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Some Basic Concepts of Figurational Sociology

Elias never considered his position to be ‘unique’. He did, however, consider it to be distinctive. Indeed, he fought against a series of dominant intellectual currents to champion what was sometimes seen to be an outmoded approach by his contemporaries. It was one of Elias’s hopes that, in the course of time, the central tenets of his work would come to be accepted simply as core parts of sociology. He was anticipating in this connection – and sought to contribute to – an end to the ‘paradigm wars’ that we have described in earlier sections, or at least a transformation of them in a more constructive direction.

The main distinctive features of figurational sociology are its emphasis on processes and relations. However, it is *radically* processual and *radically* relational in character; that is, it is processual and relational at its *roots* or *core*. The stress of Elias’s sociology is centrally upon the explanatory importance of time. It correspondingly emphasises the importance of long-term as opposed to short-term processes, although Elias did not neglect the latter.

When he was President of the American Sociological Association in the 1960s, the late George Homans devoted a Presidential Address to the theme of ‘bringing the people back in’ (Homans 1961). He was advocating a sociology that would be less statistical/mathematical than what was then becoming dominant in the United States, a sociology in which it is never forgotten that it is *people* who act, occupy statuses, perform roles and form social structures. Like Homans, Elias, too, sought to lay the foundations for a ‘scientific’ sociology that did not simply involve the emulation of the more successful natural sciences but which was attuned, on the one hand, to those properties of the subject that it shares with other sciences; and on the other, to the balance of similarities and differences between humans, their societies and the rest of the known or empirically experienced world. It is an approach in which far greater stress is placed on what human beings are and how *they came to be* as they are than has conventionally been the case with sociology at least since the end of the Second World War. Dunning vividly remembers how, as a student, he was expected by Elias to have some understanding of human anatomy and physiology, and of biological evolution as well as human history and social development. Further to this, in his sociology, Elias eschewed the use of the more popular mechanical and organic analogies for the purpose of sociological concept-formation and stressed, instead, models

taken from social life itself, for example, dances, games and the personal pronouns.

At the core of Elias's work is a stress on the observable fact that, like the universe at large, each human individual is a process: that is, we are born, mature and die – a set of facts which sound banal until it is remembered that the sociology of birth, death, and dying are marginal specialisms in our subject. Elias wrote of *Humana Conditio*, 'the human condition' (Elias 1985), in this connection. Our difficulties in coming to grips with the processual character of everything, he said, are compounded by our fears and hesitations regarding our mortality. Sociologists, he argued, need to develop a vocabulary which avoids the tendency to reduce processes to steady states (*Zustandsreduktion*). Such a tendency is characteristic of Western languages. As he expressed it:

Our languages are constructed in such a way that we can often only express constant movement or constant change in ways which imply that it has the character of an isolated object at rest, and then, almost as an afterthought, adding a verb which expresses the fact that the thing with this character is now changing. For example, standing by a river we see the perpetual flowing of the water. But to grasp it conceptually, and to communicate it to others, we do not think and say, 'look at the perpetual flowing of the water'; we say, 'look how fast the river is flowing'. We say, 'The wind is blowing', as if the wind were actually a thing at rest which, at a given point in time, begins to move and blow. We speak as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow. ... This reduction of processes to static conditions, we shall call 'process-reduction' for short ... (Elias 2012b: 106–107).

It was in order to capture this idea of process that Elias insisted that the conventional sociological vocabulary which involves talking, for example, of 'social structure *and* social change', a formulation which implies that non-changing social structures could exist, should be abandoned and, even though they often sound ugly in English, replaced by process terms such as 'socialisation', 'civilisation', 'industrialisation', 'urbanisation', 'democratisation', 'courtisation', and 'sportisation'.

According to Elias, humans are also bound to others by fluid ties of interdependence which are a biosocial and not simply a social or learned fact of life. That is, we have a partly inborn, partly socially instilled tendency to seek the company of others, for example for sexual purposes, but also as an enjoyable 'end-in-itself'. Sociability is also important for human survival. The babyhood and infancy of humans last a relatively long time, and babies and infants cannot survive on their own. They have to bond with others and others with them. As Winnicott, the psychoanalyst famously put it: 'There is no such thing as a baby, there is a baby and someone' (Winnicott 1965). Humans also have a mobile facial musculature, a biological fact which is a precondition for smiling, another crucial inborn feature at the emotional level of human bonding.³³ It plays an important part in the bonding of parents and their

newborn babies. Laughter is another uniquely human feature which can play an important bonding role. Although most people tend to take it for granted, there is an occupational group in modern societies – comedians – who specialise in making other people laugh, and there is now a substantial body of sociological research on this profession and on comedy itself (see, for example, the work of Lockyer and Pickering (2006); and Kuipers (2006)). And, of course, just as, among adolescents and adults, smiling can be used to deceive people, so laughter can be used to ridicule other individuals and groups. Both are sometimes used in ‘legal’ and ‘illegal’ murders. Examples include public executions of the kind that used to be common in European and other countries.

Human figurations

Another way of expressing the radical interdependence of humans would be to say that we form dynamic ‘figurations’ with one another. Elias developed the concept of ‘figuration’ as an alternative to, but by no means the equivalent of, terms such as structure, society, and system. The notion is centrally related to a *homines aperti* view of humans – that human beings can only be properly understood as pluralities, and not as isolated individual ‘actors’ who variously ‘interact’ with other ‘individuals’, ‘groups’, ‘organisations’, or ‘social institutions’. Elias argued that *homo clausus* formulations – which stem from an understanding of humans as ‘closed off’ ‘essences of uniqueness’ that ‘stand in relation to’ ‘society’ – can be understood as not simply in themselves conceptually problematic, but as reflective of a particular moulding of human psychic structures that emerges in tandem with particular social processes, notably those to which he referred as ‘civilising processes’. Elias’s aim in coining the term figuration, and in his work more generally, was to counter what has become to people in societies such as ours a socially intuitive reification: that we are individuals closed off from one another and from other ‘social formations’. Moreover, Elias’s term at its core is intended as a counter to the notion that ‘social agencies’, ‘institutions’, and ‘society’ are entities that exist somehow separately from the people who comprise them. That is, the concept of figurations is predicated upon an understanding of the fundamental interdependence of human beings, first in their biology, and then through their socially developed reciprocal needs (Elias 2012a: 525). Such human interdependencies comprise the nexuses of figurations: shifting networks of people with fluctuating, asymmetrical power balances. Sociologically, the concept directs attention towards shifting patterns, regularities, directions of change, tendencies and counter-tendencies, in webs of human relationships that are always changing over time. To think of the concept in relation to a more conventional sociological lexicon, the term invokes ‘the individual’, ‘agency’, ‘society’, ‘social change’, ‘power’, and ‘structure’ simultaneously, but purposely without being reducible to any of these components. Again, effectively built-in

to the concept of figurations is the core idea that notions such as ‘the individual’ as an isolated abstraction, or ‘agency’ as some-*thing* that is ‘held’ or ‘exercised’ by ‘the individual’ or ‘the state’ are in themselves misleading terms which, to varying degrees, involve forms of conceptual reductionism and reification.

A guiding analogy for the concept of figurations is that of dance. Viewing dancers on a dance-floor as a mobile figuration of interdependent people is useful because it refers to ‘real-life’ social processes, and not abstract (and highly problematic) comparisons with, for instance, biological organisms or synthetic mechanisms. However, equally, in invoking dance as an analogy, Elias also wanted us, by extension, to envisage families, cities, nation states, and even feudal, capitalist, and communist societies, all as figurations, but with differing degrees of length and complexity. We can think of recognisable patterns emerging from such shifting figurations, just as we might, for example, be able to discern the ‘tango’, or the ‘waltz’, or simply ‘dance in general’ as distinct, say, from ‘walking’. However, Elias argues, it is important not to conceive of ‘dance’ as a structure or ‘thing’ which is somehow ‘outside’ of ‘the individual’ (2012a: 525). While different people can dance the same dance figuration, there is no dance as such without dancers. Dance figurations, like any social figuration, are to a degree independent of the *specific* individuals forming them at any particular time, *but are not independent of individuals as such*. Neither, Elias proposed, are dances, or by extension figurations, mere abstracted mental constructions produced from the observation of individuals considered in isolation from one another. While figurations can persist even after the individuals who comprised them at one time died and became replaced, they only exist through the ongoing participation of constituent members.

The analogy of dance, and indeed the concept of ‘figurations’, may appear simple at first sight, perhaps common-sensical, but the insights they yield are of great conceptual significance. In this concept – which, we shall show, must be understood in relation to the others he offers – Elias provides a means of *circumventing*, not so much resolving, the ‘agency-structure dilemma’. The dilemma centres on the difficulties attendant upon developing formulations of the relationship between individuals and the societies they form which avoid the trap of ‘reductionism’ to ‘individuals’ and ‘agency’ on the one hand, and the ‘reification’ of ‘society’ and ‘structure’, on the other, whilst simultaneously doing justice to both ‘the individual’ and ‘the social’ sides of the equation. Sociologists have been embroiled in the agency-structure/individual-society conundrum since the inception of their subject when it separated from philosophy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Another name for the conundrum/dilemma is the ‘nominalism’ *versus* ‘realism’ controversy (Popper 1957). Emile Durkheim (1895) who saw sociology as the study of ‘social facts’ was a sociological realist who in some formulations came close to reifying social phenomena by playing down, perhaps even failing to see, that they are simultaneously individual. Max Weber who saw sociology as the study of ‘social action’ was a sociological nominalist because he denied the reality to which sociological constructs such

as ‘state’ and ‘society’ correspond and refer (Gerth and Mills 1970). For Weber, they are ultimately nothing more than names.

It is important to recognise that Elias only came to develop his concepts, theories and methods gradually over time. They did not flow automatically or quickly from his pen. In his 1921 essay, ‘On Seeing in Nature’, for example, in which he discussed the balance of similarities and differences between ‘the arts’ and ‘the sciences’, he used the term ‘laws’ to express the discoveries unearthed by practitioners of the latter. Somewhat later, in his plan for his later abandoned *Habilitationsschrift* (post-doctoral thesis) which was to have been supervised by Alfred Weber (*Collected Works* (2006a), Vol. 1: 111–122) and likewise in his 1929 essay on ‘The Sociology of German Anti-Semitism’ (2006a: 78–80), he made explanatory use of the metaphor of ‘constellations’ to express the idea of structure but later abandoned it on account of its astronomical connotations. It was only when working in the 1960s on a joint article with Eric Dunning, ‘Dynamics of Sport Groups with Special Reference to Football’ (Elias and Dunning 1966), that Elias came to prefer the concept of ‘configurations’ because of its combination of structural and processual connotations.³⁴

It soon became clear, however, that Elias had a considerably more complex set of concepts forming in his mind. He used the concept of ‘law-like regularities’ as explanatory of the relatively simple, recurring properties of the phenomenal universe such as light and gravity with which physicists and chemists have been centrally concerned. However, he did not think of them as necessarily universal and eternal as philosophers such as Popper seem to have done. Moreover, he spoke of the configurational dynamics of emergent organic structures such as DNA where the helix has to be double in order to result in genetic inheritance. ‘Figurational dynamics’ was the term he reserved for the highly complex and dynamic structures and processes that human societies involve, and that are the objects/subjects of sociological research. Elias expressed this latter point as follows:

It is important ... to distinguish clearly the integration and organisation of sub-units in formations such as a cell or an organism from the integration and organisation of human beings in society. For this reason I have introduced the concept of the figuration of human beings, to designate the unique mode of organisation and integration of human individuals in societies. In this way, a clear distinction can be drawn between the configuration of large models in a cell and the manifold figurations of human beings that we call groups or societies. But what is paramount for me here are the differences in the things themselves. For these, conceptual symbols which are as reality-congruent as possible must be found. (Elias 2009c: 199, n12)

Earlier, Elias had sought to represent diagrammatically what he called ‘some of the stages of integration’ in the following way.

Figure 2.1 shows in diagrammatic form how Elias sought to develop a conceptual vocabulary which was attuned to the considerably higher levels of

Figure 2.1 Some of the stages of integration as they can be presented today

complexity pertaining to human societies: in his terms – the levels of integration involved within the sphere of human figurations. We have already touched upon some of the important ways in which Elias's concept of figurations, in turn, also needs to be understood in tandem with the concepts of interdependence, *homines aperti* and *homo clausus*. It is thus pertinent now to explore these concepts in more depth for it is precisely this de-centring and re-orientation of the human self-image that is fundamental to Elias's sociological approach, and which marks his distinctive break from a pervasive current of post-Renaissance/Enlightenment thinking. To commence this undertaking, it is necessary once again first to return to the inter-related dilemma of structure versus agency.

Homo clausus and homines aperti: Between the Scylla and Charybdis

In an interview with a journalist from *Woman's Own* magazine in 1987, former British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, (in)famously said: 'There is no such thing as society... there are individual men and women and there are families'. The phrase later became celebrated as something of a neo-liberal mantra. Of course, the statement is entirely and inherently nonsensical. To use the term 'families' is already to posit the existence of an entity which is supra-individual. That is, implicit in what Mrs Thatcher said is the idea that a society consists of families and is, hence, more than the sum of its individual members. Her mentor in this mistaken way of thinking seems to have been the late Sir Keith Joseph – one of the home secretaries during her reign – and he, in his turn, seems to have got his understanding from reading the philosophers Hayek (1944) and Popper (1957), both of them advocates of varieties of sociological nominalism. Among other things, what this example shows is that the agency-structure/individual-society conundrum is not just a dry-as-dust academic issue but one with political implications.

In contrast to sociological nominalism, many, if not most of whose advocates come from the political right, the advocates of sociological realism tend, though again not always, to come from the political left. That is because, while people on the right are liable to advocate varieties of relatively unregulated entrepreneurship, rugged individualism, and unfettered markets, people on the left are more likely to champion government responsibility, state-intervention, and control, expressed through ideas such as 'no man is an island' and 'we are all responsible for one another'. An exception in this regard is provided by German National Socialism ('Nazism') with its extreme, *völkisch* racism, its idea of society ('the nation', 'the people' (*das Volk*)) as an entity which is somehow 'superorganic', and its stress on the subordination of individuals to 'the state'.

Much more typical of sociological realism is the ‘structural Marxism’ of Louis Althusser, a variant of Marxism from which ‘the human being as a creative person is almost entirely absent ...’ (Layder 1994: 41). People are seen from this standpoint as mere ‘carriers’ (*Träger*) of beliefs and structures which serve to support the *status quo* and bolster the power of the ruling class. It is a position which contrasts markedly with Marx’s own, as can be seen from his famous statement that: ‘Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past’ (Marx in Marx and Engels 1942, vol. 2: 315). As we shall show, the balance between voluntarism and determinism expressed in this passage is close to Elias’s position.

According to Elias, it is one of the chief tasks of sociologists to steer the sociological ship between the ‘Scylla’ of reification and determinism on the one hand, and the ‘Charybdis’ of individualistic reductionism and voluntarism on the other. What this means is that he urged them to use a combination of theory-based reasoning and empirical observation in which neither is allowed to become dominant. The idea is to build-up a picture of humans and their social worlds which is as congruent as possible with how individuals and their societies ‘really’ are. In short, based on his own researches, Elias was recommending a conceptualisation in which societies are neither conceived as wholly determining ‘things’ (reification), nor reduced to unstructured congeries of freely-choosing individuals (reductionism, individualism, voluntarism). Elias expressed his view of the ‘individual–society’ problem thus:

Our conventional tools for thinking and speaking are to a considerable degree constructed as if everything external to the single person were an object, moreover an object usually in a state of rest. Concepts like ‘family’ or ‘school’ plainly refer to networks of people. But the conventional way in which we form our ... concepts makes it appear as if the groupings formed by humans were pieces of matter – objects of the same kind as rocks, trees or houses. This reifying character of the conventional means of speaking and thinking about groups of interdependent people – groups to which one perhaps belongs oneself – appears not least in the concept of society and the way in which one thinks about it. One says that ‘society’ is the ‘object’ which sociologists research. But this reifying mode of expression contributes not a little to the difficulties encountered in understanding what sociology is all about. (Elias 1970: 9–10. Authors’ translation from the German)

Conventional modes of thinking and speaking, especially in the relatively ‘civilised’ urban-industrial societies of the modern era, says Elias, encourage the impression that ‘society’ is made up of ‘structures’ that are external to individuals, and that individuals are at one and the same time surrounded by ‘society’ yet separated from ‘it’ by an invisible wall. This common-sense model which dominates people’s experience of their relationship to ‘society’ today is, according to Elias, ‘naïvely egocentric’. Such a model is illustrated in Figure 2.2.

Figure 2.2 Basic pattern of the egocentric view of society

Figure 2.2 depicts what Elias called the *homo clausus* image of humans and their societies. In it, people experience themselves as isolated individuals ('egos') or 'I's who are walled off from others, separated from them as if by an invisible barrier, while at the same time experiencing the institutions that they form such as families, schools, economies, and states and which are nothing more than differently organised groups of individuals, as 'objects' or 'compelling forces' that are more, as it is sometimes metaphysically put, than 'the sum of their individual parts'. A more appropriate image, said Elias, is provided by Figure 2.3. This depicts a figuration of *homines aperti*, 'open people' who, 'through their basic dispositions and inclinations, are directed towards and linked with each other in the most diverse ways' (Elias 1978: 14–15). According to Elias 'people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds ... They are characterised by power balances of many sorts ...' (2012b: 10).

The first thing worthy of note in this connection is that Elias's understanding of the concept of interdependence is not the same as Durkheim's in *The Division of Labour* (1964). The French classical sociologist distinguished between 'bonds of similitude' based on likeness and 'bonds of interdependence' based on the division of labour. But, for Elias, 'bonds of similitude' involve forms of interdependence, too, for example, the bonds between husbands and wives, parents and children, and many more. That is, interdependence is far from being simply an 'economic' phenomenon. Dunning vividly remembers

Figure 2.3 A figuration of interdependent individuals

driving Elias from Leicester to London along the M1 motorway in the 1960s and asking: ‘Norbert, this is a form of interdependence in your understanding of the term, isn’t it? All of us drivers are dependent on the others observing the rules of the road and not losing self-control. It’s surely a kind of life and death interdependence’. Elias replied: ‘Yes it is, Eric my dear. In fact, in *The Civilising Process*, you will remember, I contrast a medieval road where the main danger was from wild animals or deliberate attack from other humans and a modern road where the principal danger is that of other people losing their self-control’ (see Elias 2012a: 406–7).

American sociologist Thomas J. Scheff has written on this issue as follows:

In *What is Sociology?* (1978; 2012b) and *Involvement and Detachment* (1987a; 2007a), Elias implicitly uses interdependence to contrast it with two different types of relationship: ‘independence’, or a relationship characterized by detachment and ‘dependence’, a relationship so over-involved as to be suffocating to one or both parties. This more specific use of interdependence is also implied in his discussion of the ‘I-we’ balance in the preface to *Involvement and Detachment* (1987a; 2007a). In this passage a balanced I-we relationship would seem to correspond to interdependence. A relationship that did not involve a balance between the ‘I’ and the ‘we’ would not be interdependent; if one or both parties maintained an ‘I-self’, the relationship would be one of independence; if one or both parties maintained a ‘we-self’, the relationship would be one of dependence ... [Elias] is not always consistent in his usage of the term ‘interdependence’, however. Although I have not found the reference, I have been told that Elias has written that war between two nations can involve interdependence (personal communication from Jon Fletcher)... (Scheff in Salumets 2001: 103)

Scheff is a prominent advocate of Elias’s work, and one of the few American scholars to have engaged with his ideas in a sustained manner. However, his

exposition of Elias above serves to highlight some of the principal sources of his misunderstanding of Elias's concept of interdependence. It is first important to note that, *pace* Scheff, Elias thought and wrote in terms of continua and balances or scales, not separate and discrete types of relationships. For Elias, as we saw earlier, humans are always and everywhere involved from birth to death in bonds of interdependence. Even though the bonds may vary, involvement in them – even of supposedly marginal exceptions such as hermits – is a constant. In fact, the isolation of hermits is illusory. Even they forage for food in neighbouring human settlements and are sometimes supported by them. They also tend to be affectively bonded to the people with whom they were once close. Seen in these terms, 'independence' and 'dependence' are not discrete types of relationships but positions towards polar ends of a continuum or scale. Furthermore, in Elias's usage, the term 'balance' has been shorn of all harmonistic value-conceptions. Scheff's misconstrual of the latter is perhaps given clearest expression in what he writes about interdependence and war (see, once again, the quotation above in which he refers to the work of Jonathan Fletcher). The passage Fletcher was referring to is in *What Is Sociology?* where Elias wrote:

Fierce antagonists ... perform a function for each other, because the interdependence of human beings due to their hostility is no less a functional relationship than that due to their position as friends, allies, and specialists bonded to each other through the division of labour. Their function for each other is in the last resort based on the compulsion they exert over each other by reason of their interdependence. (Elias 2012b: 72)

Part of the source of Scheff's and others' misunderstanding of Elias on this issue appears, once again, to relate to Elias's terminology. The term 'function' has, particularly in relation to its use within major strands of American functionalism, long had 'consensus' connotations. However, as can be clearly observed in the passage above, Elias's usage of the term expressly avoided any such connotations, and indeed, was used in this instance to refer specifically to conflict-driven relationships. Indeed, such uses of the concept form part of Elias's attempt to rescue it in a way which was common to Weimar Germany sociologists such as Mannheim (we shall return to this theme shortly). Furthermore, Scheff's exposition also betrays another principal source of misunderstanding of the concept of 'interdependence', namely, the idea that the concept refers solely or mainly to the 'division of labour'. This, as we have said, is a common misconception.

There is a tendency in complex 'modern' societies, the 'urban-industrial-nation-states' which came to dominate the world in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries, to think of 'the economy' as the central determining 'factor' in social life. Although it finds its clearest expression in some of the key variants of Marxism, such a tendency is by no means solely restricted to Marxist thinking. This is not the place for a full-scale investigation into why

‘economistic’ thinking has become prominent – a process which also finds clear expression in the taken-for-granted assumption that ‘economics’ is the leading, most necessary social science. It must be enough in the present context simply to suggest that what one might call the ‘economisation of thinking’ is probably connected, at least in part, with what Elias called ‘functional democratisation’, a process generated, as we shall see in Chapter 3, by the growing ‘pressures from below’ which ruling groups experience as societies develop beyond a given level of structural complexity. Such pressures are reinforced by the egalitarian ideologies which develop in these contexts and which involve the emergence and articulation of ideas such as ‘the people’, ‘the commonwealth’ and ‘the economy’; the last term derived from *oikos*, the Greek for ‘household’. In the dynastic states which preceded the nation states of modern Europe, ‘the economy’ was, in effect, coterminous with the household of the monarch. ‘The economy’, however, is best conceptualised, not as some separate ‘part’ of social life but, in complex ‘modern’ societies as people working – a term which covers manufacturing, trading, organising, administering, teaching, maintaining, cleaning and entertaining, and so forth – in order to earn money. This is reinforced, according to Elias, by the growing ‘monetisation’ of social relations and the fact that the industrial, commercial, and governing bourgeoisie are ‘the first working ruling class’ in history. Earlier rulers had been warriors, priests, landowners, courtiers or members of a leisured elite.

It is the hegemony of ‘economic reductionism’ or ‘economistic thinking’ that lies at the heart of confusing the concept of division of labour with that of bonds of interdependence. The latter concept, as we have said, applies to the compulsions which make enemies in a war interdependent, as well as people driving on a motorway. It also applies to the compulsions operative on parents and children, masters and slaves, employers and employed, doctors and patients, rulers and ruled. Elias drew attention, in addition, to the impersonal bonds which form in conjunction with the emergence of larger social units and in which people become emotionally bound together through the medium of such symbols as coats of arms, flags and national anthems. ‘What’, he asked, ‘are the common features of the various figurations which at different stages of development have bound individuals to them by this type of predominating emotional bond?’ (Elias 2012b: 133). Earlier, he had posed the question: ‘... why do emotional bonds to state-societies – which nowadays are nation-states – take priority over bonds to other figurations?’ (2012b: 133). In other words, why are people expected to sacrifice their lives at the behest of the rulers of their nation-states? Why, in so many cases, do they do so willingly? Why do they die defending their flags? Why have some people, for example, Josef and Magda Goebbels in Germany in 1945, sacrificed themselves and their children for the abstract ideal of their beleaguered and defeated *Volk* and its equally beleaguered

and defeated *Führer*? Why did people in the past sacrifice themselves for their tribe or their religion, and why are some members of militant religious groups today willing to sacrifice themselves for their beliefs? Elias began to answer these questions as follows:

First of all, these units all seem to have exercised comparatively strict control over the use of physical violence in relationships between their members. At the same time, they have allowed, and often encouraged, their members to use physical violence against non-members. To date, sociology has lacked any clear conception of the common features of this type of solidaristic grouping at different levels of social development. Its function is obvious: it knits people together for common purposes – the common defence of their lives, the survival of their group in the face of attacks by other groups and, for a variety of reasons, attacks in common on other groups. Thus the primary function of such an alliance is either physically to wipe out other people or to protect its own members from being physically wiped out. Since the potential of such units for attack is inseparable from their potential for defence, they may be called ‘attack-and-defence units’ or ‘survival units’. At the present stage of social development, they take the form of nation-states. In the future they may be amalgamations of several former nation states. In the past they were represented by city-states or the inhabitants of a stronghold. Size and structure vary: the function remains the same. At every stage of development, wherever people have been bound and integrated into units for attack and defence, this bond has been stressed above all others. This survival function, involving the use of physical force against others, creates interdependence of a particular kind. It plays a part in the figurations people form, perhaps no greater but also no more negligible than ‘occupational’ bonds. Although it cannot be reduced to ‘economic’ functions, neither is it separable from them. (Elias 2012b: 133–4)

According to Elias, the division of humanity into ‘survival units’ (see Kaspersen and Gabriel (2008)) will probably last until we have become effectively integrated into one such unit: humankind as a whole. It is entirely possible, of course, that such a stage will never be reached or that, after being once formed, such a unit could disintegrate. It is also worth noting, once again, that whilst in general agreeing with and, indeed, taking part in the attacks on functionalism in the 1960s and 1970s, Elias insisted on retaining a concept of functions rather than altogether abandoning it. In his case, unlike that of Parsons, it was a non-harmonistic concept, closely tied up with Elias’s concept of power and equally attuned to harmony and disharmony, order and disorder, integration and disintegration, unity and conflict. In short, for Elias, ‘function’ was a technical and empirically attuned concept that did not contain an axiomatic presupposition of any particular type of figurational dynamic, whether harmonious or otherwise. The same can be said for Elias’s concept of ‘social order’. According to Elias:

The distinction between ‘order’ and ‘disorder’, so significant for the people involved, is sociologically speaking without significance. *Among men, as in nature, no absolute chaos is possible ...* [T]he word ‘order’ is not being used [here] in the sense in which it is used when people speak of ‘law and order’ or, in

adjectival form, of an 'orderly' as opposed to a 'disorderly' person. One is talking about an order in the same sense that one talks of a natural order, in which decay and destruction as structured processes have their place alongside growth and synthesis, death and disintegration alongside birth and integration. For the people involved, these manifestations seem, with good cause, to be contradictory and irreconcilable. As objects of *study*, they are indivisible and of equal importance. (Elias 2012b: 70–71)

According to Elias, furthermore, power is a central aspect of all forms of 'social order', a 'social universal', independently, firstly, of whether it is recognised as such by the people involved, and secondly, of whether these people experience it as 'good' or 'bad'. Thus, once again, Elias's concept of power is fundamentally inter-related with his other key conceptual innovations, in particular, as we have shown, with the concepts of interdependence and figurations. It is also closely related to, and finds clear expression within, Elias's theorisation of 'established-outsider' figurations. It is to this topic we shall now turn as part of our more general exposition of Elias's conceptualisation of power.

Established-outsider figurations and Elias's theory of power

In a study that he carried out in the late 1950s and early 1960s with John Scotson entitled *The Established and the Outsiders* (1994 (1965)), Elias centrally examined a figuration formed by two working class groups in 'Winston Parva', his pseudonym for a suburb of Leicester, a medium-sized city in the English East Midlands. One of these groups, 'the established', was clearly dominant. The other, 'the outsiders', was clearly subordinate. According to Elias and Scotson, these groups were identical in terms of the conventional indices of social stratification – wealth, income, occupations, education, status/prestige – differing only in the fact that members of the 'established' group and their families had lived in the community for several generations, whilst the 'outsiders' and their families were relative newcomers. Yet a whole constellation of symptoms usually associated with class exploitation and social oppression was detectable in the relations between them. This led Elias and Scotson to ask: 'What ... induced the people who formed the first of the two groups to set themselves up ... as higher and better ...? What resources of power enabled them to assert their superiority and to cast a slur on the others as (people) of a lesser breed?' (Elias and Scotson 2008: 3–4). Elias found in 'Winston Parva' conflict-ridden figural dynamics of the sort that would normally be encountered between groups that differed along national, ethnic, or class lines. What was particularly interesting about the case of this suburb, however, was that the 'full armoury of group superiority and group contempt' (Elias and Scotson 1994: xvii) was mobilised not in relation to obvious physical, cultural, or linguistic differences, but solely with regard to differences between residents in terms of how long they had lived within the

neighbourhood, how ‘established’ they were within the community. Simply the length of association, Elias and Scotson wrote, was, in and of itself, sufficient to generate ‘the degree of group cohesion, the collective identification, the commonality of norms, which are apt to induce the gratifying euphoria that goes with the consciousness of belonging to a group of higher value and with the complementary contempt for other groups’ (Elias and Scotson 2008: 4). For Elias, Winston Parva presented an empirical crucible in which to develop a series of more general observations about power. It is evident in the passage that follows that Elias was, at least in part, developing these observations in response to long dominant conventional Marxist and Weberian formulations of power. He wrote:

[O]ne could see here the limitations of any theory which explains power differentials only in terms of a monopolistic possession of non-human objects such as weapons or means of production and disregards the figurational aspects of power differentials due purely to differences in the degree of organisation of the human beings concerned ... [T]he latter, especially differences in the degree of internal cohesion and communal control, can play a decisive part in the greater power ratio of one group in relation to that of another ... [In the small community of Winston Parva], the power-superiority of the old-established group was to a large extent of this type. It was based on the high degree of cohesion of families who had known each other for two or three generations, in contrast to the newcomers who were strangers in relation not only to the old residents but also to each other. It was thanks to their greater potential for cohesion and its activation by social control that the old residents were able to reserve offices in their local organisations ... for people of their own kind and firmly to exclude from them people who lived in the other part [the ‘outsiders’] and who, as a group, lacked cohesion ... Exclusion and stigmatisation of the outsiders by the established group, thus were two powerful weapons used by the latter to maintain their identity, to assert their superiority, keeping the others firmly in their place. (Elias and Scotson 2008: 4)

The power of the ‘established’ group in Winston Parva thus depended, according to Elias, on the fact that the ‘oldness’, that is, the length of time of their association, had enabled them to develop greater cohesion relative to the ‘outsiders’, many of whom started as strangers to each other, and this, in turn, enabled them to monopolise official positions in local associations. Such greater cohesion of ‘established’ relative to ‘outsider’ groups, Elias suggested, is a common, ‘purely figurational’ aspect of dominance-subordination relations, that is, of figurations in which some are dominant and others subordinate. The criticism implied here of the Marxian and similar approaches was later taken up by Elias explicitly. He recognised the sociological value of what he called Marx’s ‘great discovery’, namely the idea that ownership and control of the means of production constitute the key determinants of class relations, but was critical of what he regarded as the tendency in some sociological circles – it was probably at its strongest in the 1960s and 1970s – ‘to see in it the end

of the road of discovery about human societies'. 'One might rather', he added, 'regard it as one manifestation of a beginning' (Elias and Scotson 2008: 18). In other words, Elias considered Marx to have developed an important and significant insight in uncovering a fundamental inter-relationship between the asymmetrical distribution of the means of production and a correspondingly uneven distribution of the means of satisfying human material needs (Elias and Scotson 2008: 18). However, Elias considered this to be only partially correct since Marx presented the struggle over 'economic' goals as the 'root source' of conflict between dominant and subordinate groups such that, 'to this day the pursuit of "economic" goals, elastic and ambiguous as this use of the term "economic" is, appears to many people as the "real", the basic goal of human groups by comparison with which others appear to be less "real", whatever that may mean' (Elias and Scotson 2008: 18).

Elias would not have sought to deny that Marx's theory of class formation deals with the generation of a particular form of social cohesion, namely that involved in the transformation of disunited 'classes in themselves' (*Klassen an sich*) into united 'classes for themselves' (*Klassen für sich*) (Bendix 1953: 30). What he would have denied is that such processes are to be universally understood solely intra-societally and in relation to modes of production. 'Economic' forms are socially structured and socially structuring but, Elias contended, they are not alone in that respect: other aspects of figurations which, especially in an age of increasing and increasingly rapid globalisation, have to be understood *inter*-societally and not simply *intra*-societally such as state-formation which is influenced, among other things, by war, the length and density of interdependency chains which have long since been spreading beyond national borders, and the relative cohesion of and balance of power between groups, all of which are equally structured and structuring and no less 'real'. Under specific circumstances, these other aspects enjoy degrees of autonomy in relation to and even dominance over modes of production. That is, in this as in other aspects of his work, Elias rejected the notion of universal 'law-like' relations between supposedly constituent social 'parts' such as 'the economy', 'the state' and 'civil society' (Elias 2009: 66–84). Consistent with this, he suggested that the degree to which 'economic' conflicts are paramount in a society is partly a function of the balance of power between its constituent groups. He wrote:

The supremacy of the economic aspects of established-outsider relationships is most pronounced where the balance of power between the contenders is most uneven ... The less that is the case, the more recognisable become other, non-economic aspects of the tensions and conflicts. Where outsider groups have to live at a subsistence level, the size of their earnings outweighs all their other requirements in importance. The higher they rise above the subsistence level, the more does even their income ... serve as a means of satisfying human requirements other than that of stilling their most elementary animalistic or 'material' needs and the more keenly are groups in that situation liable to feel the ... inferiority of power and status from

which they suffer. And it is in that situation that the struggle between established and outsiders gradually ceases to be, on the part of the latter, simply a struggle for stilling their hunger, for the means of physical survival, and becomes a struggle for satisfying other human requirements as well. (Elias and Scotson 2008: 17–18)

According to Elias, in other words, *the phase of development* of the shifting balance of power between established and outsider groups plays a key part in shaping the aims and demands of the outsiders and in the responses of the established to them. This insight has more fundamental implications for Elias's discussion of power *per se*.

According to Max Weber, the 'classical' sociologist who devoted most time to articulating what is meant sociologically by the concept of 'power', 'we understand by "power" the chance of a man or a number of men to realise their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others' (Weber 1946: 180). Elsewhere, he offered the following variation: 'power means any chance within a social relationship to realise one's own will, even in the face of resistance, regardless of the basis on which this chance rests' (Weber 1972: 28; our translation from the original German). It was this idea of the *relational* character of power that was seized upon by Elias. Thus he wrote of 'power-balances' or 'power-ratios' and suggested that:

From the day of its birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. At least the baby has power over them as long as they attach ... value to it. If not, it loses its power ... Equally bi-polar is the balance between a slave and his [*sic*] master. The master has power over his slave, but the slave also has power over his master, in proportion to his function for his master – his master's dependence on him. In relationships between parents and infants, masters and slaves, power chances are distributed very unevenly. But whether the ... differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people ... Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of a relationship – of *all* human relationships. (Elias 2012b: 69–70)

Elias went on to tie the concept of power more explicitly to that of interdependence. A solution to the problems of power more adequate than those on offer in sociology so far, he suggested:

depends on power being understood unequivocally as a structural characteristic of a relationship ... We depend on others; others depend on us. In so far as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, more reliant on others than they are on us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force, or by our need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, a career or simply for excitement. (Elias 2012b: 88. Our translation from the German)

It is noteworthy that Elias wrote this in the late 1960s for publication in a German book which appeared in 1970, for the seemingly straightforward diagnosis that he offers is arguably sociologically profound. What Elias was

suggesting is twofold: (i) that power is ‘polymorphous’, that is, many-sided and inherent in all human relationships; and (ii) that the key to understanding power lies in the interdependency of people. The examples Elias gives in the passages we have quoted all refer to ‘bi-polar’ or ‘two-person’ relationships but he was clear that power balances in the wider society and in the relationships between societies are always multipolar; that is, they involve large, complex and dynamic figurations of interdependent individuals and groups.

Elias’s theory of what he called ‘functional democratisation’ is inherent in his concept of power as deriving mainly from interdependence. He contended that the social transformation usually referred to by terms denoting specific aspects such as ‘industrialisation’, ‘economic growth’, ‘urbanisation’, ‘bureaucratisation’ and many others, in fact involves a transformation of the total social structure (Elias 2012: 59ff). And, he suggested, one of the most significant aspects of such a total social transformation consists in the emergence of larger, more differentiated, and denser ‘chains of interdependence’ (Elias 2012a; 2012b). Concomitantly with this, according to Elias, there occurs a change in the direction of generally decreasing power differentials within and among groups, more specifically an equalising change to some degree in the balance of power between rulers and ruled, social classes, men and women, parents and children, and the generations more generally (Elias 2012b: 63ff). At the most general level, Elias maintained, such a process of ‘functional democratisation’ occurs when increasing specialisation takes place. That is the case because the performers of specialised roles gain from their specialisations chances of exerting varying degrees of reciprocal influence and control, for example, by withdrawing their services or, in the case of the purchasers of these services, refusing to pay for them. The power chances of specialised groups are further enhanced if they manage to organise since they then become able by collective action to disrupt the wider chains of interdependence on which a modern society depends. It is in ways such as these, according to Elias, that increasing division of labour and the emergence of larger chains of interdependence lead over time to greater, more even forms of reciprocal dependency and, hence, to patterns of multi-polar influence and control within and among groups. It is important, however, to stress that we have said here ‘*more even* forms of reciprocal dependency’, not ‘*even*’ forms. The comparative is significant. Elias’s hypothesis is about processes of equalisation which can be demonstrated empirically to have occurred but is not intended to deny the vast inequalities which remain in Western societies and the world at large, and which have increased in certain respects in recent years.

It is noteworthy that our discussion above of Elias on power commenced in relation to an exposition of some of his other key ideas, and continued *via* an empirical analysis of established–outsider relationships, before moving on to a consideration of some of the long-term social processes involved in ‘functional democratisation’. We stress this because it serves once more to demonstrate, firstly, the theoretical–empirical character of Elias’s approach, secondly, the fundamental

‘interdependence’ of Elias’s key concepts, and thirdly, the primacy of process in his sociological models. In the next part of this chapter, we shall explore more centrally the underpinning diachronic orientation of Elias’s approach, with a specific discussion of his work on time, and a more general examination of some of his observations regarding the relations between history and sociology.

Time and history in the work of Elias

Of all the major sociologists of the twentieth century, especially its second half, Elias was the one who argued most consistently in favour of an ‘historical approach’. (The reasons why we have put ‘historical’ in inverted commas will become clearer as our exposition of Elias unfolds.) In order fully to grasp what he wrote on the subject of the sociology-history interface and the need for a process-orientated view to be dominant in both subjects, it is necessary to have an understanding of at least the basic elements of what he wrote on the subject of time. The principal contribution that Elias had to offer in this regard is best illustrated by comparing what he wrote with the views on this subject of Anthony Giddens. According to Giddens in *The Constitution of Society*:

As the finitude of *Dasein* and as ‘the infinity of the emergence of being from nothingness,’ time is perhaps the most enigmatic feature of human experience. Not for nothing [*sic*] was that philosopher who has attempted to grapple in the most fundamental way with the problem, Heidegger, compelled to use terminology of the most daunting obscurity. But time, or the constitution of experience in time-space, is also a banal and evident feature of ... day-to-day life. It is in some part the lack of ‘fit’ between our unproblematic coping with the continuity of conduct across time-space, and its ineffable character when confronted philosophically, that is the very essence of the puzzling nature of time. (Giddens 1984: 34–5)

Dasein is the German for ‘being’ or ‘existence’ and, following his interpretation of Heidegger, Giddens is suggesting here that ‘time’ is unproblematic as a ‘common sense’, routine feature of daily life but massively problematic when viewed philosophically because, in the latter context, we are unable to escape ‘ultimate’ issues of a kind that we humans can only ‘resolve’ inadequately through the use of patently metaphysical ideas such as ‘absolute beginnings’, ‘ultimate origins’, ‘uncaused’ ‘first’ and ‘final causes’, and ‘being emerging from nothingness’. Elias never pretended he had got anywhere near to solving the ‘mysteries’ of existence. As he expressed it in a poem in *Luciad*, the Leicester student magazine in 1962, ‘There are no mysteries/only a lot I don’t know’. He also claimed in conversations to have gone further than philosophers such as Heidegger and philosophically-minded sociologists such as Giddens regarding the understanding of time. More particularly, from Elias’s standpoint both sides of the equation as formulated by Giddens are problematic. That is, while ‘time’ may be a ‘banal and evident feature of human day-to-day life’ in

the modern world where we have inherited a workable calendar and efficient devices such as clocks and watches for measuring what we call 'time', this has not always been the case. According to Elias: 'One forgets that for thousands of years the calendars people used ran into trouble again and again; they had to be reformed and improved until one ... reached the near perfection the European calendar has attained since the last calendar reform' (Elias 2007b: 156–7). Indeed, so far from being 'banal and evident' is this taken-for-granted feature of human life that there have been times when people were opposed to calendar reforms because they believed they would shorten their lives!

The other side of what Giddens wrote is problematic because he does not appear to have considered the possibility that the 'daunting obscurity' of Heidegger's terminology may have been connected, not so much with the properties of 'time' as with the fact that Heidegger approached the problem in a purely rational and quasi-theological manner. More particularly, while the problems associated with 'time' remain *complex* if approached in a more theoretico-empirical manner, they are not necessarily 'daunting' and 'obscure'. At the most basic level, they are relatively straightforward. That is, 'time' is a concept which, in Elias's sociological terms, refers to a symbolic 'means of orientation' through which humans coordinate their lives – 'I'll meet you in the pub at 6.15'; 'the plane leaves Heathrow Airport at 18.30'; – and communicate their understanding of natural and sociohistorical processes of various kinds – 'light travels at 186,000 miles per second'; 'the Nazi dictatorship came to an end in 1945'. The reality of 'time' is as a social, collectively produced symbol in a world where only natural processes and events, including processes and events at the human-social level, occur; where, we might say, only events and processes of various kinds are 'real'. That, at least, was Elias's view. He expressed it thus:

Linguistic habits ... constantly reinforce the myth of time as something which in some sense exists and as such can be determined or measured even if it cannot be perceived by the senses. On this peculiar mode of existence of time one can philosophise tirelessly, as has indeed been done over the centuries. One can entertain oneself and others with speculation on the secret of time as a master of mystery, although there is no mystery. It was Einstein who finally set the seal on the discovery that time was a form of relationship and not, as Newton believed, an objective flow, a part of creation like rivers and mountains which, although invisible, was like them independent of the people who do the timing. But even Einstein did not probe deeply enough. He too did not entirely escape the pressure of word-fetishism and in his own way gave sustenance to the myth of reified time, for example, by maintaining that under certain circumstances time could contract or expand. (Elias 2007b: 36–37)

So, processes and events, not symbols, are the only substantives, and 'time' is a humanly constructed symbol, not a process like a flowing river or an event like a flood. Furthermore, 'every change in "space" is a change in "time"; [and] every change in "time" [is] a change in "space"' (Elias 2007b: 82).

Part of the reason why is that the earth is constantly moving round the sun and the sun is part of a galaxy, 'the Milky Way', that, with the exception of local galaxies such as Andromeda which are moving towards us, is moving away at speed from the billions of other galaxies which constitute the currently known universe. We propose not to elaborate on the concepts of 'space' and 'time' any further here, except to add that, just as people today are the inheritors of more reality-congruent time symbols and more accurate time meters such as atomic clocks and the quartz watches that we in the more 'advanced' societies carry round on our wrists, so, too, are we the inheritors of a fund of more reality-congruent knowledge about 'space', especially the 'local space', namely the earth and the solar system, which we inhabit. That is, we have not only more effective calendars and chronometers – time-measuring devices – but also more detailed and reliable maps and devices such as compasses, radar, satellites and global positioning systems ('sat navs') for accurately measuring relative positions in 'space-time'. Our technologically buttressed abilities in these regards are crucial to the operation of the networks of global and local interdependence which characterise the present-day world.

The principal relevance for sociology of these issues is that the subject ought to be centrally concerned with the study of social events and processes in space and time. This means that the conventional view according to which sociology and history are separate subjects, one concerned with 'the present', the other with 'the past', is arbitrary and wrong. All studies are necessarily studies of 'the past'. A moment's reflection will show how this is so. Human societies exist in space-time, and time, as the old personifying adage has it, 'never stands still'. To express it non-metaphysically, human individuals, their societies, the earth, our solar system, the Milky Way and the universe are processes, constantly moving, constantly changing. This means that what we call the 'present' is a constantly shifting reference point in the ceaseless flow of physical, biological, social and individual processes and events. What was 'the present' on all these levels when we started writing this chapter had already become part of the past when we completed it. In a word, 'the present' is an ambiguous concept with multiple levels of meaning and it has to be read as having an historical connotation. It follows that, if it were to be accepted that sociology is the study of 'the present', some more or less arbitrary judgement about the relatively recent past would have to be made. One would have to decide whether the term 'past' refers to, say, the 1990s, the 2000s, or the 2010s, to the years since the 1960s, or to those since the end of the Second World War. However, whatever decision was made, any such studies would necessarily involve attempts to come to terms with aspects of 'the past'. In short, it would inevitably lead one to become involved in a kind of 'historical' study. Elias commented upon this fundamental relationship between sociology and history in some detail as we shall now discuss.

History and sociology

One of Elias's lengthiest statements on the relationship between history and sociology is contained in the Introduction to his book, *The Court Society* (Elias 2006b (1969)). He began with a critical examination of the popular belief, expounded most systematically by the philosopher Karl Popper in his book, *The Poverty of Historicism* (1957), that history and historical sociology cannot possibly be 'scientific' because of the uniqueness and unrepeatability of historical events. It was Popper's contention that a 'science' is only possible with recurring events and phenomena because only then can you test and formulate testable 'laws'. Elias took issue with this popular view, suggesting that uniqueness and unrepeatability are not inherent in history as an 'object', that is, inherent in its 'nature' independently of the values and interests of people like Popper who make claims of this kind. On the contrary, such claims reflect the values of people in highly differentiated urban-industrial societies in which individual uniqueness is prized. Elias's case against Popper and others who propound similar views was complex. He began to unravel the complexity by suggesting that:

unrepeatable and unique phenomena are by no means confined to the sequences of events that historians take as the object of their studies. Such phenomena exist everywhere. Not only is each human being, each human feeling, each action and each experience of a person unique, but each bat and bacillus. Every extinct animal species is unique. The saurians [that is, the dinosaurs] will not return. In the same sense, *Homo sapiens*, the human species as a whole, is unique. And the same can be said of each speck of dust, of our sun, the Milky Way and of every other formation: they come, they go and when they have gone they do not return. (Elias 2006b: 10)

These observations, said Elias, suggest that there are 'different degrees of uniqueness and unrepeatability, and what is unique and unrepeatable on one level can be seen on another as repetition, a return of the never-changing'. Take, for example, the often claimed uniqueness of individual human beings – one of the reasons advanced for the impossibility of a 'scientific' history or a 'scientific' sociology. According to Elias, it provides a good example of a phenomenon that involves uniqueness on one level and repeatability on another. That is so, Elias said, because 'individual human beings are themselves repetitions of an unchanging form, and what differs between people now appears as a variation of the ever-recurring basic pattern' (Elias 2006b: 10).

This observation allows Elias to question how 'object adequate' or 'reality congruent' – in more popular terms, how 'accurate' – is the argument that history consists of a unique sequence of unrepeatable events. Is it, he asked, a product of unprejudiced critical analysis or the result of an ideological manipulation in which the practitioners of history in highly differentiated and individualised societies project their specific social conditioning and short-lived

values onto their 'object of study, the historical process itself'? This question, said Elias, cannot be answered in simple 'yes/no', terms; nor can it be reduced to a simple formula. Elias stressed the need to define clearly both the differences and the relationships between 'biological evolution', 'social development' and 'history'. The failure to do this up to now, said Elias, has acted as a blockage to knowledge.

Elias also contended that the biological constitution of social insects such as ants and bees is both relatively fixed and determines their social organisation. The evolution of *Homo sapiens* has led our species, too, to have a relatively fixed biological constitution. However, it is one which makes individual members of the species dependent on experience and learning. Humans *have to* learn in order to be able to function and it is this which makes it possible for human societies to have a history and to develop, that is to undergo changes of structure or form. According to Elias, however, while the biological evolution of *Homo sapiens* cannot be reversed – though the species could, of course, become extinct and, when our sun 'dies', probably will unless we have managed by then to transfer to a new habitable planet in a new sun system – their social development is reversible. As Elias put it:

Change in human figurations is ... closely bound up with the possibility of transmitting experiences gathered in one generation to subsequent generations as acquired social knowledge. This continuous social accumulation of knowledge plays a part in the changing of human society. But the continuity of the collection and transmission of knowledge can be broken. The increase in knowledge does not bring about a genetic change in the human race. Socially accumulated experiences can be lost. (2006b: 13)

The terms 'biological evolution', 'social development' and 'history' denote layered yet separate sequences embracing the whole of humankind and they occur at different rates. In the long process of biological evolution, the species *Homo sapiens* emerged for the first time as a distinct species some 50,000 years ago. Its social development, though fast by comparison with the rate at which significant biological evolution generally takes place, was, at first, comparatively slow, speeding up following the agricultural and urban 'revolutions' and becoming even quicker following the 'scientific revolution' of the seventeenth century and the 'industrial revolution' of the eighteenth. Nevertheless, though fast by comparison with biological evolution, social developments are often so slow by comparison with an individual life-time that people do not recognise them as occurring at all. In Elias's words:

Measured by the length and rate of change of an individual human life, social developments often take place so slowly that they seem to stand still. It is possible that the ... figurations formed by people change so little for a number of generations that they are regarded by those involved as immutable ... Thus, for a long period in the development of European society, people are embraced over and over ... by the figuration 'knight-page-priest-bondsman'. Today, and

for a number of generations past in the developed industrial societies, people are repeatedly found in relationships such as ‘worker-employee-manager’ or ‘higher-middle-lower official’. The functional interdependence of these and all other divisions in a particular society entails ... a certain exclusivity. Knight and bondsman would scarcely fit into an industrial configuration. (2006b: 13)

Each human individual, said Elias, though a variation on the relatively unchanging pattern of the species as a whole, is ‘unique’ and ‘unrepeatable’ and, in the course of his/her life-time undergoes rapid change. Nevertheless, these unique, unrepeatable and rapidly changing individuals form relatively persisting figurations with one another which are ‘just as real as the individual people forming them’. This is rarely recognised by the institutionalised establishment of historians, argued Elias, and it perpetuates both the inherent individualism of their approach and their feelings of superiority relative to newcomers such as sociologists. This leads to a terrible waste of human effort in the sense that each generation feels an urge to rewrite history in the sense of historians continually revisiting the same topics and events, bringing with them new values, new axes to grind, new sensibilities and new biases but little sense of the need for incremental knowledge.

Elias as a radical sociologist

We commenced this chapter by arguing that Elias’s sociological approach was *radically* processual and *radically* relational. However, that Elias’s sociological insights might be considered ‘radical’ requires some qualification. As a means of concluding and distilling some of the key arguments of this chapter, we shall thus elaborate in more detail what we mean in this respect.

Johan Goudsblom of the University of Amsterdam has likened Elias to Charles Darwin (1977), the principal progenitor of the theory of biological evolution *via* ‘natural selection’. An additional parallel – with Copernicus, the sixteenth century Polish astronomer – may also be pertinent. This is because Elias arguably succeeded not just in recognising that members of the species *Homo sapiens* are a kind of animals which evolved biologically to bond closely with each other, to be dependent on languages and the intergenerational transmission of acquired funds of knowledge, but also, as we have endeavoured to show in this chapter, in developing a conceptual repertoire attuned to this fundamental insight. Kilminster (2007: 154–5) elaborates on an idea of Freud’s in this connection by referring to Elias’s work as having delivered the fourth, sociological ‘blow to human narcissism’; the first three having been delivered, respectively, by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud. In his seminal essay, ‘Resistances to Psychoanalysis’ (Freud 1925: 273), Freud had pointed to: Copernicus as having delivered the first, that is, the *cosmological* blow to human self-love by discovering that the earth revolves around the sun rather

than *vice versa*; Darwin as having delivered the second, that is, the *biological* blow, by discovering such basic facts about humans as that they had evolved out of earlier species of hominids; and the third, psychological blow that was delivered by Freud himself with regard to his highly influential and important thesis regarding the human repression of libidinal impulses.

In a manner that parallels Copernicus with respect to our solar system and astronomy, Elias pointed the way towards a sociology in which a resolution by means of theory-guided empirical research and research-based theorising could take the place of merely thinking about such age-old philosophical/sociological issues as the agency-structure dilemma (nominalism *versus* realism), the nature/society dichotomy, the nature *versus* nurture problem, body-mind dualism, materialism *versus* idealism, and many more. Elias's conceptual reorientation – aspects of which we have begun to explore in this chapter – has arguably laid the foundations for a 'post-philosophical' (Kilminster 2007) model for approaching such problems.

As was typical of Elias, he viewed his own contribution to sociology in terms of evolutionary scale processes of human development. In his text *The Symbol Theory*, Elias wrote of humans as having become equipped *via* evolution to undergo a process of 'symbol emancipation', that is, a potentially liberating increase in power and control made possible by language and knowledge-stocks in four main areas: (i) over their wider environment; (ii) relative to other animals, of humans developing from a 'hunted' into a 'hunting' species (Goudsblom 1994); (iii) over themselves as individuals; and (iv) over themselves as groups. A related notion is what Elias (1978: 156–7) called 'the triad of basic controls', that is, the control of self, society, and nature. Symbol emancipation, Elias suggested, must have involved simultaneous and interacting processes of biological evolution and social development, each mutually dependent on and not reducible to the other. Such processes are still far from being fully understood and the difficulty of understanding them is inhibited by a tendency to distinguish, as we have seen, between, for example, 'nature' and 'society', as if 'societies' could exist somewhere other than in 'nature'. The institutionally reinforced distinction between the 'social sciences' and the 'natural sciences' contributes further to the inhibition. In Elias's words:

Most of [the social sciences], history and sociology among them, are concerned with aspects of human life which are uniquely human, which in other words are, or are due to, evolutionary innovations. They distinguish humanity from other species. As a rule, however, these human sciences ... do not ask how these uniquely human properties are connected with those which humans share with other species, such as birth and death ... [N]o attempts are made ... to discover the hinge connecting nature with ... 'non-nature'. Thus sociologists may see the body as a topic of interest. But the prevailing routines ... make it easy to treat the body as a topic of sociological research set apart from other topics, perhaps as the subject-matter of a specialism. There does not seem any need to explore the links connecting aspects of humans conceived as body, with other aspects

perhaps conceived as disembodied. On a larger scale, too, human sciences of this type tacitly work with the image of a split world. The division of sciences into natural sciences and others not concerned with nature reveals itself as a symbolic manifestation of an ontological belief – of the belief in a factually existing division of the world ... The question as to which unique biological characteristics of human beings make history possible has hardly been a talking point among historians. Nor have the distinguishing characteristics and the relationship of biological evolution and social development been a frequent point of discussion among sociologists. The term evolution is at present used indiscriminately with reference to both. How culture, rationality, knowledge, conscience and other similar aspects of human beings fit into the well-established theory of an evolutionary descent of humans is anybody's guess... (Elias 2009b: 141–58)

Just as Copernicus rejected the old geocentric or earth-centred picture of our local solar system and replaced it with a heliocentric or sun-centred view, so, to continue with Freud's model, Elias can be seen as having established crucial preconditions for the establishment of sociology as a human science (*Menschenwissenschaft*) by correcting the *homo clausus* or 'closed person' view of humans and replacing it with an orientation towards *homines aperti*, pluralities of 'open people'. Each of these reorientations involved a process of decentring: in the case of Copernicus, a decentring from humanity's primary anthropocentrism, that is their view of *Homo sapiens* and the earth as the centre of everything. In the case of Elias, a decentring from the Enlightenment/Judaeo-Christian view of humans as 'rational' beings created by an anthropomorphic conception, 'God', who stands 'above' and in some ways 'outside nature'. Further to this, humans are seen according to this view as apart from and above other animals, and as separated and alone in relation to each other.

In the next chapter, we shall develop this argument further through an exploration of how Elias attempted to add to a reorientation of sociology through what he regarded as his most important contribution to the subject, his theory of 'civilising processes'.