Authors’ translation of German original; see Elias 2006a: 83 for alternative translation).

The German Jews, he had written in 1929, had had three options: to fight for a better social order in Germany; to fight for a Jewish state in Palestine; or, resigning themselves to their lot, to steer an unobtrusive path through a life increasingly scattered with minefields.

The years following the First World War were a period of great instability, tension and unrest in Germany. Kaiser Wilhelm II abdicated in the wake of the humiliating military defeat, and the Weimar Republic was formed. Large sections of the officer corps, many rank and file soldiers, and a large proportion of the old imperial upper and upper middle classes held the new republic, its parliamentary institutions, and its socialist/social democratic leaders in contempt. They called the republic a ‘pig-sty’. There were attempts to overthrow it from the far Left and the far Right. From the Right, there was the so-called ‘Kapp Putsch’ of 1920 and the ‘Hitler-Ludendorff Putsch’ in Munich in 1923. And, under the influence of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, a ‘Soviet Republic’ (*Räterepublik*) was formed in Munich in 1918 and, at the same time in Berlin, there was an uprising by the ‘Spartakists’ led by the ‘Communists’ Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxembourg. Both uprisings were put down by the ‘official’ army of the Weimar state and the *Freikorps*, fighting bands formed of demobilised officers and men from the disbanded army

and navy. The *Freikorps* were politically to the right. They formed the backbone of an underground terrorist organisation, '*Konsul*', which killed large numbers of people, possibly 1,000, in the early years of Weimar (Elias 1996: 186). One of their victims, wrote Elias:

was my schoolfellow, Bernhard Schottländer, a completely unathletic, highly intelligent person, who, with his thick spectacles, looked like a young scholar even as a first-former, and who tended to communism after reading Marx, and whose corpse, if I remember rightly, was found in Breslau's city moat, tied up with barbed wire. (Elias 1996: 186)

After the suppression of the *Freikorps*, the stability of the Weimar Republic was further undermined by the hyperinflation of 1922–23. In August 1922, it took over 1,000 marks to buy a US dollar. By October, that figure had risen to 3,000 and by December, 7,000 (Evans 2003: 104). Depreciation of the currency became increasingly compelling, taking on more and more the character, in Elias's terms, of a 'blind' or 'unplanned social process'. Richard Evans captured its unintended dynamics when he wrote:

Anyone who wanted to buy a dollar in January 1923 had to pay over 17,000 marks for it; in April 24,000; in July 353,000. This was hyperinflation on a truly staggering scale, and the dollar rate in marks for the rest of the year is best expressed in numbers that soon became longer than anything found even in a telephone directory: 4,621,000 in August; 98,860,000 in September; 23,260,000,000 in October; 2,193,600,000,000 in November; 4,200,000,000,000 in December. (Evans 2003: 105)

Elias used to relate how he would go into a café for a cup of coffee in that period with the price listed at 5,000 marks and be asked to pay 8,000 or 10,000 marks when he had drunk it. More significantly, his parents' real income was substantially lowered by the galloping inflation and, not only were they unable for a while to support his studies financially, but *they* needed *his* support. He worked for two years as 'export manager' in a metal goods factory. It was, he said, an instructive experience. He learned a good deal about practical economics, liked his boss, and asked him one day: 'Tell me, Herr Meerländer ... why on earth do you do that? You are a rich man and yet you sit here eight hours a day ... Meerländer took his cigarette from his mouth, smiled and said: "You know, it's a hunt. A *hunt*. I *must* get this order and the others must not"...' (Elias 1994: 32). Such experiences outside the academy forced Elias to engage first hand with all that resided beyond the 'world of ideas'. To paraphrase how Elias himself expressed it: '... the onset of the great social crises' (the war, Germany's defeat, the severe post-war social tensions, the hyperinflation) 'drove me out of the ivory tower ...' (Elias 1994: 91).

Subsequently, Elias was to witness the bloody street and beer-hall battles between the Communists and the Nazis, and the rise of the latter to power in 1933. He described this process (1989; 1996) as 'a breakdown of civilisation'

because the Weimar state proved incapable of maintaining monopoly control over the means of violence, and because, from that point on until 1945, as has been widely documented, the German state apparatus was abused in the pursuit of 'uncivilised' aims. One could even say that Germany in that period was ruled by criminals, though 'civilised barbarians' might be a more appropriate term (this is an issue to which we shall return in Chapter Three).

What Elias had to say about his activities, thoughts, and feelings as the Nazis rose to power is revealing. He was not politically active in a party political sense, but his physical and moral courage shine through in particular from three of the acts he used to recount to students and friends. The first occurred in 1932 as the street and beer-hall battles began to escalate. It was only then, Elias said, that he began to feel seriously alarmed. So he went alone to a trades union office in Frankfurt-am-Main in an attempt to persuade its pacifist and Social Democrat members to fight. He later wrote:

I pointed out that the private armies were gradually becoming more important than parliamentary elections. I closed my little talk somewhat dramatically with the question: 'Gentlemen, what measures have you taken to defend your fine union building if you are attacked?' The answer was deep silence. (Elias 1994: 42)

That was because, Elias said, most Social Democrats and trades unionists at the time were pacifists and also believed that Germany was a constitutional state (a *Rechtsstaat*) governed by the rule of law. His father certainly believed it. When Norbert begged Hermann and Sophie to remain in England in 1938 – they had visited him to help with the publication of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* – the senior Elias replied to the effect that: 'What can they do to me, Norbert? I'm a German. Germany is a *Rechtsstaat* and I've done nothing wrong'.¹⁴ His mother was later to die in a gas chamber in Auschwitz (possibly via Theresienstadt). Elias was understandably devastated by his parents' decision to return to Germany and utterly distraught over his mother's ultimate fate. He never forgave himself for his inability to help her. But sociologically, he later exclaimed, Germany during the 1930s helped to crystallise for him one of his key ideas, namely that 'law cannot function without the backing of physical force' (Elias 1994: 44).

The second act involved Elias going to hear Hitler speak in Frankfurt in late 1932 or early 1933. He (Elias) was accompanied by two tall, 'Aryan-looking' students and sported a feathered 'Tyrolean' hat in order to disguise his Jewish features. He went, he said, because, although he knew that there was little he could do to change things, he had an intense need to know and understand what was going on. Asked in an interview why, he replied:

Because I think it is one of the most important tasks of human beings: if they want to arrange their lives better than they are now, they have to know how things are connected ... I mean that quite practically, since otherwise we act wrongly. The whole misfortune of people now is that they often let themselves be

guided by unrealistic ideas ... There was once great enthusiasm for communism. People sacrificed their lives for it – and look what has come of it. There was enthusiasm for liberalism. American presidents and economists still believe in it – and are they any more able to cure our economic ills? They act as if they knew the answers on the basis of ideals, but in reality they do not know how the economy or states function ... There should be more people like myself who are not afraid of what they discover ... That is the task of a scientist, in the social sciences as in the natural sciences... (Elias 1994: 47–8)

The interview from which this extract was taken was recorded in 1984 at a time when ‘Reaganomics’, ‘Thatcherism’, and the economic ideas of Milton Friedman were in the ascendant. Elias was firmly opposed to them as he was to any form of economics that was not allied with and integrated into a body of sociological theory and research, and in particular, that was ignorant of long-term social processes. His arguments, though he was by no means a lone voice in this respect, about the dangers of economic interventions based on inadequate, ideology-laden models and ideas appear to have been borne out in particular by an escalating global economic crisis in more recent times. As the *Guardian* columnist and London School of Economics lecturer, John Gray, has observed (2010), ‘Ignorant of history, including that of economics itself, most economists not only failed to forecast the crash but, mesmerised by the spurious harmonies of their mathematical models, were blind to the mounting instability of the financial system and failed to grasp that an upheaval of the kind that is currently under way was even possible’. Gray penned these words as part of the scene-setting for his review of an iconoclastic (2010) text entitled *23 Things They Don’t Tell You About Capitalism* written by Ha-Joon Chang, a leading economics thinker and currently Professor at Cambridge University. In the book, Chang set out to ‘destroy the myths’ (to use Elias’s (2012b) term) of free-market economics that have long guided domestic and international economic policies. Chang squarely blames many of the present – he wrote this in 2010 – global economic problems on the flawed models advocated by professional economists. The 2008 economic crisis, he proposed, ‘... has revealed how the complexity of the world we have created, especially within the sphere of finance, has vastly outpaced our ability to understand and control it’ (2010: 254). He writes:

Over the last three decades, economists played an important role in creating the conditions of the 2008 crisis (and dozens of smaller financial crises that came before it since the early 1980s, such as the 1982 Third World debt crisis, the 1995 Mexican peso crisis, the 1997 Asian crisis and the 1998 Russian crisis) by providing theoretical justifications for financial deregulation and the unrestrained pursuit of short-term profits. More broadly, they advanced theories that justified the policies that have led to slower growth, higher inequality, heightened job insecurity and more frequent financial crises that have dogged the world in the last three decades. On top of that, they pushed for policies that weakened the prospects for long-term development in developing countries. In the rich

countries, these economists encouraged people to overestimate the power of new technologies, made people's lives more and more unstable, made them ignore the loss of national control over the economy, and rendered them complacent about deindustrialisation ... In other words, economics has been worse than irrelevant. Economics, as it has been practised in the last three decades has been positively harmful for most people. (Chang 2010: 247–248)

Chang's comments again bear out Elias's arguments regarding the importance for interventions in the social world (and Elias's model of 'the social world' by necessity includes 'economic' interventions and indeed the 'economic sphere' more generally) to be based firmly upon a reliable and expanding stock of reality-congruent knowledge, and of the corresponding dangers of acting on the basis of ideas that are more heavily 'value-congruent' – in this case the values of the 'free market' – than reality-congruent since the balance of intended to unintended consequences that follows from such interventions is likely to lean very decisively towards the unintended component of this ratio.¹⁵

The third act took place early in 1933, just after the Nazis came to power. It testifies to Elias's physical and moral courage but also to his concern for others. At this time, Elias was working under Karl Mannheim at Frankfurt University as 'University Assistant to the Sociological Seminar', a post which carried with it tutorial duties for undergraduate students, and a Doctoral supervision load (Elias 1961). As he related it in 1960 or 61 to Dunning who had asked him a question about 'critical theory' and the 'Frankfurt School', at a stage when Adorno, Horkheimer and many of their 'leftist' students were still in Germany, though a number were seeking to leave the country as was still possible at that time. Adorno had managed to purchase the necessary rail and boat tickets for the USA and a costly licence from the Nazi authorities to emigrate. Elias was in possession of keys to the 'Marxburg', the building which housed the Sociology Department (that is, Mannheim, Elias and Hans Gerth), when he heard that the Gestapo had learned about Adorno's left-wing involvements and were thinking of rescinding his emigration licence. He (Elias) accordingly went to the Institute, unlocked Adorno's room, picked up from his desk and bookshelves any material that the Gestapo might have regarded as incriminating and spent several hours tearing it up and flushing it down the toilet, fearing all the time that the Gestapo might burst in and catch him, a Jew, in what was, from their standpoint, a criminal act. The whole process lasted several hours. Some two or three days later, after Adorno had managed to escape, Elias was picked up at his flat by members of an SA (*Sturmabteilung*), that is, 'brownshirt' unit and driven across Frankfurt to the Institute in an open truck. He was quietly confident, he said, as it turned out rightly, that they would find nothing of importance.

It was around this time that Gret Freudenthal, one of the two women whose PhDs Elias was supervising in Frankfurt – the other was Ilse Seglow¹⁶ – drove him on a fruitless journey to Switzerland to seek university employment.

He then visited his parents in Breslau and afterwards left Germany for France where he was again unable to find a post. He was, however, provided with support by the Steun-Fonds of Amsterdam which enabled him, as he put it, to enlarge his *Habilitationsschrift*, the post-doctoral thesis one has to write in Germany to become a university teacher and which he had completed in 1933. This involved, in Elias's words 'an extended study of nobility, royalty and courtly society in France' and formed the basis of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*.¹⁷

Elias left France and migrated to England in 1935, remaining there until 1978. At first, speaking little English, he obtained financial support from a committee set up in Woburn House, London, to help Jewish refugees. The stipend they gave him was small but allowed him to rent a bed-sitting room, to eat and to continue a book he had started in Paris. He worked in the Reading Room of the British Museum where, almost a hundred years before, another German-Jewish exile, Karl Marx, had written *Das Kapital*. At first, Elias said, his ideas about how to take his work further were rather vague but they crystallised when he came across the works on etiquette. Suddenly, he said,

I ... found material which demonstrated that other standards of behaviour had been known, and how they had changed. So I began *The Civilizing Process*, fully conscious that it would be an argument against the psychological studies of attitudes and behaviour of that time ... For me it was quite clear that this well-trodden way was no more than an effort to fit humans into the methods of the natural sciences or biology, so that the whole human process of change was pushed aside. That was how it all began. (Elias cited in Mennell 1998: 18)

On The Process of Civilisation (Über den Prozess der Zivilisation) was published in Switzerland in 1939. In that same year Elias was appointed as a Senior Research Assistant at the London School of Economics (LSE) where he embarked on a study of the importance of the navy for understanding some of the key specificities of Britain's developmental path and the part the navy played in the development of the once powerful but now, in the context of the Second World War, declining British Empire. Elias's study of the British navy has recently been published by University College Dublin Press (see Elias 2007b).¹⁸

At the LSE, Elias was strongly supported by Morris Ginsberg, and also by his (Elias's) former Head of Department and PhD supervisor, Karl Mannheim, who now had a post at London University's Institute of Education. In a letter (written in English) to his parents in Germany and dated January 1941, he wrote:

I am going on with my work as peacefully and quietly as ever, preparing a new book which I hope to write together with Ginsberg who is very kind to me and who, I believe, in his own hesitant way rather likes me. Uncle Karl [Mannheim], too, is here. He is not on the best of terms with Ginsberg and not very happy on the whole. But since I have dedicated to him the second volume of my last book on "the Civilising Process", he, too, is very kind to me.¹⁹

In his autobiography, the historian, Eric Hobsbawm, recalls regularly seeing Elias at the LSE in this period. Hobsbawm was then a student at Cambridge but divided his vacations between the LSE, where he used the library, and France. At the LSE's main building in Houghton Street, Aldwych, he informs us,

student activists used to discuss politics ... usually observed by a silent lone central European rather older than ourselves, apparently one of those 'eternal students' who hang around inner-city campuses, but who was in fact the totally unknown and unconsidered Norbert Elias, just about to publish his great work on *The Process of Civilization* in Switzerland. Academic Britain in the 1930s was extraordinarily blind to the brilliance of the central European Jewish and anti-fascist refugee intellectuals unless they operated in conventionally recognized fields such as classics and physics. The LSE was probably the only place where they would be given house-room. Even after the war, Elias's academic career in this country was marginal... (Hobsbawm, 2003: 121)

Hobsbawm might have mentioned philosophy as another 'conventionally recognised field' in Britain where 'refugee intellectuals' were accepted. He could not have known, however, that the climate in British sociology was to change during and after the war partly as a result of the writings of the philosopher, Karl Popper, himself a refugee intellectual but one who *was* employed at the LSE. This 'climate change' was to work in the short-term to the academic disadvantage of Elias.

When the Second World War broke out in 1939, the LSE was evacuated to Cambridge and, shortly afterwards, Elias was interned as an 'enemy alien', first in a camp at Huyton near Liverpool, and then in one on the Isle of Man. Characteristically, Elias and one or two others formed their own 'university' in the camp. It was typical of Elias that, on the first page of the exercise book in which he wrote his lecture notes, he scribbled 'the lack of books as an advantage'. Clearly, Elias held his own ideas to be better than those in any book! It was there, too, that the subsequently famous American anthropologist, Eric Wolf, then an interned Austrian teenager, had his first encounter with the social sciences through lectures given by Elias on 'The Network of Social Relationships' and 'Monopolies of Power' (Wolf 1977). It was also whilst on the Isle of Man that Elias wrote and produced (in 1940) '*Die Ballade vom armen Jakob*' (*The Ballad of Poor Jacob*), which was put to music by the prominent composer and fellow internee Hans Gál (Korte 1996: 38). The opera tells the tale of Jakob, a Jew, and his ill-fated plight as an outsider.

After the war, Elias was employed by the British secret service in their attempts to 'de-Nazify' German prisoners of war. It was not until 1954, though, that he obtained his first full-time university appointment at the then University College Leicester. Its status then was as a satellite of the University of London. He was probably not fully aware at first, however, of the fact that the climate of British sociology had been changing substantially, especially during the course of the war.

Until the Second World War, the ‘evolutionary’ tradition in British sociology started by Hobhouse and Spencer was kept alive at the London School of Economics by Morris Ginsberg.²⁰ (As we shall see later, Elias rejected the appellation ‘evolutionary’ in favour of the terms ‘developmental’ or ‘process sociology’.) It was a tradition that was compatible with the sociological perspective of Elias as can be seen from an essay, ‘Recent Trends in Sociology’, which Ginsberg published in 1933. He wrote:

On the historical and evolutionary side of sociology recent work has brought out certain important distinctions. Alfred Weber and (Robert) MacIver stress the distinction between culture and civilisation and argue that the order of growth appears to be radically different in the two spheres ... With regard to the process of civilisation ... an important distinction is drawn by Thurnwald between ... processes that are cumulative and irreversible, for instance, technical discovery, and those that of necessity alternate between a number of limited possibilities, for instance, the forms of marriage, or systems of kinship. (Ginsberg 1956 [1933]: 120–121)

At Heidelberg during the 1920s, Alfred Weber had been Elias’s *Habilitation* supervisor. Under him, Elias was researching the part played by Florence in the transition from pre-scientific to scientific forms of thinking. It is interesting to note that the culture/civilisation distinction that he presumably learned from Alfred Weber and Robert MacIver is the first topic examined by Elias in *On the Process of Civilisation* and that Ginsberg, citing Thurnwald (1932), used the term ‘process of civilisation’. Elias had encountered Thurnwald at the 1928 Zürich Conference when he was a discussant of a paper by him (see Elias 2006a [1929]).

A measure of the change that took place in British sociology, especially after the Second World War – and, until the late 1950s/early 1960s, British sociology was virtually restricted to the LSE – is provided by an autobiographical note which A. H. (‘Chelly’) Halsey included in the Preface to his *A History of Sociology in Britain* (2004). He wrote:

Popper’s attack on historicism was deeply impressive to me. The Hobhouse tradition of seeking laws of social development, though never explicitly mentioned by Popper, was thereby rendered suspect and we were prejudiced against it and converted to Popper’s version of ‘positivism’ as well as, admittedly reluctantly, to piecemeal social engineering. Our activism also led us to quantitative surveys. Popper was not apparently a philosopher but a physicist interested in the methods of the social sciences. It was his conversion of philosophy into methodological problems which attracted us – all very abstract but most persuasive... I was also a Victorian child, led by the promise of science to a new political and social order and inspired by idealistic novels and other arts to the creation, at last, of a new utopia. I have never subsequently lost these early orientations. (2004: vii)

Such orientations became dominant in British sociology in and after the 1950s. Dunning vividly remembers attending a British Sociological Association

Conference with Elias in Sheffield in 1962 or 1963. The topic was 'development', and when Elias expressed his views from the floor, he was heckled with the cry of 'Hobhouse! Hobhouse!' from a prominent female graduate of the LSE. With the exception of Hobsbawm, who happened to be attending, no one seemed to recognise that, with his new synthesis, Elias had arguably moved beyond Hobhouse and Ginsberg. Later on, Elias also provided a compelling critique of Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* and *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (see Chapter 5).

Without ever disappearing completely, the opposition to Elias as the proponent of a supposedly old-fashioned and occident-biased 'progress' theory began to be diluted in the 1960s and 70s as 'historical sociology' and the study of 'social development' in the sense of sociological research into the so-called 'Third World' began to achieve greater legitimacy. Elias used to stress in this connection, however, that terms like 'developed societies' and 'developing countries' are misleading because *all* human societies are in a state of flux. It is only the rates and directions of change that vary. He also attacked as uninformed the assumption that we already know all there is to know about the so-called 'developed' West and how 'it' came to be 'developed'. Accordingly, he called for a programme of comparative and historical research into Western as well as 'Second' and 'Third World' countries.

It was not only Elias's life-experiences but his formal education that influenced his thinking. At the University of Breslau between 1918 and 1923, he read philosophy and medicine, the latter in part because his parents wanted him to become a doctor. He studied medicine until he had completed the pre-clinical part of the degree but, at that point, gave it up to concentrate on obtaining his doctorate in philosophy. Not surprisingly, his unusual and in some ways even anomalous joint training in medicine and philosophy was another profound influence on the development of Elias's patterns of thinking. As he himself expressed it, one aspect of the resultant dilemma with which he found himself confronted, was 'the discrepancy between the philosophical, idealist image of [people] and the anatomical, physiological one', which, he commented, 'unsettled me for many years' (1984: 84). An example was provided in the dissecting room. In the 1950s and 1960s in his tutorials at Leicester, Elias used to relate how, as a result of his experiences in dissecting corpses, he began to puzzle over the popular-*cum*-philosophical dichotomy between 'the body' and 'the mind', wondering how these crude categories, which imply that 'the mind' is somehow separate from 'the body', fitted in with the structure and functioning of the complex organ which he observed and which, although it is still far from being fully understood, is now known to be the primary seat of consciousness, that is of 'feeling' and 'thought'. It was in the dissecting room, too, Elias told us, where he first observed and realised the significance of the complex, mobile musculature of the human face, leading him to reflect on the importance of smiling, laughing, and crying

in human communication and social bonding. He speculated in particular in this connection that the emergence of this facial musculature and of the cognitive-emotional communicativeness of humans must have taken place interdependently in the course of long-term processes of biological evolution and social development.²¹ In the course of such processes, *Homo sapiens* emerged as a social, language-forming, language-learning and language-using species which depends on expandable funds of knowledge which are symbolically, that is, mainly linguistically and mathematically, expressed and stored. Elias was, of course, aware of the fact that knowledge can contract and be lost as well as expand. An example of knowledge-loss is that experienced by most people in the urban-industrial-nation-states of today of the detailed knowledge of plants, animals, and animal behaviour which helped groups of hunter-gatherers to survive. Another example, as Foer (2011) explores, is how the human capacity to remember relatively large stores of information has declined in tandem with the ascendancy of the written word, particularly post Gutenberg's development of the printing press in 1440, and more recently with the development of new information technologies. An example that Foer provides is that of research that has demonstrated how over the course of the past decade the average quantity of telephone numbers that a person might be able to recall from memory alone has decreased tenfold. Such changes, he proposes, have emerged in tandem with the increasing availability and use of smartphone technologies.

Elias obtained his philosophy doctorate in Breslau in 1924 for a thesis entitled *Idee und Individuum: ein Beitrag zur Philosophie der Geschichte* (*Idea and Individual: a Contribution to the Philosophy of History*). In it, he explored the part played in history by individuals and ideas (Elias 1924). However, he quarrelled with his supervisor, Richard Höningwald, over the issue of the Kantian *a priori*: the idea that certain categories of thought such as time, space, causality, and basic morality are inborn in people rather than socially formed and learned in particular socio-historical contexts. This played a part in leading him to decide to switch to sociology and go to Heidelberg to write his *Habilitationsschrift*. As we have seen, he registered to 'habilitate' under the 'cultural sociologist' (*Kultursoziologe*) Alfred Weber – younger brother of the more famous Max who had died in 1920 – at the *Institut für Sozial und Staatswissenschaften*. The choice of Elias's topic was principally related to the sociology of science, with a specific focus upon the relations between science and art in the Italian Renaissance. (His proposal is translated and republished in the Appendix to the first volume of the *Collected Works* published by UCD Press. See *Early Writings* (2006a).)

It was in Heidelberg that Elias met Karl Mannheim, one of the founding figures in what came to be known as 'the sociology of knowledge' (*Wissenssoziologie*). Strong traces of both Alfred Weber's cultural sociology and Karl Mannheim's sociology of knowledge can be found in the synthesis

that Elias was to develop, particularly traces of Mannheim's sociology of knowledge. However, Elias was able skilfully to avoid both the descriptive particularism of Weber and the structure/consciousness dualism discussed at length by Mannheim. Other influences on Elias included: the sociologist Georg Simmel; the field theorist, Kurt Lewin; the *Gestalt* theorist, Wolfgang Köhler; the behavioural psychologist, J.B. Watson; and the physiologist W.B. Cannon. Above all, however, Elias's work can be seen as a synthesis principally of Marx, (Max) Weber and Freud, with Comtean and Durkheimian elements added later, perhaps in part as a result of the influence on him at Leicester of Ilya Neustadt.

In 1929, Mannheim accepted the Chair of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt, taking Elias with him as his Assistant. It is a mark of the power of German professors, then as now, that Mannheim called Elias to his room one day and said: 'Elias, I'm halving your stipend. The other half, I'm giving to Hans Gerth'. Gerth was later to achieve a degree of fame as collaborator with C. Wright Mills. Mannheim also took over from Alfred Weber as supervisor of Elias's *Habilitationsschrift*, promising to 'habilitate' him earlier. Elias abandoned the role of Florence in the development of scientific thinking as his topic and chose instead to write on 'the court society' of France. Elias 'habilitated' early in 1933, just after the Nazis came to power. His thesis was referred to in his work by Mannheim, but Elias mislaid his own copies and it was not published until 1969 when it appeared with the title, *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (*The Court Society*) (see Elias 2006b). Among other ways, it was remarkable – some might say remarkably prescient given what was about to happen in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s – in showing how a single individual, in this case Louis XIV, can come to exercise monopoly control over the levers of power in a large and complex state.

The advent of the Nazi dictatorship introduced another discontinuity into Elias's life. It forced him into exile, first of all to France where he spent two years in Paris and became informally attached to the *Ecole Normale Supérieure* through his association with the likes of Célestin Bouglé and Alexander Koyré (see Elias 1961). While in France, Elias published his first two sociological papers – one on 'changes in the character and function of art and architecture during a process of industrialisation' (Elias 1961: 1) entitled 'Kitschstil und Kitschzeitalter' (Kitsch-style and the age of Kitsch) (1935a) and another on the expulsion of protestants from France ('Vertreibung der Hugenotten aus Frankreich') (1935b), both published in English translation in *Early Writings* (2006a: 85–96 and 97–104 respectively). Elias subsequently moved to England (in 1935), and received British citizenship in 1952. It was not until 1954 that, at the age of 57, he obtained his first *full-time* university teaching post. It was at (what later became) the University of Leicester where, together with Ilya Neustadt, he succeeded – despite a prevailing climate in Anglophone sociology which was, as we described it

earlier, strongly antipathetic to his views – in building up what was to prove to be, for some ten or fifteen years, one of the most rapidly expanding and influential sociology departments in Europe.

Elias at Leicester

When Elias started to teach at Leicester in 1954, it was a University College and awarded London degrees. It was given a Royal Charter and the right to confer its own degrees in 1958. The then Head of Department, Ilya Neustadt, proved highly influential in securing Elias a teaching post at Leicester, and was for a considerable time to prove a powerful ally to Elias. It is together with Neustadt that Elias developed an innovative Introduction to Sociology course for the first intake of students reading for Leicester degrees, that is, the intake for the 1957–1958 academic year. The course arguably came to form one of the main bases for the success of the Leicester Sociology Department in the 1960s. It is worth reflecting at some length on this course, and more generally on the Leicester period of Elias's life, as this serves here to highlight his somewhat enigmatic place amongst, and rather sparse influence upon, in particular, some of the more prominent sociologists in Britain who emerged during this period. In Western countries generally, the 1960s were a decade of sociological expansion but, at Leicester, the rate of expansion exceeded that of anywhere else in Britain. Indeed, the Leicester Department came for a while to outstrip even the London School of Economics as the principal institution where British university teachers of sociology were trained or spent their formative years. A list of some of the personnel involved as staff and students will give an idea of the Department's success. They include (in alphabetical order): Martin Albrow, Sheila Allen, David Ashton, Clive Ashworth, Mike Attalides, Joe and Olive Banks, Anthony Barnett, Richard Brown, Chris Bryant, Percy Cohen, Chris Dandeker, John Eldridge, David Field, James Fulcher, Mike Gane, Anthony Giddens, Miriam Glucksman, John H Goldthorpe, Paul Hirst, Sydney Holloway, Keith Hopkins, Earl Hopper, Jennifer Hurstfield, Geoff Ingham, Nick Jewson, Terry Johnson, Mike Kelly, Richard Kilminster, Derek Layder, Mary McIntosh, Gavin Mackenzie, Rob Mears, Nicos Mouzelis, Pat Murphy, Chris Rojek, Graeme Salaman, John Scott, Ken Sheard, Dominic Strinati, Laurie Taylor, Ken Thompson, Ivan Waddington, Dave Walsh, Rod Watson, Ian Varcoe, Bryan Wilson and Sami Zubaida. Nearly all of them subsequently became at least moderately well known, though, with several notable exceptions, few acknowledged and most were probably unaware of the greater or lesser direct or indirect influence on them of Elias.

Elias's influence was a consequence of the fact that the Departmental agenda was largely set by whether members of the Department were for or against his ideas. Of those within the Department when he was there, Ilya Neustadt, Eric

Dunning and Richard Kilminster were perhaps the staunchest proponents of Elias's position apart from Elias himself. In Dunning's case, this was partly a consequence of the fact that he is sufficiently proficient in German to have been able to read *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* in the original. That extended his insights into what Elias was attempting, especially into the fact that he was not proposing a throwback to the 'evolutionary', 'inevitability of progress', and teleological ideas of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as many claimed. However, only a few Leicester sociologists emerged in that context as what one might call 'fully-fledged Eliasians' or 'figuralists', and principal among those who did were the Leicester sociologists of sport.²² Somewhat indirectly, the University's Centre for Labour Market Studies is another of Elias's legacies. It grew, under the leadership of David Ashton, out of Elias's failed Departmental research project on 'The Young Worker' (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2006). It is worth noting that some of those who were involved with Leicester sociology during the period of Elias's prominence in the department later acknowledged, at least in private correspondence, how profoundly influenced by Elias they had been. A case in point is Richard Brown who in a letter to Elias himself in 1977 wrote that:

Joop [Goudsblom] has commented on the absence of traces of your teaching or references to your writings in the case of publications by me and a number of others previously in Leicester, and in my case at any rate the comment is justified, at least with regard to references. It may well reflect something of the present state of industrial sociology, where I continue to do most work. It would not be so true of teaching, where I continue to be involved very considerably with problems of industrialisation and development and well aware of the lead you gave me in that respect. I also find that I draw on your teaching most of all perhaps when discussing (as in first year courses) formulations of individual-society 'relations', where most writing, it seems to me, is still very inadequate, posing some sort of dichotomy between 'individual' and 'society' and producing all sorts of false problems as a result. There is still a lot of work to be done! (Brown 1977)

The First Year Course devised by Elias proved to be popular with students and was central in leading them, in their droves and to the chagrin especially of the economists,²³ to abandon the other social sciences and flock to sociology. However, it was not so popular with teachers in the expanding Leicester Department, especially those who had come under the influence of the then-dominant, 'anti-historicist' current within then-contemporary sociology. In particular, it was to differing degrees unpopular with Anthony Giddens, John Goldthorpe, and Percy Cohen. Whilst it was likely that Giddens was principally critical of Elias's course – and of his approach to sociology more generally – on account of its explicitly anti-philosophical character,²⁴ Cohen and Goldthorpe,²⁵ in their different ways both devotees of Popper's arguments in *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), were critical

of its historical, process-orientation, or what Elias used in those days to call the ‘developmental perspective’ which underpinned it. This was a period in which advocates of the then-dominant sociological orthodoxy used to argue that the concept of development is of no scientific use because it is irremediably shot through with moral connotations. That is, it was held that ‘development’ is an inherently value-laden, ‘Eurocentric’, even ‘racist’, term which implies the intrinsic superiority of the West and the intrinsic inferiority of ‘the rest’. In short, it was held to be equivalent to the in some ways wrongly discredited concept of ‘progress’. In fact, contrary to a common misinterpretation of his theory of civilising processes which sees it as a form of ‘Western triumphalism’ which ethnocentrically celebrates the Western way of life, Elias developed the theory in the first place in the hope of contributing to an understanding of how what people think of as ‘civilisation’ is only a thin veneer, and which, through its own immanent dynamics, effectively ‘produces’ as an outcome its own discontents. Indeed, refuting the ideological fallacy of Western triumphalism was precisely Elias’s starting point (Kilminster 2007).

It is apparent that both Elias and Neustadt were aware of the rapidly changing sociological ‘fads and fashions’ of the times, but in spite of these, both insisted on a developmental approach to teaching the subject. Prior to Elias’s arrival, the developmental character of the course was largely confined to a relatively crude ‘chronological’ orientation. However, the historical scope of the existing programme no doubt was attractive to Elias. In personal correspondence from 20 October 1952, Neustadt, seeking here to encourage Elias to come to Leicester, described the then-existing programme and signalled some of the directions in which he hoped Elias might develop it:

You can begin with Aristotle if you like!!! The best summary is Armand Cuvillier: *Manuel de Sociologie*, 2 vols. 1950. Vol. 1. First 2 chapters which gives you a bird’s eye view from Aristotle to the present day. One can, for example, begin with discussing the various sources of sociology: political science, philosophy of history, history, influence of social reform movements and social investigations in the 19th C. (Booth, etc.), the influence of biology (theory [sic] of evolution, Darwin, Spencer, the Eugenics movement, studies of heredity and environment, twins, etc. biological analogies). But then the main body is: Comte, Spencer, (the anthropologists if you like: Tylor, Morgan, etc.); Marx; Max Weber; some other German sociologists; Pareto; Hobhouse, Durkheim, Lévy-Bruhl, Westermarck; comparative method; American tendencies... You are perfectly free to arrange the material as you think best; you are not expected to cover all those people – one usually selects... How you present it is your business entirely: for ex.: ... Weber: ideal type, capitalism, religion. Hobhouse: social development; Marx: materialist interpretation of history; Pareto: residues and derivations, elites. Ginsberg used also to deal with some problems: such as race and civilization, culture and civilisation (concepts), crime, war. Now that has gone out of fashion, and one deals, for ex., with various classifications of groups; or social surveys... But the main body remains an exposition and discussion of a number of representative

sociologists. There is in fact very little about ‘methods’... Using Barnes, Cuvillier and even Sorokin (bad for students, but useful when in a hurry for us) you can devise 2–3 introductory lectures giving a bird’s eye survey of names, works and dates and approaches: biological, psychological, sociological, etc. Then go on to Comte, etc. Or, for that matter, plunge straight into Durkheim. It does not matter a bit. Donald’s criterium [*sic*], for example, is merely a chronological one! (Neustadt 1952)²⁶

It is noteworthy to observe the key intellectual figures who are mentioned here by Neustadt. Marx, Weber and Durkheim are all included, but so are Comte, Spencer, Pareto and Hobhouse. Neustadt also alludes to the growing dominance of ‘American tendencies’ (implied here, for example, is the increasing influence of Parsonian functionalism), which include an emphasis on the classification of groups and the collection and analysis of survey data. In the development of the Leicester First Year Course – and here we are referring specifically to the course as given in 1960–61²⁷ when Dunning was a Tutorial Assistant, attended it and took course-related seminars – Elias indeed maintained a chronological orientation, bucking the then increasingly dominant trend to become present-centred, but came to develop this orientation in a number of key respects. Elias made a decisive move away from the existing ‘great men’, ‘history of ideas’, approach that appears to have been employed in the then-existing programme, and instead developed a series of lectures that would document the *longue durée* of human history, and, in tandem, the ascendancy of the social conditions in which sociology emerged as a distinct discipline. He retained a ‘bird’s eye’ view, but extended this more generally to human history and global development. For example, he used the United Nations Yearbooks as a principal source of data on social development. On the basis of the figures contained in the Yearbooks on such issues as population, health and economic growth, he suggested – and it is noteworthy that he made this suggestion as early as 1957 – that the societies of the world could be divided into three basic types, what he called ‘Type A’, ‘Type B’, and ‘Type C’ societies. ‘Type A’ societies were structurally ‘simpler’ or ‘underdeveloped’ societies and had high birth rates, high death rates, small but relatively stable populations, agrarian and sometimes hunting and gathering economies, low levels of urbanisation, low levels of division of labour, weak or non-existent states and low levels of bureaucratisation. ‘Type B’, or ‘industrialising’ societies, had high birth rates, falling death rates, expanding populations, growing levels of industrialisation and urbanisation, increasingly complex divisions of labour and social structures, increasingly powerful states and growing levels of bureaucratisation. ‘Type C’ or ‘industrial’ societies had low birth rates, low death rates, large but relatively stable and occasionally declining populations, urban-industrial economies, large, complex and powerful states, and high levels of bureaucratisation. The most powerful Type C societies had developed overseas colonial empires and were also generally dominant in the world. However, Elias stressed in his course

that, in conjunction with processes of global democratisation, such dominance was at that time coming increasingly under attack in the form of anti-colonial/de-colonisation movements.

Elias next looked critically at explanations of the changes involved in the development of and the transitions between these social types. First he examined the explanations proposed by the theorists of 'economic growth' – neither theories of modernisation nor the term 'modernisation' itself had yet become as misleadingly hegemonic as they are today. The works of William Arthur Lewis (1954) and Walt Whitman Rostow (1960) served as Elias's principal examples. He counterposed their largely reductionist, economic arguments with nineteenth and early twentieth century sociological theories of development, for example, those of Comte, Marx, Durkheim, Weber and Hobhouse. In that context, Elias looked critically at, among other things, what he called, following Bertrand Russell (1948), the 'billiard ball' concept of social causation, arguing in its stead for a concept of 'causal nexuses', that is, of complexes of interacting and interdependent 'causes' and 'effects' in which 'effects' become 'causes' and *vice versa*. Finally, Elias undertook what he called, following Neustadt's cue (see again the earlier-cited correspondence) 'A Bird's-Eye View of the Social Development of Mankind' (*sic*). This started with a look at the origins and early biological evolution of *Homo sapiens*, went on to examine the earliest 'Stone Ages', and finished with a discussion of the 'Neolithic' (agricultural) 'New Stone Age', 'Metallurgical' (Bronze Age; Iron Age), 'Urban' (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Mexico, Peru), 'Scientific' and 'Industrial Revolutions'. Much of what Elias said in his 'Bird's-Eye View' was based on his reading of the work of the archaeologist V. Gordon Childe (1928, 1936). Interestingly, the Canadian historian W.H. McNeill and his son have, in the last decade, published a book entitled *The Human Web: a Bird's-Eye View of World History* (2003). It is a book redolent of ideas that could have come from Elias, and may possibly have been influenced by McNeill's exposure to 'figurational' work and thinking in the late 1980s and 1990s.

It does not, we think, require too great a stretch of the imagination to enable one to realise that Elias was anticipating *inter alia* in his First Year course what American sociologist Irving Horowitz (1966) later came to call the 'three worlds of development'. In short, we are suggesting that, as early as 1957, Elias anticipated the now standard distinctions between 'First World', 'Second World' and 'Third World' countries.

As we have said, Elias's course was popular with students. They were encouraged to explore and discuss a variety of issues such as the adequacy of his typology with its lumping together, for example, of varieties of in some ways very different African, Asian, South and Central American societies under the 'Type A' label. However, the course was decried by some members of the Leicester academic staff as hopelessly out-dated. What they meant, we can plausibly surmise, was something to the effect that:

- (i) Elias's course dealt with issues such as social change and development which were either not covered or did not figure centrally in the then fashionable American introductory textbooks. Nor was it readily susceptible to Parsonian interpretations or researchable using statistical methods and present-centred survey techniques. These at that time University of Leicester critics of Elias, principal among them John Goldthorpe and Percy Cohen, evidently equated recency of publication with sociological value. In their view, the writings of Parsons (Cohen) and the methods of scholars such as Lazarsfeld (Goldthorpe) were what *modern, up-to-date, truly scientific* sociology should *really* be about;
- (ii) these sociologists who were at Leicester at that time were similarly opposed to Elias's stress in his First Year course on the developmental and comparative theories of Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber. By the 1950s, the developmental/historical work of these and other 'classical' sociologists (such as Hobhouse) had been to a large extent confined to the dustbin by the advocates of the then dominant functionalist and empiricist approaches to the subject (which were, of course, destined themselves to be similarly side-lined in the late 1960s). Elias, however, counselled against such arguments, claiming that many of the so-called 'classical' theories contained redeemable elements and accordingly urged sociologists 'not to throw the baby out with the bathwater'. More particularly, he advised them to jettison only those aspects of earlier theories that had been definitively refuted in terms of testable scientific criteria as opposed, as has recurrently happened in the social sciences, to fashion-shifts based on grounds of a more ideological, value-judgemental kind. Similarly, Elias integrated the concept of function into his synthesis on the basis that a move from a concept of action to a concept of function constitutes a shift in the direction of greater reality-congruence and hence scientificity. That is because, if properly interpreted, the concept of function is indicative of the existence of nexuses in the observable social world.

Elias, Ghana, and British anthropology

During his time at Leicester (1954–1962), Elias rose to the rank of Reader before retiring from his post in 1962. Immediately upon his retirement, and before his return to Europe in 1964, Elias spent two years as Professor of Sociology at the University of Lagon, Ghana.²⁸ Whilst at Lagon, he became engaged in a considerable amount of fieldwork, and partly in relation to this, he began to amass a collection of African art. His collection had become sufficiently extensive by 1970 to warrant an exhibition at the City Art Gallery in Leicester.

According to the prominent anthropologist, Jack Goody, speaking at a conference in Metz (France) in 2002, Elias's fellow teachers at Lagon in 1962 – Goody was one of them – were up in arms against the way in which he (Elias) ran the Sociology Department there. While it was likely that Elias would not have made a good administrative head, it is possible that his Lagon colleagues may well have been opposed to him not only on that count but at least in some measure also on grounds that were similar to those on which he had been criticised at Leicester over the previous four or five years. That is, it may well have been the case that Elias's Lagon colleagues perceived him to have been 'old-fashioned' for trying to introduce an approach to sociology which, at that time, was considered to be outmoded. The opposition to Elias in that context also came from his (Elias's) attempt to remove anthropology from Lagon's sociological curriculum. In all likelihood, such a move was related to some of Elias's reservations concerning the British anthropology of this period.²⁹

Nor did Elias seek to deny the contributions to knowledge that the best British anthropologists such as Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and Evans-Pritchard (1940) had made. He did, though, point to the fact that the origins of the discipline in Britain lay, in large part, in the perceived need of the rulers of the British Empire for information on the people they ruled. Elias was also critical of the tendency of many anthropologists to write, after only one or two years' fieldwork, as if they were describing *the* social structure of the Nuer, the Tiv, the Ashanti, or whoever, and not just giving *their own*, necessarily partial view of this structure. Nor, according to Elias in his lectures, tutorials, and private discussions, did such anthropologists typically try to account for how this structure had emerged in the first place, how it had developed over time, or how it had been affected by European colonisation.

In short, according to Elias there was a tendency, perhaps especially in the 1950s and 60s, for British anthropologists to treat 'tribal' societies as if they were self-contained, bounded 'systems' that existed independently of space and time, and, more particularly, independently of any wider and dynamic social and environmental context. There was also, he suggested, a tendency to accept – and perhaps even to believe – that what anthropologist X had written about tribal society Y had a high degree of congruence with the reality of that society. Furthermore, Elias proposed, tribal social structures tended to be seen as unchanging constants, so that there was no need for other anthropologists to return after a period of time to see whether anything had changed, or simply to test/check what their predecessors had written. In this connection, Elias used to make much of how, when Oscar Lewis (1951) returned to test what Robert Redfield (1947) had written on the folk culture of Yucatan, a Tepoztlán village in Mexico, he (Lewis) found a society that was considerably different. More particularly, Lewis found Tepoztlán to be conflict-riven, whereas Redfield had claimed it to have been largely harmonious (Elias and Dunning 2008).

Elias also used to argue that a good deal of twentieth century anthropology was characterised by a pervasive current of cultural relativism, in turn driven by a sometimes crude, romantic egalitarianism (see Dunning 1977). This contributed, he said, to a failure on the part of many anthropologists to appreciate, for example, that a people with and willing to use nuclear weapons is *ipso facto* more militarily powerful in an empirically demonstrable sense than, say, a people with only spears and bows and arrows. However, drawing distinctions of this sort had become, Elias suggested, eschewed by anthropologists as part of a more general attempt to avoid ethnocentrism, and their wish to disavow a colonial legacy in which a sharp distinction had repeatedly been drawn between those who are 'primitive' and those who are 'civilised' (see, for example, Anton Blok's (1982) critique of Elias's work along these lines; see also Stephen Mennell's more general discussion of anthropological critiques of Elias's work (1998: 228–241)). As we argued earlier in this chapter, Elias was more than just aware of this danger when drawing comparisons between societies at different stages of 'development'. Indeed, it was one of Elias's chief contributions in *On the Process of Civilisation* not only to explore how such distinctions as that between 'civilised' and 'primitive' people were employed by particular groups in the West as means of distinguishing their ways of life from those of their perceived social inferiors – and in so doing, mobilising the latter as justifications for colonial bloodshed – but also to examine the sociogenetic conditions under which such notions emerged in the first place. In fact, Elias saw it as his central undertaking to advance a *technical* concept of development that, quite consciously, avoids judgments such as 'backward' or 'uncivilised' through facilitating a primary engagement with differences in the 'actual patterns of interdependence binding people together' (Mennell 1992: 237).

Elias's return to continental Europe

From 1964 to 1978, Elias maintained firm connections with Leicester. He continued to teach regularly on the MA (Sociology) degree, retaining an office in the University. During that period, he and Dunning also taught jointly at the University of Warwick for five years. Although he kept a flat in London for a while (in the White House next to Regent's Park), Leicester remained his principal place of residence until 1978, when he returned permanently to continental Europe, initially to Germany (1978–1984) after being awarded an honorary Doctorate by the University of Bielefeld in 1977. Thereafter, Elias came to set up home in Amsterdam where he had previously been a visiting lecturer in the early 1970s.

From the late 1960s and early 1970s, Elias's sociological reputation began to grow in continental Europe, especially in the Netherlands, Germany, and France. In addition to Bielefeld, Elias was invited to a number of other German

universities, sometimes as a visiting scholar – these included Aachen, Bochum, and Konstanz. In 1977, Elias was made the first recipient of the Theodor Adorno Prize conferred at Frankfurt, where he was also awarded the title of Professor Emeritus at the city's principal university. During this period, Elias's star also began to rise outside the academy. For example, he became known to lay audiences when he came to feature in a series of interviews and documentaries by the press and television media, both within the Netherlands and Germany. His ninetieth birthday (1987) was marked by two conferences in his name, and an associated special issue of the journal *Theory, Culture and Society*. A year later, he was presented with the European Amalfi prize for *The Society of Individuals* (Elias 2010 (1987)) (at that time only available in the original German as *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen*) as the best book published within the continent during 1987. By the age of 92, Elias was almost completely blind and suffered recurrent strokes. He died at his home in Amsterdam on 1 August 1990. Virtually his last words to Dunning, who was visiting him the previous Christmas, were: 'Eric my dear, I'm dying'. They were spoken calmly, without visible emotion and in what appeared to be a rather detached and matter-of-fact way.

Summing up, the following aspects of Elias's life can be said to help in explaining characteristic features of his sociology:

- (i) His experience, above all, of the First World War, the rise of the Nazis and the murder of his mother in a gas chamber, all sensitised Elias to the part played by violence and war in human life. Such experiences also intensified his awareness of 'decivilising' as well as 'civilising processes' and provided him with first-hand experiences of the sorts of horrors that could be committed in the name of civilisation.
- (ii) The repeated interruption of his career by wider events – the First World War, the German hyperinflation of 1923, the Nazi takeover ten years later, exile to France and then to Britain, internment as an 'enemy alien' – all helped to sensitise Elias to the interdependence and interplay of the 'individual' and the 'social'; 'the private' and 'the public'; 'the micro' and 'the macro'; 'agency' as well as 'structure'. As we suggested earlier following Kilminster (2007) and Russell (1997), Elias's experiences as a Jew played a part in this connection, too.³⁰
- (iii) Elias's simultaneous study of medicine – perhaps especially his observation in the dissecting room of the structure and functioning of the human brain – and philosophy, helped to problematise for him such aspects of philosophy as the mind-body dichotomy, contributing to his switching to sociology in the first place and to his making important and original contributions to what have come to be known as 'the sociology of emotions' and 'the sociology of the body'. That Elias was a pioneer of the sociology of sport is perhaps best understood primarily in that context, too.

It is worthwhile noting in this connection that many German social scientists in the 1920s and 1930s would, of course, have had similar experiences to Elias but took different scientific paths. However, none of them experienced the totality of what Elias went through and none had the same combination of academic training, determination, Jewish origins, familial background, and intellectual ability. Furthermore, some of Elias's conceptual innovations were developments only likely to have been made in Weimar Germany because they were elaborations on the earlier contributions made by scholars such as Max and Alfred Weber, Georg Lukacs, and Karl Mannheim. Besides, as is the case when considering the work of any key scholar, while the genesis of an individual's ideas cannot adequately be explained without an understanding of the biographical, intellectual, and more general historical conditions under which these took form, the development of such ideas is never in any simple sense *reducible* to such conditions.

Recognition and dissemination

As suggested above, it was not until Elias was relatively advanced in years, principally when he was in his eighties, that his work came to gain anything like the widespread recognition for which he had hoped. At the time of its original publication in Switzerland in 1939, Elias's key study *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* was little known and largely ignored by sociologists of the period. As Bryan Wilson (1977: 15–16) has suggested, the eve of the Second World War was perhaps not the most auspicious time for the publication of a two volume work on 'civilisation', and at that, by a German Jew. However, the republication of the text in the original German in 1969 did bring more widespread attention to Elias's work. It reached an even wider audience in the 1970s and 1980s as Anglophone scholars were finally able to read English translations of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, notably the publication by Blackwell in 1978 of an English translation of Volume I sub-titled *The History of Manners*, which was followed in 1982 by Volume II sub-titled *State Formation and Civilization*. Also during this period, a number of Elias's other principal studies, some of which were partially or wholly written before the original publication of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, began also to be published in English. These included (in their English translations) *The Court Society* (1969); *What is Sociology?* (1978); *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1984); *Involvement and Detachment* (1987); *The Society of Individuals* (1991); and, together with Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement* (1986; 2008), which was first written in English. It was not until 1994, though, that *The Civilizing Process* was published in English as a single volume, to be followed in 2000 by a revised edition, again by Blackwell, in which some of the issues relating to the translation from the

original German were further addressed. At the time of writing, a major series entitled *Elias Collected Works*, published by University College Dublin Press, is nearing completion. A newly revised and partially re-translated version of *The Civilizing Process* has (May 2012) been published with the title *On the Process of Civilisation*. The new title, from the outset, helps to avoid the impression that Elias was attempting to theorise a singular, monolithic and universal process of social development. The title also constitutes, as we have suggested earlier, a far more accurate English translation of the original German title, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*.

To date, Elias's writings have been translated into some twenty-nine languages, mainly German (110 items as of June 2005) and English (72 items, also as of June 2005). Verbal testimony to Elias's current sociological stature is provided by a growing number of scholars. At a conference in Amsterdam in 1990 to mark Elias's death, the German Max Weber scholar, Dirk Käsler, described Elias as a 'sociologist for Europe in the twentieth century and a sociologist for the world in the twenty-first'. In a poll carried out in 1998 by the International Sociological Association, Elias's *On The Process of Civilisation* was ranked as the seventh most important sociological work of the twentieth century, coming ahead of books by Parsons, Merton, Habermas and many other famous figures. In 1998, Robert van Krieken wrote as follows on Elias's growing reputation. What he said is worth quoting in full:

Since translation of his work into English began to accelerate in the 1980s, a growing number of books and articles on topics including health, sexuality, crime, shame, national and ethnic identity, femininity, and globalisation, in a variety of disciplines, made positive reference to Elias as an authority on the history of emotions, identity, violence, the body and state formation. Lewis Coser referred to him as 'one of the most significant sociological thinkers of our day', and Zygmunt Bauman described him as 'indeed a great sociologist'. 'Long before American scholars had discovered the idea of historical sociology', wrote Christopher Lasch, 'Elias understood the possibilities of this new genre and worked them out with an imaginative boldness that still surpasses later studies in this vein'. Anthony Giddens describes his work as 'an extraordinary achievement, anticipating issues which came to be explored in social theory only at a much later date'. Elias's teaching, writing and ideas are gradually exercising an increasingly pervasive influence on an ever-widening circle of sociologists as well as a broader lay public, in an expanding number of countries and languages, and he is now starting to take his place in the sociology textbooks and dictionaries. (van Krieken 1988: 2–3)

Two caveats are necessary to what van Krieken wrote. The first is that Elias's growing popularity is partly a consequence of the emergence and growth of 'the sociology of emotions', 'the sociology of the body', and 'the sociology of consumption' as sociological specialisms, developments of which Elias would probably have at least partly disapproved because these specialisms are not always located in the context of a wider body of theory. In this respect, echoing

some of the ideas of Comte, Elias was opposed to the fragmentation that results from the contemporary trend towards overspecialisation. He also regarded 'the body' and 'the emotions' as central to *all* fields and branches of sociological endeavour and stressed the need (i) for analysis always to be accompanied by synthesis; and (ii) for *all* sociological specialisms to be related to a central corpus of knowledge.

Our second caveat relates to the fact that Elias's growing popularity is patchy and not literally world-wide. For example, his work first caught on and continues to be highly regarded in the Netherlands, France, Germany, Italy, Portugal and Spain. It is also highly regarded by some research groups in South America, especially Brazil, Colombia, and Argentina. In the United States and Britain, however, in fact throughout most of the English-speaking world, Elias's work remains somewhat marginal, little known outside specific paradigmatic enclaves, and somewhat divorced from the mainstream. An important exception to this more general rule is in relation to the sociological study of sport and, to a rather lesser extent, leisure, where Elias's work has long been centrally discussed by scholars in these fields. Relatively recently, for instance, the Canadian Michael Atkinson published his highly insightful *Tattooed: The Sociogenesis of Body Art*, in 2003; Joseph Maguire published his perceptive *Reflections on Process Sociology and Sport: 'Walking the Line'*, in 2011; and Dominic Malcolm published his imaginative *Sport and Sociology*, in 2012. All three were manifestly important sociological contributions – the latter two to the study of sport which, as we saw earlier in this book, had been pioneered among others by Elias and Dunning in the 1960s, 70s and 80s. All three of these books are fundamentally based upon, and have sought to advance, Elias's concepts and theories. Thus, they differ in a variety of ways from the work of other sociology of sport pioneers such as Günther Lüschen, John Loy, Peter Donnelly and Klaus Heinemann.

There are signs, nonetheless, that this situation regarding the reception of Elias's work – particularly with regard to its confinement to specific geographical and sociological 'enclaves' – may be set to change. Perhaps most significantly, it is in relation to the empirical applications and assessments of Elias's ideas on civilising processes that the most important developments have occurred over the last two decades. A noteworthy case in point is that of work by a number of key crime historians. For example, Eric Johnson and Eric Monkkonen's edited collection entitled *The Civilization of Crime* (1996, University of Illinois Press) contains contributions from European and North American scholars who have come to consider the work of Elias on the back of a reassessment of long-term trends in crime. As the authors of this volume explained:

One of the most notable effects of recent work on the history of crime as demonstrated in this volume has been to force historians to reassess (or to assess for the first time) the work of the sociologist Norbert Elias. Without a doubt, his

work has gained the greatest respect of any single theoretician. Elias's significance has come to be recognized in part because his descriptions of the "civilizing process" match so well what crime historians have been finding. That he wrote his major works touching on violence in the late 1930s with little historical research to confirm his ideas makes his theoretical formulations all the more impressive ... [F]or historians of crime, the slowly growing conviction that crime has decreased, not increased, over the centuries; that the countryside used to be dangerous, not safe; that, as Barbara Hanawalt put it, "fur-collar crime" was a major threat – all of this changed the status of Elias from curiosity to prescient thinker. (1996: 4–5)

That this text was published in the US, and by two major North American scholars in the field, is particularly noteworthy. However, more importantly, to the extent that Johnson and Monkkonen are correct, it would appear that these scholars' motivation to engage with Elias has grown out of an increasing dissatisfaction with long established models of crime and society, rather than, say, the need to settle or resolve paradigmatic disputes. Indeed, until recently, Elias's thesis ran counter to most if not all other sociological models that had been dominant within the US, particularly those associated with Tönnies, Durkheim, Park and Burgess, and many related others, all of which held that crime had increased in tandem with processes of urbanisation, class alignment, industrialisation, and the more general demise of 'community' associated with the ascendancy of 'mass society' (1996: 5).

More recently, prominent North American social scientists such as Richard Sennett (currently in post at both the London School of Economics and the New York University)³¹ and, to a much greater extent, Steven Pinker, the latter a Canadian who teaches at Harvard, have also come to recognise the significance of Elias's work. Pinker, a renowned and highly influential Canadian psychologist, like Johnson and Monkkonen, and the various contributors to their edited volume, came to engage with Elias's work not out of paradigmatic alignment, the pursuit of intellectual fashion, nor, indeed, because Elias's 'star was on the rise' in the US, but because his (Pinker's) empirical assessment of long-term trends in violence effectively made necessary a theoretical model that could better account for the processes he was observing. In his highly original book entitled *The Better Angels of our Nature: the Decline of Violence in History and its Causes* (Allen Lane, 2011), Pinker describes Elias as '... the most important thinker you have never heard of' (2011: 59). The book contains a seventy-page chapter devoted solely to Elias's work, and draws centrally on his theory of civilising processes. While we might cavil at some points of detail concerning his exposition of Elias, Pinker shows an admirable command of Elias's core ideas.³² His work constitutes a major engagement with, assessment and extension of, Elias's theory of civilising processes. Above all, Pinker has arguably surpassed Elias with the very substantial body of statistical data that he introduces. Statistical methods were not highly developed in sociology

during most of the years in which Elias lived and wrote, and he (Elias) spent far more time analysing literary texts, paintings and drawings. In addition, Pinker has effectively developed further specific aspects of Elias's thesis. For example, he has explored in some detail what we might call 'the civilisation of God'. Pinker documents through a panoply of examples how in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, there is a shift away from the understanding and depiction of God as a vengeful, impulsive, volatile, spontaneous and bloodthirsty deity – in, for instance, the Hebrew bible (the Old Testament) – and towards the depiction of an increasingly even-handed, temperate, pacifying, divine providence (in the New Testament and the Talmud).

We have shown in earlier sections of this chapter how Elias's own biographical circumstances, intertwined with a specific set of historical conditions – particularly the rise of the Nazis in Weimar Germany and the Second World War – had a significant role to play in his status as a relatively marginal figure, both within his own lifetime, and with respect to his enduring influence on other scholars. However, in addition to a consideration of such circumstances, there is a range of other factors to consider. These notably include some of the characteristics of Elias's work itself, which we think help to explain why it has not yet come to gain the recognition that it arguably deserves.

In an e-mail written to Chris Rojek in 2005 (which both of them have permitted us to cite), one of the few American sociologists to have engaged seriously with Elias's contributions, Alan Sica of Penn State University, commented incisively, albeit somewhat tongue-in-cheek, on this issue. He wrote:

The reason Americans don't take to Elias is that he writes about European historical and cultural change and American sociologists don't feel comfortable with that sort of thing, except for Goldstone and that small lot; and because he is theoretically very adventurous and synthetic, and they don't go for that; and because he trashed Parsons, who many of them liked back in the day; and because he could be mistaken for a closet Freudian, which they don't like; and because he brings up really obnoxious qualities of humankind, which they particularly don't like; and because he wrote a helluva lot of stuff, which takes a long time to read, and they don't have time; and because 'figuration' is a word that has distinctly effete connotations in this country, and sounds like art history...

In our opinion, notwithstanding some notable exceptions not least those discussed earlier in this section, these observations apply to Britain as much as the USA. Put simply, Elias's work has never quite 'fitted' within the sociological mainstream in either the UK or North America. And as we have seen in this chapter, dominant intellectual trends seem on the whole to have disadvantaged Elias at pivotal moments in the development of his academic career. At a time when sociologists were turning their attention to 'macro' level social structures, particularly to the spheres of work, industry, and the 'economic forces' of production, Elias's work – with its focus on, say, the minutiae of table manners in the French Court – seemed out of place, indeed, rather 'effete' to use Sica's

term, perhaps even antagonistic. Similarly, his later work, for example, on Mozart, or, together with Eric Dunning, on sport and leisure, was considered by some to be rather trivial at the time of its first publication. The question in such a context hardly needed to be spelled out: surely such topics were not worthy of serious sociological attention? And, while these topics subsequently came to be recognised as important fields of sociological analysis in their own right, Elias's approach was often considered (with, as we have seen, some notable exceptions) to be *one from the past* more than *one for the future*. Indeed, his work has almost always run counter to intellectual fashions. This tendency has extended even to the language and terminology he employed. Particularly in his first published work in English, Elias unapologetically used terms and formulations – with reference to, for example, 'civilisation'; 'development'; 'directions of change'; 'functions'; 'laws'; 'the nexus of facts'; 'scientific understanding'; 'factual knowledge'; and 'reality' – which variously offend the sensibilities of, or sound alarm bells for, many present-day sociologists. While Elias arguably employed such terms in ways that avoided their pitfalls (and with these, some of the main reasons why they had initially been called into question), this simple tendency alone has not helped his case.

More generally, Elias's developmental approach to sociology, and in particular, his insistence on the notion of sociology as a 'science', has led many (albeit mistakenly) to label him, variously, as an 'evolutionist', and more recently, as a 'naïve empiricist', a child of the Enlightenment who, for example, is '... happily innocent of modern social studies of science' (Pels 1991: 181). While we shall return to such issues in Chapters Five and Six, and the Conclusion of this book, the points raised above are important in a key respect: whether or not such charges are 'real', they are, to paraphrase W.I. and Dorothy Thomas (1929), 'real in their consequences' to the extent that they have underpinned some rather hasty dismissals of Elias's work.

Such difficulties for subsequent generations of sociologists, quite literally, to 'come to terms' with Elias's work are perhaps compounded by the fact that, as we discussed in the Introduction, his sociology does not readily lend itself to short-term political causes. We have seen in this chapter that Elias's dogged determination to avoid ideological incursions into knowledge is related in important respects to aspects of his biography. Elias shunned straightforward and direct political investments in knowledge, and argued instead that these should be pursued by means of a *detour via* detachment. Elias's emphasis on 'detachment', in turn, has led some, albeit wrongly, to suggest that he appears to be making claims for a 'disinterested' or 'neutral science'. Furthermore, Elias envisaged the 'user group' for sociological knowledge ultimately to be *humanity as a whole*, not *specific* groups or interests.

In these and other senses, Elias's work does not provide easy 'answers'. The core premise that effective social interventions can only be made on the basis of the growth of a stock of knowledge that will take generations to establish may

seem to some to be something of a ‘cop-out’. Essentially, the notion appears to provide a good rationale for political avoidance along the lines that ‘we can avoid becoming “politically” involved now, so long as we do our bit in the long run by playing our part in the knowledge relay race’. Typically, the social, economic and political problems of the day, irrespective of their long-term sociogenesis, are experienced rather more urgently. The temptation to ‘retreat to the present’ is all the greater for sociologists who are faced with institutional competition from other fields and disciplines – such as psychology and economics – the members of which feel more able to posit and peddle ‘answers’ and ‘oven-ready solutions’. Of course, such a portrayal of Elias as a scholar who consigned political action to the future, is a misrepresentation, not simply of his approach, but of his life’s work. As we have seen in this chapter, such work included in his youth, Zionist activism as part of the Blau-Weiss League, his later group-analytic work, and indeed the development of a path-breaking synthesis enshrined in his sociological approach that he hoped would help enable sociologists to become *Mythenjäger* – ‘hunters’ or ‘destroyers’ of myths (2012b: 46) – including the mythological and fantasy-laden political ideologies of the day. In a very immediate and direct political sense, Elias encouraged sociologists to challenge ideologies such as those which, to take the example discussed earlier in this chapter, underpin in important ways the enormous social and economic volatility which, in recent years in particular, has destroyed countless livelihoods and lives.

Dunne (2009) has suggested that Elias’s position in this respect is inherently contradictory. On the one hand, Dunne argues, Elias views human history as following a largely ‘blind’ course, and yet on the other, he (Elias) envisages a future phase in which sociologists might be able to exert ‘control’ over human figurations. Furthermore, Dunne proposes that the issue of control in Elias’s work is similarly ambivalent: Elias effectively observes the emergent human capacity for self-control through his empirical-theoretical work as an ‘actual’, and yet also posits such controls in a prescriptive manner – as something sociologists of the future *ought* to be able to develop. While, as we shall discuss in Chapter Six, we agree that there are a good many questions concerning what might be called the ‘political status’ of figural sociology that require further working through, we disagree with Dunne’s formulation of such problems. Firstly, Elias’s model of human figurations is expressly intended to avoid both determinism on the one hand, and voluntarism, on the other – a point that Dunne recognises, but nonetheless neglects to accommodate. Put simply, Elias’s approach avoids a view of human history as either ‘the net outcome of human rationality and conscious planning’, or of human history as a mere flow of unstructured and directionless ‘chaos’. For Elias, human history arises from the ‘web’ of interdependencies – the nexus of planned and unplanned outcomes of interlacing human decisions, actions, and intentions, both rational and irrational, which shapes, more than it is shaped by, the choices of specific

individuals (Mennell 1983: 6). As such, the course of large-scale human figurations has a degree of independence from *any particular* individual, but *not individuals as such*. Indeed, as Elias shows, for example, in *The Court Society* and *The Germans* – respectively in connection with Louis XIV and Adolf Hitler – under specific figurational conditions, single individuals have historically been able to monopolise state controls in order to secure a high degree of influence over large-scale human figurations, albeit with many consequences that these individuals had ultimately not anticipated. Elias demonstrates with his examples of ‘the games models’ (see Elias (2012b)) that the degree to which any particular figuration follows a ‘blind’ course is also related to the power ratios of the people who comprise it. In the case of those figurations which involve relatively high degrees of asymmetry in dominant power relations, the capacity for those in positions of relative advantage to exercise rational and conscious ‘control’ is considerably greater than within figurations characterised by more symmetrical power ratios. Thus, secondly, the question of ‘control’, or perhaps better, the degree to which particular groups of individuals, perhaps single individuals, might be able to ‘steer’ or otherwise influence the overall direction of change of specific human figurations is not simply a question of *either* ‘control’ *or* ‘no control’. It is a question of *degrees* of influence, in turn related to power balances, and also a question pertaining to the ratio of intended relative to unintended consequences arising from conscious interventions in the sphere of human figurations. Elias’s central thesis in this respect is that the more fantasy-laden the basis for such interventions, the more likely such interventions are to have a higher degree of unintended relative to intended consequences. Dunne is also, in our view, incorrect to conflate ‘self-control’ with ‘control over human figurations’. Indeed, Elias’s central argument is that while the human capacity for self-control that emerges in tandem with civilising processes is a necessary condition for a breakaway from the double-bind ‘trap’ that he posits, such ‘controls’ are not in themselves ‘sufficient’ to do so. Indeed, a further effort at ‘distancing’ is required, *both* in terms of psychic ‘detachment’, and in terms of ‘scientific civilising processes’ through which specific intellectual groups might come to gain a degree of autonomy from ‘heteronomous evaluations’. Finally, Dunne is manifestly wrong to suggest that figurational sociologists are conspicuously silent on issues of policy, resigning such commentary to later generations, or perhaps altogether shirking such responsibilities. To take just the authors of this book as examples of ‘working with Elias’, Dunning *et al.*’s (1998) work on football hooliganism was highly critical of the-then Thatcher government’s emotionally-charged and populist strategy of ‘penning’ rival supporters in football grounds since, they argued, such strategies served simply to escalate tensions between and among supporters, and to displace the violence such that it took place outside of the grounds instead of within them. Similarly, Hughes’s (2003) work on smoking concluded with a series of observations and

recommendations for health policy based upon his figurational analysis of long-term trends in tobacco use. Elias's model of sociology as a vocation, and more specifically, his depiction of sociologists as 'destroyers of myths' is itself of considerable 'political' import (see, for example, Mennell's (1983) explicitly 'political' pamphlet based upon figurational principles). It points towards forms of intervention in the social world that are applicable to sociologists at the current phase of the development of their discipline. At this early stage, current levels of knowledge are perhaps only sufficient for sociologists to draw upon in calling into question, for example, fundamental assumptions made within policy discourse. Indeed, as we mention elsewhere in this book, there is much in Elias's critique of *homo clausus* that, critically speaking, strikes at the core of neo-liberalist ideology and other forms of political and philosophical individualism. While destroying such ideological 'myths', in itself, is a form of 'political action' if we are to so label it, it stands towards one end of a gradual continuum towards more elaborate forms of political involvement, with, for example, explicit policy advice, the development of alternative, research-based models of government and governance, and so forth, towards the other end. If Elias is right, sociologists might, to the extent to which they are able to secure more reliable knowledge of the social world, be able to move gradually along the scale towards greater political involvement not, as Dunne depicts it, at a future stage when 'the day finally arrives' (such a notion is far too static), but by degrees, and by no means *via* a simple, unilinear 'march' towards progress within the human sciences as a whole. Indeed, though the 'anticipatory motif' (Kilminster 2004: 34) of Elias's work is expressly intended to help facilitate such a transition, it by no means guarantees this. Another axis upon which the degree of sociologists' capacity for effective research-based political involvement might vary relates to the degree of complexity involved. We might conceive, for example, of a further continuum with, for example, relatively simple (but still immensely complex) figurations, such as those between a parent and child, towards one end, and gradually more structurally complex figurations towards the other – for example, the figurational dynamics of entire families, schools, organisations, institutions, communities, neighbourhoods, regions, states, supranational entities, and ultimately, humanity as a whole. Accordingly, we could envisage the capacity for sociologists to proffer, for example, research-based models for the rearing of children, group analysis, organisational change, and so forth to be closer to the current reaches of sociological knowledge than, say, effective strategies for the aversion of escalating inter-state military conflicts. Elias's position on 'secondary involvement' is anything but an easy one to practice as a vocation. It demands considerable self-distancing, and, by extension, at the level of sociology as a discipline, the development of a series of more general institutional shifts (this is a theme to which we shall return in the conclusion).

Finally, following on from our arguments above, there is a more fundamental issue that ought to be considered when seeking to understand the somewhat

patchy reception of Elias's work. Put simply, figurational sociology is not easy to practise. Developing an understanding of, in particular, long-term social processes often involves painstaking analysis of time-series data. To emulate Elias directly, one needs to have a solid command of classical and modern history, among other humanities, but, at the same time, there is a need to develop analyses which are quite different from those of historians, and which, accordingly, do not obey the rules of 'historical method', particularly with regard to the chronicling of events – a tendency which often causes figurational sociological work to fall foul of the methodological standards set by members of the 'historical establishment'. Moreover, the key concepts of figurational sociology are, at once, both beguilingly simple and immensely complex. In addition, their comprehension demands a considerable degree of cognitive investment and re-orientation. In particular, a full and proper orientation towards *processes* and a move away from *homo clausus* thinking, each demands a substantial degree of perceptual realignment and self-distancing. Such demands are all the greater given that there are no single or simple terminological/conceptual equivalents to Elias's core theoretical precepts. Nor can such concepts easily be 'disentangled', or indeed, meaningfully separated from, the theoretical-empirical work in which they take form. An exegesis of Elias's work, therefore, always faces the danger of artificially divorcing the 'empirical' and 'rational' components of his approach, or perhaps better, of separating Elias's theoretical insights from his empirical insights, and in so doing undermining a core aspect of his sociological practice which centred on the integration of 'research-theorising'. Yet at the same time, the enterprise of exposition itself demands, for the purposes of coherence, a degree of distillation and separation of core ideas from the corpus of the work from which such ideas are drawn.

It is with these two, albeit apparently contradictory, endeavours in mind that we shall start in the next chapter to examine some of Elias's major contributions to sociology.