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The Development of Knowledge and the Sciences as Social Processes

In this chapter, we shall explore the implications of Elias's central engagement with social processes for the understanding of issues related to knowledge and the development of the sciences. As we shall see, his approach to such issues involved a consistent attempt to develop sociology as a discipline distinct from philosophy. In a direct and conscious sense, Elias sought to translate problems relating to knowledge and the sciences that continue to this day to be typically posed in largely 'philosophical' terms into more 'sociological' formulations. Of course, the distinction we have drawn between sociology and philosophy is by no means shared by, nor even immediately recognisable to, a broader sociological audience. But, in many ways this was precisely Elias's point: he sought to establish a sociological approach which, *pace* the arguments of Winch (1958) among others, would stem from a break both from the discipline of philosophy and what we might loosely call 'philosophical modes of theorising'. As we shall endeavour to illustrate in this chapter, Elias had a remarkably lucid vision of what a properly sociological approach in contradistinction to a philosophical one should entail.

While there is some disagreement regarding Elias's depiction of philosophy and, indeed, regarding the alleged degree of his residual dependence on philosophical thinkers (see, for example, Maso's (1995) discussion of Elias and Cassirer, and the response of Kilminster and Wouters (1995) and Goudsblom (1995)), Elias's views on knowledge and the sciences involved a fundamental rejection of the classical oppositions and related modes of theorising which have long dominated debates over 'epistemology', 'ontology' and 'methodology'. To this end, Elias made much of his intellectual debts to Comte and Marx.

The primacy of process

Comte and Marx, Elias argued, attempted in their own ways to escape the 'fables of classical European philosophy' (Elias 1997: 355; Elias 2009b: 9), in particular, the notion of 'eternal reason' and the idea of 'consciousness' or the human 'spirit' as the timeless, unchanging, 'motor' of social change. These principles were also used in classical philosophy as starting points for all questions concerning 'knowledge' and 'science'. For Comte, the philosophical

edifice of ‘eternal reason’, the idea of an unchanging mind shared by all people and all classes in all historical periods, was fundamentally flawed. In rejecting it, Comte made what Elias called ‘a sociological breakthrough’. More particularly, he developed the hypothesis that human thinking, in tandem with a complex of more general social structural changes, has passed, and is continuing to do so, through a series of empirically verifiable stages. Elias recognised, of course, that Comte’s ‘law of the three stages’ – marked by the sequential ascendancy of theology (itself subdivided between fetishism, polytheism and monotheism), metaphysics and science – cannot strictly speaking be called a ‘law’ and involved an overly simple view of knowledge, especially as it has developed since Comte’s death. Elias nevertheless saw the model as providing a useful indication of an empirically demonstrable overall ‘direction’ of change and that it was in that way helpful in securing a break from the predominantly static forms of thinking of classical European philosophy (we shall later discuss the concept of directionality in greater detail). In this way, says Elias, Comte was able to redefine the relationship between ‘a reasoning subject of knowledge’ and the ‘objects of knowledge’ as itself a social process and, accordingly, as a properly sociological concern that could be empirically investigated through an examination of how the development of different types of knowledge involves a partly necessary sequence of developmental stages (Elias 1997: 355; Elias 2009b: 9)).

By contrast to Comte, Marx based his reorientation of human intellectual activity on a break from the philosophy of Hegel who, in turn, had been dependent on an inherited notion of ‘spirit’, the idea of mental activities as a domain wholly autonomous in relation to the structure and development of societies, and yet at once the hegemonic impetus behind all other aspects of social change. As we touched upon in Chapter 2, Marx’s crucial departure from this philosophical legacy, said Elias, was to substitute for ‘spirit’, the relations involved in the material production and distribution of goods for the satisfaction of elementary human needs (Elias 1997: 356; Elias 2009b: 10). In so doing, Elias argued, Marx’s work constituted a decisive shift from philosophy to sociology. More specifically, Marx’s work involved a departure from the reduction of ‘humanity’ to ‘mental activities’, and a shift away from the notion of a single, isolated, and ‘rational’ human mind, towards a consideration of people in the plural, of human societies, including a focus on human relationships, people’s biological constitution, and their need to find sustenance for their elementary needs.

Marx recognised the lack of a clear-cut correspondence between the depiction of the social world in the books of learned scholars such as Hegel, and the objects to which such accounts refer. For Marx, this lack of agreement between posited ‘knowledge of the world’ and ‘the world to which such knowledge pertains’ does not derive so much from a philosophically postulated gulf between ‘subject’ and ‘object’, or from the structure of a pre-given human consciousness, as it does from the fact that the interests, values, ideals and commitments of

groups – to which those who reflect upon such matters variously subscribe – distort or obscure their perceptions of the world (Elias 1973: 376; Elias 2009a: 11). Elias suggested that this crucial insight of Marx's was 'eminently promising' since such 'blockages' and 'distortions' can be studied empirically and systematically in relation to the development of societies. Indeed, Elias noted, this insight provided the foundations for many subsequent sociological theories of knowledge (1973: 376; Elias 2009a: 12). Another, now largely overlooked, aspect of Marx's insight is the idea that such interests, ideas and values, tied as they are in important ways to broader social relations, develop over time. In this way, Marx can be said to have laid the foundations for a processual theory of the growth and development of knowledge.

In thus railing against this one-sided image of humans, Elias suggests, Marx 'overshot the mark' somewhat. Fighting directly, as he was, against the philosophical idealism of Hegel, Marx paradoxically came to subscribe to a materialist mode of theorising that mirrored in certain ways that of his opponent (Elias 1973: 376; Elias 2009a: 12). Marx's posited relationship between 'being' (existence) and 'consciousness' implied an eternal, unchanging relationship between all forms and levels of consciousness and all manifestations of 'social reality' in all historical ages. In this context, consciousness was conceived as a kind of 'eternal froth', lacking a structure of its own. It was seen as little more than a 'superstructural' reflection of a structured socio-economic base – as though 'social reality', indeed the human 'means of production', could be produced without consciousness, and as if people could be involved in relations of production as owners and employees somehow devoid of consciousness (1973: 376; Elias 2009a: 12). In this sense, Marx can be said to have effectively replaced an autonomous philosophical 'spirit' with an equally autonomous 'economy' or 'mode and relations of production'. Thus, according to Elias, Marx's substitution of a 'material' for an 'ideal' 'prime mover' was ultimately rooted in and indicative of the fact that his break from the philosophical legacy was incomplete.⁵⁰

Regarding his use of concepts such as 'the economic' and 'the material', Elias proposed that Marx came to treat the social satisfaction of elementary human needs as the basis of all other human functions, and to posit in this connection, to use his (Marx's) own Hegel-derived terms, a 'dialectic of historical movement' (Elias 1997: 356; Elias 2009b: 10). In this way, Marx's 'dialectical exuberance' gave way to a kind of 'chicken-and-egg' problem. In Elias's deceptively simple words, it can be expressed thus: 'people are in no position to satisfy their elementary physical needs without thinking and without the knowledge to orientate themselves in their world, and that they are incapable of orientating themselves in this manner without satisfying their elementary needs' (Elias 1997: 356; Elias 2009b: 10–11).

Elias sought to move beyond this apparent paradox by avoiding Marx's tendency to accord primacy to 'the economy' and to relegate all other areas of human functioning to a secondary 'superstructure'. Elias's contention was that

‘consciousness’, ‘knowledge’, ‘ideas’ (or whatever we choose to call them) and ‘society’ or ‘social reality’ are terms which refer, not to separate objects which exist independently, but rather to different, inter-related aspects of a complex whole. The historical tendency, particularly in Western thought, towards conceiving of, for example, ‘consciousness’ and ‘society’ as ontologically distinct and ‘separate’ was, for Elias, itself of considerable sociological interest and, again, something worthy of empirical investigation (see our discussion of *homo clausus* and *homines aperti* thinking in Chapter 2). For Elias, it makes little sense to conceive of humans without consciousness or, conversely, to conceive of consciousness without ‘society’ – as something existing outside a plurality of living people – an idea which is ultimately implied by the argument that ‘material conditions’ or ‘relations of production’ (the ‘cause’) are generative of ‘consciousness’ (the ‘effect’) (Elias 1973: 375; Elias 2009a: 12).

Elias’s position was, in a relational sense, more ‘radical’ than even that of Marx. For Elias, ‘consciousness’, ‘knowledge’, and ‘ideas’ are a component of everything social. And like all things social – indeed, everything in the known universe – these terms imply phenomena that are dynamic. That is, for Elias: “‘consciousness’ is an inherent *dimension* of *any* society. ... [I]t is present in the feeding of a child by its mother, the ploughing of his field by a farmer, in the spinning of cotton by workers of a nineteenth century mill” (1973: 376; Elias 2009a: 11). Further to this, Elias’s emphasis on the processual character of ‘consciousness’, ‘knowledge’ and ‘ideas’ had ‘epistemological’ as well as ‘ontological’ significance. If ‘consciousness’ or ‘ideas’ and ‘society’ are seen as essentially static entities, albeit entities which ‘move’ or ‘change’ from time to time, our questions concerning knowledge must inevitably centre on issues of primacy. Thinking in essentially static terms, we are compelled to seek to identify the ‘active’ or ‘prime mover’, as well as the ‘moved’, ‘acted upon’ or passive ‘recipient’ of ‘change’. Put simply, adherents to an ‘epistemology’ which stems from a static orientation are compelled to ask questions which are themselves flawed in certain respects. To illustrate this point, it is worth returning to Elias’s example of the ‘chicken-and-egg’ problem, a subject that featured recurrently in his teaching. How might this dilemma be reframed using process concepts?

The problem of ‘which came first, the chicken or the egg?’ seems impossible to resolve. A chicken obviously has to exist to lay an egg but, equally, a chicken has to grow out of an egg. So how can the problem be resolved? From a process perspective at the present level of knowledge, the short ‘answer’ is: ‘the Big Bang’ – at least if one subscribes to this widely accepted theory of how the universe ‘began’ and, indeed, to the very notion of any such ‘absolute beginning’. That is because the problem of the chicken and the egg is only impossible to resolve if one accepts the manner of its posing: the chicken and the egg are offered as equivalent and exclusive opposites. One has to choose between one and the other. Such a formulation begs for an ‘answer’ rather than

an investigation. Moreover, the problem is posed statically; it is blind to the processual character of that to which it refers. In other words, it is not a helpful question because it leads one to make a selection between only two choices and these are treated as 'eternals'. In short, the intractability of the dilemma is to a large extent a product of how the question has been framed.

Adopting the sort of process orientation advocated by Elias, one would attempt to 'resolve' the chicken and the egg question, not through 'armchair theorising' but *via* a different and more reliable knowledge-producing vehicle: 'research-theorising' – that is, theorising in tandem with empirical observation in which neither the theoretical nor the empirical component is allowed to become dominant over the other. Using such an approach, it would be necessary to gain an understanding of the evolutionary emergence of chickens and their characteristic reproductive cycles over time. If we were really interested in what came 'first' – accepting, for present purposes, that this is a pertinent question – we would need ultimately to consider the origins of the universe, hence our earlier reference to 'the Big Bang', because, given our present level of understanding, everything, all life on earth, and everything else in the cosmos is, in the 'final' analysis, connected to that. From there, we would seek to trace the origins of the earth, then move on to considering the development of life, perhaps studying how the earliest, single-cell life-forms emerged from 'the primordial soup'. We might then explore how these evolved into more complex organisms such as animals, including saurians (dinosaurs) and, then, how these in turn gave way to other life-forms. We might go along with those who claim that birds evolved from dinosaurs which also reproduced using eggs, and eventually we could study the species that we have now come to recognise as 'chickens'. The question of 'which came first?' would thus be reframed to become a research-based investigation through which we would seek to discover which was the earliest life-form to reproduce using eggs. But even this is too static a question, too static a starting-point for research. We would need, for example, to investigate the development of membrane-like coatings surrounding the young of some species which eventually evolved into egg-like 'shells', and so forth. In short, to resolve this question more adequately than through the inevitably flawed selection between two static choices, we would need to refocus our enquiry to accommodate the relational and developmental dynamics of the 'real' universe as scientists have so far come to understand it.

On the concepts of 'process' and 'development'

The chicken and egg example is intended here as allegorical. We have introduced it in order to highlight the importance of reframing in processual terms questions about knowledge and social dynamics. One of the respects in which the allegory is limited is in the lack of a correspondence between the kinds of processes

involved in the development of life on earth, specifically 'organic' or 'biological evolution', and those involved when we speak of the 'development' of societies. It is, accordingly, important to consider exactly what Elias meant, firstly, when he used terms such as 'process', 'development', and 'direction', and, secondly, by his broader conceptual vocabulary that was centrally attuned to facilitating diachronic analysis and the study of social dynamics at various levels.

Two main sets of issues arise in this context. They are interconnected but we have separated them for purposes of clarification. The first set is more 'substantive'. It relates to the specificities of Elias's thesis concerning the developmental 'directions' of 'civilising processes' in France, England, and Germany, the three most powerful West European nations when Elias wrote his book. Particularly since its publication in English, Elias's *magnum opus* has attracted criticism on the grounds that his thesis is shot through with teleological, or more specifically, 'progress' overtones. Perhaps the exemplar of this is Cambridge anthropologist Sir Edmund Leach's statement concerning *On the Process of Civilisation*: that, at the very time it was being written, 'Hitler was refuting the argument on the grandest scale' (Leach 1986).

We have discussed such readings of Elias's work, and the issues to which they pertain, in some detail in earlier sections of this book (particularly in Chapter 3). It is important to add that these criticisms betray a pervasive caution among sociologists and anthropologists of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries over the very concept of 'development' and, indeed, many cognate terms, a tendency that Wittfogel (1957) described as 'developmental agnosticism', though 'developmental atheism' might have been a better term. Herein lies the second set of fundamentally inter-related concerns we alluded to above. Put simply, as theoretical 'objects' for Elias's theorising and research, what is the status of terms such as 'process' and 'development'? And by similar extension, to what extent, if at all, does Elias's use of process descriptor terms such as 'direction' and 'curve' imply unilinear development and historical continuity? As we have seen already, and as we will discuss in greater detail in Chapter 6, such questions have been central to critiques of Elias by authors from within the disciplinary domain of anthropology in particular (see, for example, Blok (1982), and Goody (2002) discussed in this volume; see also Mennell's (1998: 227–250) rebuttal of such critiques). They are arguably all the more important in the wake of post-modernist accounts of what their authors deem to be the 'grand narratives' of classical sociology. Indeed, what we understand to be the widespread post-modernist emphasis on 'discontinuities', 'ruptures' and historical 'disintegration' would at the very least appear to raise important questions regarding concepts such as 'development' and related terms.

Critics have often viewed Elias's commitment to a developmental perspective as having been related in large part to his positioning at a particular socio-geographical and historical conjuncture, namely as a European scholar who wrote his most important work in the first half of the twentieth century

before the attack on 'social evolutionism' of figures such as Talcott Parsons (1937) and Franz Boas had had time fully to sink home. It was at a time when Elias could still be envisaged as 'standing on the shoulders' of optimistic Enlightenment thinkers who placed their faith in the progressive triumph of Western rationality. However, particularly in view of the massively troubled era, especially in his native Germany, in which he began to develop his key ideas, Elias was able in important ways to remain remarkably detached from the prevailing social climate. Far from being naïve or ignorant of the tendency of particular groups in Western European societies, including some of their leading public intellectuals, to take it for granted that *their* societies, *their* values, *their* ways of life were the most advanced, and those of others by comparison 'primitive', for Elias, the growing ascendancy of such ideas was in and of itself a problem of sociological interest. As we showed in Chapters 2 and 3 of this book, the opening sections of *On The Process of Civilisation* are devoted to exploring how the very word 'civilisation' came to emerge as a notion employed as a means of legitimising the dominance of the then-ruling groups in France, later coming to spread throughout Europe and the wider world and to perform a similar legitimising function for European rule over supposedly 'barbarian subjects'. Indeed, *pace* Leach, rather than constituting an empirical refutation of Elias's arguments, the development of what was then the nascent Third Reich and Hitler's rise to power were among the points of departure of Elias's work, namely the 'experiences in whose shadow we all live' to which he referred in the Preface to *On The Process of Civilisation*. The difficulties that Elias experienced in getting his book published in the first place were also intimately bound up with the Nazis' rise to power.

For Elias, the emergence in the twentieth century of a powerful trend in the social sciences and related subjects towards viewing terms like 'development' and 'process' with suspicion, if not outright condemnation, poses a problem of sociological interest and importance. It is not all that difficult to understand, he used to argue, why such terms have come to attract a taboo-like status. You do not need to be a professional historian specialising in the twentieth century to know of the horrendous atrocities that were legitimised in that century by notions of 'development' and 'progress' in a normative sense and which more or less explicitly implied judgements of 'superiority' and 'inferiority' whether in terms of 'race' or belief systems of a political or religious character. If anything, in so far as it is possible to make such a generalisation with meaning, the dominant mood in Western societies since the latter part of the twentieth century has been characterised by growing doubts over whether the direction of social change taken, in particular in the more 'advanced', more affluent societies of the West, can be said to involve any 'progress' in the sense of increasing human happiness and well-being. As Mennell cogently expressed it, '[it] is also partly because any mode of speaking and thinking which appears to rank the peoples of the world as "higher" and "lower", as more or less advanced, is seen as

casting doubt upon the fundamentally equal worth and rights of all human beings. This is a very civilised way of viewing humans' (1998: 27).

According to Elias, furthermore, such judgements are paradoxical. On the one hand, he suggests, the twentieth century was a period of significant technical advance in which an exponential expansion of knowledge took place, together with a correlative trend towards planned reform of the 'social order'. At the same time, however, the twentieth century was a period marked by deepening doubts about the value of such 'progress'. Any advantages secured in conjunction with the latter were accepted but its simultaneous dangers were increasingly feared. Elias commented on the apparent paradox thus:

The increasing stream of innovations makes the affected people insecure; the growing tempo of change strengthens their desire for enclaves of peace and for symbols of changelessness. Above all, however, people search for deliverance from the unremitting conflicts of human groups – whether they delude themselves that everything could be peaceful and harmonious if only the others, the disturbers of the peace, the agitators, did not rebelliously threaten the good life, or whether they see the means of salvation in an overthrow of existing power relations and the establishment of another order in which they hope for greater peace, harmony and freedom from conflict'. (1997: 358; Elias 2009b: 13).

In fact, when viewed in the longer term, the idea of humanity advancing towards a 'better' future – an idea which arguably reached its zenith in Europe between the mid-eighteenth and the mid-nineteenth centuries – is in many respects quite novel (Elias 1997: 357). For centuries, Elias argued, people saw social development mainly as a 'decline': 'Paradise lay in the past. The Golden Age was followed by the Silver Age and the Iron Age [and] by many wars. At best, people dreamed of a journey back to the lost paradise, of the return of the better part, of the renaissance of antiquity'. (Elias 1997: 357; Elias 2009b: 11). The enthusiastically held belief in 'progress' which had been dominant in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – more specifically the faith in a continuous improvement in the human condition that was to be brought about through advances in knowledge and its application *via* technology – was followed in the twentieth century, particularly in the more advanced industrial nations, by 'a kind of dialectical pendulum swing by a no less exaggerated judgement that this belief in progress was the expression of a naïve optimism' (Elias 1997: 357; Elias 2009b: 12). However, again paradoxically and albeit on the most laudable grounds, such wholesale condemnation of the belief in progress impeded access to a whole range of sociological problems not only concerning the 'age of optimism' itself but also regarding the more sceptical period that followed it. For Elias, more fundamental questions concerning the social conditions within which a 'progress movement' had gained the ascendancy in the first place; the shift and reconfiguration of power relations that was expressed in ideas such as 'progress', and, indeed, the circumstances

under which the 'chorus of opposing voices' later came to gain wider acceptance, including in academic communities, necessitated an engagement with 'process' and 'development', concepts that had been rejected earlier as part of a more general reaction against notions of social 'progress'.

Within academic circles, the disavowal of notions of social 'progress' was bound up with a widespread but by no means total renunciation of social 'evolutionism', particularly in the fields of anthropology and sociology. This rejection arguably undergirded a shift towards variants of historical and cultural relativism. As Mennell (1998) has observed, a long dominant American school of anthropology whose principal progenitor was Franz Boas had been founded on a critique of theories of social evolution of precisely the type that underpinned such variants of 'scientific racism' as 'eugenics' – ideas which had grown up in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and which widely influenced social policy and practice in the USA and Europe, but which are nowadays best remembered as having been mobilised by the German Nazis as a justification for genocide. The Boasian argument for cultural relativism, based on a meticulous and detailed analysis of cultural traits and their (lack of) association with 'racial' differences, thus served as a necessary corrective to Social Darwinist models of social 'evolution' which sought to explain socio-cultural differences between 'primitive' and 'modern' societies in terms of supposed differences in biological, especially biologically inherited mental, endowment (Mennell 1992: 235). What we have called here 'the Boasian' approach, later came to be influential upon the British and French structuralist, including structural-functionalist, schools of anthropology and among social scientists more generally.

While Elias by and large agreed with this rejection of Social Darwinism and, indeed, shared many of Boas's views, he nonetheless sought to retain a notion of 'development' that is neither 'evolutionary', unilinear, nor imbued with ideas of 'progress' in a normative and value-judgemental sense. Elias's view was that, when considered at a 'technical' level, the differences between the biological and social levels of integration demand, respectively, different kinds of process concepts. For example, human societies develop through socio-cultural not biological differentiation and change. As a result, unlike biological evolution, social development is reversible: 'de-development', 'de-differentiation', and 'de-civilisation' are just as possible as 'development', 'differentiation' and 'civilisation' (we are using this last term in its process sense). Moreover, again by contrast with biological evolution, social 'stages' do not follow one another with the same degree or kind of necessity. While it may be possible to establish retrospectively that a set of earlier changes made a later set of changes possible – formed a precondition for them, in other words – there is no 'logic' or 'pattern' to social development in the sense of a series of stages necessarily following one another according to a fixed sequence.

Nor – and we are again in agreement here with Stephen Mennell (1992: 235) – is there any exact equivalent in social development to biological speciation.

There are two distinct aspects to this issue. The first is typological. Thus, as early sociologists such as Durkheim – who used the terms ‘species’ and ‘speciation’ in this connection – tried to show, it is possible to classify societies in terms of such properties as their degrees of structural complexity, population sizes, and densities, and so forth (Durkheim *Rules*). The second aspect is biological and crucially involves the fact that humans are biologically a single species, able to communicate knowledge to one another *via* oral and written symbols, thus allowing the direct exchange of knowledge and the indirect exchange of social characteristics between groups at different developmental levels. The point is that, for Elias, the challenge is to work out a concept of development that avoids problems such as process- (or state-) reduction, essentialism, and teleology on the one hand, and epistemic relativism or a view of history as consisting only of constant and unstructured transformation on the other.

The concept of ‘development’ that Elias sought to construct was one by means of which he tried to approximate at different levels of abstraction the diachronic structure of changes in human societies. Where Elias refers, for example, to the overall ‘direction’ or ‘curve’ of a ‘civilising process’, he is at pains to stress that such terms denote a *balance* between ‘trends and counter-trends’, ‘spurts and counter-spurts’, ‘shifts and counter-shifts’, aggregates of changes that, conceptually speaking, are rendered as regression sequences plotted against time-series data. To talk of an overall ‘direction’ is thus not to imply a simple arrow-like trajectory. Similarly, to posit a ‘curve’ – and here again we might think of an undulating graph representing a sequence of rising and falling data – in order to capture and to describe the character of certain long-term social processes is an example of Elias forming a conceptual vocabulary through which he sought to avoid depicting ‘development(s)’ as sequences that are universally simple, linear and incremental while, at the same time, avoiding a collapse into historical relativism. Indeed, Elias’s meticulous commitment to mapping in detail the ‘diachronic structures’ involved in, say, the long-term development of table manners in Western Europe, has sometimes led to the charge that he was primarily an empirical historical analyst and only secondarily a sociological ‘theorist’ (van Krieken 1998: 43). And yet, conversely, his use of shorthand summary process descriptors – such as his characterisation of European civilising processes as involving ‘diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties’ – is sometimes treated as though he was denying the vastly complex sequence of often apparently and sometimes ‘really’ contradictory changes that Elias painstakingly documented in his study of those self-same processes.

As van Krieken observes, an orientation towards a directional rather than a teleological approach to development can also be found in the work of writers such as Ginsberg (1934) and Ogburn (1922), both of whom Elias cited in *On The Process of Civilisation* (van Krieken 1998: 29). However, van Krieken also suggests that, while Elias’s concept of social development avoids teleology and

is multi-linear, and while Elias successfully distanced himself from progress theories, there remains a degree of ambiguity regarding whether or not he saw 'civilising processes' as involving changes that amount to an overall 'progress' in certain aspects of human life. On the one hand, van Krieken proposes, Elias often casts the relatively higher levels of human control over non-human nature that tend to accompany 'civilising processes' in a positive light. On the other, as we have seen, Elias suggested that 'civilising processes' could at any time be accompanied by or contribute, independently of the intentions of a majority of the people involved, to decivilising processes. He was also acutely aware of the 'dark side' of civilisation, not least following his experiences in the two World Wars, and perhaps especially on account of the murder of his mother in one of the Nazi gas chambers (van Krieken 1998: 70–71). Van Krieken adds that the chief danger of employing a concept of directionality is that it can be read, albeit incorrectly when viewed against the background of the totality of Elias's work, as a conflation of trends and counter-trends into a single overall 'arrow' of change. This helps in part to explain why Elias's work has sometimes been wrongly charged with 'unilinear evolutionism' (1998: 68). We agree by and large with van Krieken's observations on this subject, but with one main qualification.

As we saw in previous chapters, Elias refused simply to dismiss 'civilisation' as 'the worst form of life and one that is doomed' (Elias 2012a: 8). He was also reluctant to embrace wholesale the growing tide of pessimism about humans and the development of their societies. However, this was part of a more general effort to avoid 'evaluating' in a simple normative sense the phenomena he was studying. He recognised that the 'civilising processes' experienced in the West up to his time of writing had contributed at one level to 'specific civilisational difficulties' by means of which 'we torment ourselves', yet, at another, compared with our medieval ancestors, to a diminished level of 'difficulties and fears' (Elias 2012a: 8). Elias was referring in this latter connection to the higher degrees of control over non-human nature facilitated primarily by the development of the sciences. He recognised clearly that this latter development is an ambivalent, Janus-faced process, with, for example, the growing ability to understand and control atomic fission and atomic fusion entailing both an ability to create bombs with the power to destroy human-kind and to make available abundant cheap energy for constructive and peaceful purposes, whilst again, even in the latter case, involving new kinds of problem – such as those attendant upon the disposal of radioactive waste with its long life spans. However, rather than 'blaming science' for its negative consequences, Elias sought to contribute to the development of 'better', more 'scientific' means of orientation to the social world than have been available up to now. In turn, Elias also understood such means of orientation as being a vital resource for humanity as a whole to draw upon in their attempts to avoid the escalation of destructive inter-state and 'inter-faith' conflicts, together with the more general 'shadows' and

‘discontents’ that ‘civilising processes’ and other social developments have tended so far in human history to entail. We understand van Krieken’s charge that Elias’s attitudes towards the greater human capacity for control of the natural world ‘could easily be put in the category of “progress”’ (1998: 70) by others. However, this is a judgement that Elias would not himself have made. It was more Elias’s endeavour to study people’s attitudes towards the ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ aspects of science, its triumphs and its failures, whilst avoiding making value-judgements of an overly simple, non-empirically based kind.

This last point raises a number of related concerns. Firstly, what did Elias understand a more scientific ‘means of orientation’ to the social world to involve? Secondly, to what extent did he subscribe to an ideal of ‘science’ that could be ‘value-neutral’ or ‘value-free’? Thirdly, in positing the natural sciences as models for the social sciences to emulate – whilst taking due note, following Comte, of the need to take account of the specificity of ‘the social’, for example, its complex and labile character – in what sense was Elias advocating a variant of ‘positivism’ and/or ‘empiricism’? These are questions, albeit pursued in a different order below, that are worth discussing in detail.

Knowledge and the sciences

Before commencing a discussion of what Elias understood when referring to a ‘more scientific’ sociology, it is necessary to consider what he had to say about the concept of ‘science’ itself. It is also necessary to examine some of his key ideas about the history and philosophy of science. The first thing worthy of note in this connection is the fact that, for Elias, it is highly problematic to talk of ‘science’ as though the term refers to something monolithic. Indeed, he suggested, a sociological theory of science needs to take centrally into account the diversification of ‘the sciences’ which has taken place since the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century (1972: 117; Elias 2009a: 67). Elias was critical of a prevailing tendency in philosophical and philosophically-influenced sociological discussions of science to treat the fund of knowledge of a science at any given time as constituting a coherent and self-contained system that is understandable without reference to the processes by which it ‘came to be’. More particularly, he was critical of the tendency to divorce systems of knowledge from ‘their’ development. He was critical, furthermore, of accounts of sciences in which their histories are introduced as a kind of ‘backdrop’, where such a ‘history’ serves merely as a brief ‘introduction’ which recounts a medley of ideas, seemingly without order or structure. For Elias, once again, what we call ‘science’ has to be understood developmentally, that is as involving structured and directional change. In fact, in this sense it is better from a process-orientated perspective to posit ‘science’ as *consisting of* ‘structured and directional change’, rather than as a system of knowledge that

somehow happens to be *contextualised* by such developments. Furthermore, Elias suggested, any philosophical, historical or, for that matter, sociological approach to understanding the sciences needs some kind of theory of the ‘development’/‘growth’ and ‘loss’/‘decay’ of scientific knowledge. Indeed, it is not always recognised in this connection that, as we suggested earlier, he wrote of ‘knowledge-loss’ as well as ‘knowledge-gain’ (1987a).

It is, of course, impossible meaningfully to generalise in any simple sense about either philosophical accounts of science or historical ones. In fact, Elias found a measure of agreement between his own views and those of developmentally-minded philosophers of science such as Imre Lakatos and theoretically-minded historians of science such as Thomas Kuhn (Elias 1972).⁵¹ In a paper devoted to their contributions, Elias wrote:

[I]f Kuhn argues – and I would agree with him – that a theory of the history of science has to prove itself and may have to be changed in the light of relevant empirical evidence, Lakatos appears to argue – and again, that is how I see it myself – that the evidence may have to be changed, that it, may have to be selected, connected and interpreted differently in accordance with a different theory of the history or the ‘progress’ of science. (1972: 121; 2009a: 89–90)

The debate between Kuhn and Lakatos arose in conjunction with a more general problem regarding the development of knowledge, a subject to which Elias devoted considerable attention particularly in his later years. Put simply, it appears to be the case that, for scientific knowledge to advance, general theoretical models need to be revised, refined and sometimes completely transformed in order to make them consistent with new empirical evidence. Sometimes they need to be abandoned altogether. Conversely, it is inevitably the case that empirical evidence will be selected and interpreted in the light of existing theories. How, then, to use Kant’s classical formulation, *is science possible?* Or perhaps better, how can the occurrence of ‘advances’ in scientific knowledge be established? Part of Elias’s approach to this problem involves once again reframing it in more processual terms. If we are concerned with exploring the issue of how knowledge ‘grows’, ‘expands’, ‘advances’, ‘progresses’ or ‘regresses’, he suggested, it is crucial to realise that it is not so much a question of selecting between (or, indeed, of reconciling) two static logical extremes – such as are suggested, for example, by the terms ‘deductivism’ and ‘inductivism’ – as it is of asking questions about the structure of a specific kind of order, more specifically about the connections involved in the sequential order of knowledge development. According to Elias, however, the kind of connectedness involved in such sequences is different from that with which, say, classical physics, the physics of Newton, was concerned. It is an order in which each datum that comprises it ‘... presupposes an antecedent datum as its necessary (though not necessarily its sufficient) condition and may in turn become a necessary (though not necessarily sufficient) condition for a further stage within that process of

growth or development' (Elias 1972: 121; Elias 2009a:90). Thus, for Elias, the endeavour of establishing the criteria of 'progress' or 'regression' in the development of this type of order, of determining the character of the connections in a diachronic succession, is of crucial importance (1972: 121; Elias 2009a:90).

The goal of the sociological theory of any particular science is thus, for Elias, that of shedding light on the 'nexus of the sequential order' involved in the discoveries its practitioners make. Classical historians of science, he suggested, have tended on the whole to neglect any such undertaking. Their focus, instead, has characteristically been upon 'the history of ideas', pursuing questions such as 'who said this first?', 'who stole whose ideas?', 'how did this particular individual achieve that breakthrough?', 'what was his/her reasoning?', 'what individual idiosyncrasies were involved in this discovery?', etc. While such questions have their place, Elias suggested, their importance has been elevated to such an exaggerated extent that the history of science has tended to involve more the history of 'great men', 'scientific pioneers' and 'great inventors', than it has the study of the diachronic structures involved in the sequential development of knowledge within particular sciences. Historical accounts of this individualistic sort tend to rely upon references to relevant documents as the basis for certainty regarding the authenticity of a particular scientist's ideas. But the selection and connection of such, albeit textually authenticated, individualised fragments of the development of knowledge within a scientific field are characteristically left to the imagination of the historian (Elias 1972: 12; Elias 2009a:90). To use Lakatos's term, the 'rational reconstruction' of the order of succession of the particular fragments that comprise an historian of science's narrative of the history of science is somewhat arbitrarily conceived.

Kuhn (1962), of course, made important contributions in breaking from a tradition of historical writing about the sciences which has no 'theory of growth' or 'development'. He did so through examining what he called 'the structure of scientific revolutions'. Expressed simply, what he did was to advance an analysis of the 'internal' and 'external' history of science by recourse to a series of empirical cases. More particularly, he posited a distinction between 'normal science' and 'revolutionary science'. 'Normal science' was held to involve relative stasis and a tendency to rationalise as anomalous or to reject altogether evidence perceived as presenting an 'internal challenge' to the currently dominant paradigm. 'Revolutionary science', by contrast, was held to involve dramatic change and revision of knowledge, challenges to the 'rules and standards of scientific practice', 'paradigm ruptures', 'revolutions', and 'discontinuities'. In putting these ideas forward, Kuhn was, in effect, challenging the 'logical positivist' or 'logical empiricist' tradition in philosophy which posits an overly simple 'development by accumulation' model (Friedman 2003: 19). It is a tradition according to which the growth of scientific knowledge is understood to involve nothing more than the progressive uncovering of 'facts' through systematic observation.

Like Kuhn, Elias was acutely aware that the ‘development-by-accumulation’ model falls short on account of its neglect of extra-scientific issues. For example, whether or not a scientific hypothesis is regarded as worth testing, or whether or not a given finding is regarded as valid, is often related to the phase in the development of the social group and/or society in which the hypotheses/findings were generated. Similarly, it may have been related to the relations between such groups and societies and their rivals. In a nutshell, extra-scientific contingencies and developments frequently, perhaps even invariably, have an important part to play in the development of a science (Elias 1972: 130; Elias 2009a:96). However, Elias also felt that Kuhn placed rather too much stress on ‘ruptures’ and ‘discontinuities’ in his model of ‘scientific revolutions’, and over-separated ‘normal science’ from ‘revolutionary science’. He suspected that Kuhn’s preoccupation with discontinuity and ‘spectacular advances’ may have betrayed a residue of ‘great man’, ‘history of ideas’ thinking in his (Kuhn’s) theorising. Put simply, according to Elias we are more likely to find ruptures, breaks and revolutions if our focus is fixed firmly upon the ‘great innovators’ and the question of distinguishing those thinkers ‘who said it first’ (the progenitors of scientific revolutions) from those ‘who merely continued or elaborated an existing innovation’ (the proponents of normal science). If instead, Elias contended, our central engagement is with the development of specific scientific problems and concepts, it is likely that we will find a picture of the balance and blend of historical continuity and discontinuity different from that portrayed by Kuhn.

Kuhn can be understood in this regard as standing in the ‘epistemological break’ tradition exemplified by Gaston Bachelard according to which:

irrespective of what one might assume, in the life of a science, problems do not arise by themselves. It is precisely this that marks out a problem as being of the true scientific spirit: all knowledge is in response to a question. If there were no question, there would be no scientific knowledge. Nothing proceeds from itself. Nothing is given. All is constructed. (Bachelard 2002: 117)

As part of the ‘pendulum swing’ away from the traditional continuist, incremental model of science, the stress in this intellectual lineage is characteristically upon how knowledge does not march onwards somehow independently of ‘the knowers’ who produce it – ‘Nothing proceeds from itself. Nothing is given’. Instead, knowledge is said to be ‘constructed’, that is, inextricably tied to the values, interests, efforts, abilities and lives of the individuals who generate innovations and, ultimately, paradigm revolutions.

This stress on epistemological rupture can be seen as complementary to the ‘great man’ model of scientific development. Elias depicted the latter by invoking the metaphor of swimmers who jump into the stream of knowledge at particular times and places, and who are dependent, within the constraints of time and place, on their individual strengths, abilities, decisions, and

deeds for being able, within limits, to swim further or faster than others. The history of science, he tells us, is full of 'outstanding swimmers' who are understood to have 'solved' the key scientific problems of their day through their outstanding ingenuity. Like Bachelard before him, even Kuhn understood the theory of relativity to be totally unconnected with the developments in theoretical physics which preceded it (Elias 1972: 133; Elias 2009a:93, n. 13), almost as if the great figure of Einstein effectively cast all others into the shadow. Those whom Kuhn groups together under the banner of 'normal science', who do not quite manage to gain recognition as great innovators and who appear only to continue and perhaps to elaborate a little on an existing paradigm are, as such, denigrated and metaphorically 'thrown to the wolves'. And yet, Elias suggests, such proponents of 'normal science' who make less spectacular advances, even though these might be 'overthrown' in the course of dramatic paradigm revolutions, nonetheless form a lineage or line of succession without which no problem could be posed. Indeed, as Bachelard recognised, 'if there were no question, there would be no scientific knowledge'.

It follows that the process that he metaphorically depicted as a 'stream' into which individual scientists 'take the plunge' is better conceived, from Elias's perspective, as an 'intergenerational grouping of knowledge-carriers and knowledge-producers' (Elias 1972: 124; Elias 2009a: 93). The structural conditions experienced by, the resources available to, and the control and direction of any such grouping may be such that, during some phases in its development, its representatives will face problems which none of them, no matter how great their individual abilities, can solve. During other phases, by contrast, the conditions might favour innovation. The 'great men' model of scientific development, in particular the questions of 'who said it first?' and 'who merely continued it?', appear to a degree to have been reproduced in Kuhn's demarcation between 'revolutionary' science and 'normal science'. But on their own, Elias contended, such questions are inadequate as a basis on which to determine and explain 'advances', 'slow-downs' or 'regressions' in the development of scientific knowledge. The 'discontinuity thesis', of which Kuhn can be understood as a proponent, involves the assumption of a relatively stable patterning (inevitably leading to rupture) of the developmental relationship that exists between 'the problems that a scientist seeks to solve with the help of his theoretical innovation and the antecedent developments in his or her neighbouring scientific fields' (1972: 133; Elias 2009a:93, n. 13). In a much more straightforward manner, the 'incremental growth' theory of knowledge development reaches the same kind of assumption, albeit of 'continuity' instead of 'discontinuity'.

For Elias, both assumptions are problematic. It is always necessary, he contended, to investigate the balance between continuity and discontinuity or rupture in knowledge growth. A key related concept is that of 'relative autonomy', used with a dynamic, developmental or processual connotation. For example, it would be wrong, according to Elias, to understand the

relationship between innovations and antecedent developments in scientific knowledge as involving simple, direct 'cause-and-effect' diachronic sequences such as the following: *datum or theory 'A' led to 'B' which in turn led to 'C' (as in a simple continuist model); or datum or theory 'C' broke from 'B' which, in turn marked a discontinuation of 'A' (as in a simple discontinuist model).* Instead, invoking the concept of relative autonomy, the sequential structure might be better expressed as: *datum or theory 'A' was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for 'B', which, in turn, was a necessary but not sufficient condition for 'C', and so forth.*

The concept of relative autonomy also plays a crucial part in Elias's argument in another sense. It is one which testifies to a degree of agreement between Elias and Lakatos. More particularly, both authors agree that scientific knowledge can come to have a degree of independence, not from individuals *per se* but from *any particular* individual. That is, knowledge can be 'handed on' between knowers and generations of knowers. It is, in Elias's terms, under certain figurational conditions, *communicable*. In this sense, returning to Elias's metaphor, the 'stream of knowledge' can be said to have a degree of independence from the intergenerational groupings of knowers and the individual 'carriers' and 'producers' of knowledge who comprise these groupings. Accordingly, knowledge can be understood as having a (diachronic) 'structure of its own' or, to use Elias's formulation, 'a sequential order to its expansion or decay' (Elias 1972: 124). However, once again the autonomy of knowledge from the groups who produce and exchange it is always relative, never absolute and complete.

The idea of knowledge having relative autonomy in this way avoids the dangers of both epistemic relativism and logical positivism (empiricism). For Elias, it also invites a theoretical-empirical investigation into how the relative autonomy of knowledge varies both historically and between the sciences. How is it, for example, that knowledge in the physical or so-called 'natural' sciences has gained a relatively high degree of autonomy, while that in the social sciences, perhaps particularly in sociology, is relatively low? What problems stem from the relatively high degree of autonomy in some sciences and scientific fields relative to that of others? It is to these and related issues that we shall address ourselves in the remainder of this chapter and in the chapter which follows.

On sociology as a 'science'

Our last discussion points towards a need to resurrect the question of the degree to which sociology is, or indeed ever can be, 'scientific'. Since the 1960s, in the UK at least, undergraduate students of the discipline have characteristically been trained from their first year onwards to treat with abject suspicion, if not wholesale rejection, the idea that sociology can be a science. This is, perhaps,

for what appears to be a good reason. It is abundantly clear that sociology deals with a subject-matter which is in important ways different from that of the 'natural sciences'. Attempts to model sociology on the 'natural sciences' in a 'positivistic' fashion have well documented limitations. Indeed, as we have discussed in earlier sections of this book, even Comte himself, the coiner of the terms 'positivism' and 'sociology', argued against sociologists emulating the models and techniques of the natural sciences too closely, and would have lamented above all the so-called 'positivist' preoccupation with measurement and quantitative methods. Comte's vision of sociology as a science involved, not so much a question of using other sciences as models from which to derive methods and procedures – these he saw as having fundamentally to depend upon the levels of complexity, rates of change, and degrees of human involvement in phenomena at the different emergent levels of reality, and which give rise to the need for different sciences – but rather to promote sociology as the '*queen*' of sciences, a discipline that would play an integrating role for all fields and branches of knowledge. But 'positivism', at least as the term has come subsequently to be understood, by no means represents the only possibility for sociologists to proceed more 'scientifically'. From Elias's perspective, sociology can become *more* 'scientific' in the sense of there emerging a trans-generational community of producers, carriers, and users of sociological knowledge who collectively concern themselves with developing and refining the means of orientation towards human societies. In other words, according to Elias, it is possible for sociology to be 'scientific' in the sense of its proponents concerning themselves, whatever methods they may use, with developing a systematically ordered fund of demonstrable knowledge about the social world.

The legacy of debates stemming from what Rojek and Turner (2000) call the 'decorative turn' in sociology over the last twenty years appears to boil down to a pervasive faith in more or less sophisticated variants of epistemic relativism and a stress upon the importance of recognising the social contingency of knowledge. Against this backdrop, to insist on using the term 'development' or to speak of 'advances' in sociological knowledge is to invite the charge of naïve empiricism and immediately to be seen as aligning oneself with the 'steady incremental' model of knowledge accumulation. Worst of all, it is to be seen as subscribing to a unilinear, evolutionary, 'progress' theory of knowledge development. Again, as discussed earlier in this chapter, it is not difficult to understand the currently prevailing sensitivity towards the notion of an 'advance' in knowledge. Such a term appears to be invoking an Enlightenment assurance that science moves inevitably towards progressively 'superior', intrinsically 'better' forms of knowledge, and that scientific practice involves the discovery of 'truths' which are considered to be progressive approximations to 'reality' and devoid of moral investment or purpose.

Sociologists of science have long since highlighted an inherent paradox in the ideas of Enlightenment social thinkers, remnants of which can be seen in the

work of subsequent generations. The paradox is that Enlightenment thinking is invariably shot through with an unspoken moral project which centres on notions of Western superiority and an endemic blind faith in 'progress' which is little different from the religious, metaphysical, and philosophical convictions bound up in the beliefs that science is understood to supplant. But recognition of the social contingency of scientific knowledge, the uncovering of 'hidden' moral visions underpinning Enlightenment thinking and, indeed, the thinking of scientists today, is not, for Elias, an 'end-point' to debates about knowledge and the possibilities for sociology as a science. Rather, it marks a beginning, a point of departure. In rejecting Enlightenment notions of social 'evolution' and 'progress', there has been a tendency, according to Elias, to use one of his favourite metaphors, to 'throw out the developmental baby with the evolutionary bathwater'. A consequence of this almost total rejection of at least this aspect of Enlightenment thinking, Elias argued, has been the effective blockage of access to a means of conceiving problems concerning the sociology of knowledge, and, indeed, key questions concerning the 'human sciences' generally, in a processual and developmental manner. In particular, it has effectively tabooed use of the conceptual tools by means of which sociologists might be able to escape the impasse of conceiving of knowledge as either socially contingent or value-free.

Part of the means by which sociologists might succeed in moving beyond this impasse, Elias suggested, is by reframing the more general problem to which it relates. In the language of epistemology, the dilemma pertains centrally to the split between 'empiricism' and 'rationalism' and related divides such as those between 'objectivity' and 'subjectivity', and 'deductivism' and 'inductivism'. It is typically posed as a kind of conceptual riddle which is ultimately insoluble. According to Elias, however, the problem is better conceived, not as a choice between static, 'logical' alternatives, but as a question which pertains to 'embodied' pluralities of humans 'in the round', and to investigations into *the figurational conditions under which knowledge develops*. A key task in addressing the 'philosophical riddle' alluded to above is that of reconciling the insight that empirical evidence and 'social facts' are not somehow 'given' *a priori* to a researcher – that researchers select evidence more or less consciously and deliberately on the basis of existing theories, understandings, and values (both professional and extra-professional) – with the understanding that scientific knowledge develops through revising existing theories in the light of new evidence, new 'facts'. To this end, Elias introduced as conceptual alternatives the terms 'involvement' and 'detachment'. In addition, he adopted formulations which always involve 'degrees', 'blends' and 'alloys' between the former and the latter and which refer to '... changing equilibria between sets of mental activities which, in human relations with other humans, with objects and with self ... have the function to involve and to detach' (1956: 227; Elias 2007a:69).

We shall discuss the concepts of involvement and detachment further in the next chapter. For the moment, it must be enough to say that, in positing an

alternative to the standard dichotomy between 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', Elias was reaching for a formulation that would facilitate a consideration of the conditions under which *greater* 'value-incursion', or expressed more precisely, the 'autonomous' values of a scientific discipline such as a commitment to understanding the world *as it is* and *as it has developed*, have greater influence than the heteronomous values of the societies to which the scientists involved belong and which instead privilege the world *as we want it to be*, or, indeed, *don't want it to be*. Such terms are designed to bring questions concerning what one might call 'the developmental exigencies' of knowledge to the fore in place of static and idealised conceptions of the relationship between knower and knowledge. Here, Elias was again arguing against a Kantian model of 'objectivity' centred on the idea(l) of a cognitive effort at self-distancing by an isolated, supposedly rational being. In place of this, Elias wanted to contribute to the development of a psychoanalytical and sociological conception of *detachment* based on a recognition of both the configurations of psychic structures that facilitate an optimal balance between involvement and detachment, and the relationship of these structures to the social arrangements – the figurational conditions – that make potentially more constructive balances of involvement and detachment possible. In short, Elias wanted to explore, not just the social contingency of knowledge but also the *different ways* in which knowledge is tied dynamically to different and differentially emergent human psyches and figurations.

According to Elias, it is a main task of sociologists to develop knowledge which will hopefully be of greater potential than, say, many of the ideology-driven beliefs which have tended to govern politics and everyday social life so far. He had a whole repertoire of formulations with which to describe such knowledge. More particularly, he spoke of: adding to the 'social fund of more reality-congruent knowledge'; the development of theories with greater 'object-adequacy'; advances in 'the means of orientation' towards human figurations; knowledge with 'greater cognitive value'; and so forth. He also spoke of knowledge-gathering and developing as a psycho-social process in which, for example, highly involved individuals might add to what they know experientially about, say, smoking or playing football, by undertaking a 'detour *via* detachment' – a concept we have touched upon in earlier sections of this book. In this, they 'distanciate' themselves from their objects of study in an attempt to construct as accurate a picture of these as possible. And then, deploying the potentially more 'reality-congruent' or 'object-adequate' understandings thus obtained in a process of 'secondary involvement', they seek, to continue with the examples employed above, to help people to stop smoking, to improve their understanding of sport dynamics, and so forth. As such, Elias posited a kind of diachronic structure as inherent to the 'detour', one involving a *blend* of, first, the insights derived from having an experiential 'involvement' in that which is studied; then, following on, greater 'detachment'

whereby such insights are complemented by viewing the same topic, as it were, from a 'distance'; and finally, 'secondary involvement' where the combined insights of involved and especially detached knowledge might facilitate social interventions which have more intended relative to unintended consequences than has typically been the case than those based solely on highly involved knowledge.

'Reality congruence'

Critics of Elias have suggested that, while his position regarding knowledge may involve a different terminology, it does not so much resolve classical epistemological dilemmas as side-step them. For example, Derek Layder (1990) has argued that adopting concepts such as 'involvement', 'detachment' and 'reality-congruence' as alternatives to 'subjectivity', 'objectivity' and 'truth' fails to remove the key problem of how to distinguish between knowledge-claims. As Layder put it: 'To talk of something as being "more true"' or "more false" no more resolves the problem of what constitutes the moment at which something becomes true rather than false, that is, how someone classifies something as false rather than true and *vice versa*' (Layder 1990: 44). Leaving aside for the moment his reduction of Elias's concepts to the static binaries of 'true' and 'false', Layder's formulation of the issue is in many ways reminiscent of Popper's in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (1959). It is a formulation in which a person conceived as standing apart from the stream of knowledge is envisaged as arbitrating between the falsity and truth of knowledge-claims according to an 'external' and *a priori* 'logic'. Indeed, Layder's dependence on Popperian thinking is explicit: in developing his critique of Elias's position, he invokes Popper's distinction between 'naïve' and 'sophisticated empiricism'. Like other sophisticated empiricists, Layder proposes, Elias distances himself from a 'naïve empiricist' position by recognising that observations of the world are not made in a vacuum but are, in fact, theory-laden. However, he (Layder) suggests that, again like other sophisticated empiricists, Elias provides no criteria of validity with which to distinguish scientific from non-scientific statements (1990: 44).

It would be misleading for us to suggest that, in his work on knowledge and the sciences, Elias somehow forgot to discuss the issue of criteria of validity or, perhaps better, the 'standards' by which to determine 'advances' in knowledge according to their degrees of reality-congruence. It is rather the case that he rejected this mode of formulating the problem precisely because it is premised upon a rather unrealistic, somewhat static and imaginary cognitive process, not a developmental and fully 'social' one. The idea of an authority figure measuring 'truth' claims against timeless and universal standards of 'validity' is, it seems to us, an enduring myth that is by no means confined to imagery in

the work of writers such as Layder and Popper. It can be seen, for example, in the pervasive tendency in Western sociology to assess the worth of a piece of research against standards of methodological procedure or rigour – a tendency towards the fetishisation of methodology as the principal means by which to gauge the adequacy of any particular claimed contribution to knowledge. But the idea that the degree of correspondence between ‘knowledge of the world’ and the ‘world itself’ might thus be somehow ‘settled’ or ‘determined’ in an absolute and final sense, and at that, through a process of cognitive arbitration is, at best, rather unrealistic. Indeed, the very depiction of the process by which knowledge develops as involving a solitary individual selecting between logical oppositions such as ‘true’ or ‘false’, ‘valid’ or ‘invalid’, is, according to Elias, highly problematic regarding concrete social processes. Terms like ‘true’ and ‘false’ may well have considerable utility in the resolution of problems that pertain, say, to the prescribed order of a logical system such as many of those relating to a predominantly deductive science like mathematics. However, these terms have considerably less adequacy for the problem of determining advances in means of orientation towards the social world – an undertaking central to Elias’s model of sociology. As Elias wrote in critique of Popper:

[T]he term ‘scientific discovery’ used in the title of his book is slightly misleading. Scientific discoveries on the theoretical level are not really Popper’s concern. He is concerned with the logical consistency and coherence of the series of statements which follow from the theoretical postulates or axioms. These themselves are apparently arbitrarily chosen by the individual scientist. How and why, according to Popper, is not a question into which a theory of science needs to go. Yet, in fact, the relationship between the theories and experiments of different scientists, the way in which they influence, learn and struggle with each other, in short, the relationship between the hypotheses and theories of a particular scientist and both the preceding development of his [*sic*] field and the current scientific situation in it, is of supreme importance for the understanding of the former. Quite arbitrarily, Popper’s thinking and argument stop at the point where the individual forms an hypothesis. (Elias 2009c: 165–66)

Elias’s critique of Popper, and by extension, of the more general and pervasive mode of posing the problem of developments in scientific knowledge that underpins Popper’s formulation, thus amounts to considerably more than a question of terminological differences. Rather than shirking or ‘side-stepping’ the problems posed by Popper and Layder, Elias poses instead alternative modes of conceptualising them. As can be seen from the above quotation where Popper characteristically framed such issues more in terms of ideal situations of how a science *ought* to proceed, Elias (and in this sense what he wrote was positioned firmly within the ‘sociology of knowledge’ tradition) was concerned with the problem of how inter-generational pluralities of scientists *actually* proceed and, more specifically, with questions relating to the psychic and social conditions under which advances and regressions of knowledge occur.⁵² This is an important point. While Elias’s formulation might well have ‘epistemological’

implications and is likely to be seen as such by philosophers and sociologists with philosophical leanings, much of his sociological reorientation is lost in the translation of his concepts into their perceived philosophical equivalents. In Layder's formulation, Elias's concepts are rendered as banal neologisms which translate to 'degrees of truth' as if he (Elias) were referring to 'degrees of pregnancy'. While, to continue with the comparison, it might well make sense to think of 'pregnancy' as a process involving varying degrees, it, and by comparison, the concept of 'truth', steer our thinking towards 'states' and 'essences' and away from arguably more realistic ways of conceiving developments in social scientific knowledge – ultimately, a female is *either* pregnant *or* she is not. 'Truth' is similarly an 'either-or' concept which serves to steer thinking inevitably towards 'finalities', 'states' and 'essences' and away from arguably more realistic ways of conceiving developments in knowledge.

Elias's usage of the term 'reality congruence' implies a 'process', not a state. It is a 'flow' term not an 'essence' term, one which refers to varying degrees of approximation, of agreement, between the dynamism of scientific knowledge and the dynamism of the social reality of which that knowledge forms part. We realise, of course – as did Elias – that use of the terms 'reality' and 'congruence' in this connection is liable under present conditions to arouse suspicion. But Elias did not think of 'reality' as something fixed, monolithic and ultimately 'fully knowable'. He did not see it as a 'thing out there', but rather as a dynamic totality which includes humans and their expanding (and sometimes contracting) knowledge as an integral part. It follows that, in Elias's view, knowledge can never be 'absolute', never 'finished' or 'final' as is implied by a static concept like 'truth'. It is worth observing that, as an alternative, a term such as 'value-congruence', and indeed, the sociological investigation into how scientific knowledge is, to varying degrees, consistent with extra-scientific values is, in the current sociological climate, considerably less controversial. It is perhaps useful, then, to qualify Elias's usage of the term 'reality-congruence'. In using it, he was also inevitably implying a consideration of 'value-congruence': the key question is which values (note, not simply 'whose' values – as in a 'history of ideas' model of science)? Put simply, Elias's stance on knowledge suggests that a consideration of 'value-congruence' without a consideration of 'reality congruence', as in a solely relativist position, is as problematic as a consideration of 'reality congruence' without 'value congruence' as in a naïve empiricist stance.

When considered developmentally, we might thus understand an 'advance' in a given field or specialism as involving a phase in its overall development in which the knowledge produced is more consistent with the 'autonomous' values of its scientific community – such as, once again, understanding 'the social world as it is' – relative to the 'heteronomous' values of a wider society – such as those which tend towards portraying 'the social world as we want it to be or don't want it to be'. Of course, not all sciences conform to this somewhat idealised

contrast between 'autonomous' and 'heteronomous' evaluations. At the current stage of its development, sociology is a case in point.

It was Elias's firm conviction that, for sociological knowledge to 'advance' in any sense, one of the central pre-requisites is the gradual establishment of an inter-generational, international community of scholars committed to a set of values which centre on the enterprise of developing a more reliable fund of knowledge about humans and the societies we form than has been achievable thus far. The problem of reality congruence pertains, in this respect, to the extent to which such a community will be able to establish higher degrees of certainty over time. More particularly, it is a question of whether any particular models, 'claims' concerning the structure, 'direction', or even enduring characteristics of social processes, have lasting utility, 'fit', demonstrability within the course of subsequent research-theorisation. Such a process is by no means inevitable, and, particularly at the current stage of the development of sociology as a discipline, is unlikely to be characterised by a steady, incremental, linear development towards an expanding and more reliable fund of knowledge. We shall add to and elaborate on this discussion in Chapter 5.