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Problems of Method and Values in the Development of Sociological Knowledge

Thus far we have described Elias's work as constituting a radically processual, relational and synthesis-orientated approach to sociology. We have argued that this engagement with relationships, processes and syntheses extends equally to Elias's treatment of problems relating to method and the role of values in the development of sociological knowledge. In this chapter, we shall consider – to use terms which he fundamentally rejected – Elias's 'epistemological', 'ontological', and 'methodological' position, and explore his reframing of the sociological lexicon as part of an attempt to facilitate a reorientation of problems that have historically been the chief concerns of the philosophy of the social sciences and that he saw as belonging to the sociology of knowledge.

Involvement and detachment and the problem of 'values'

As we argued in the previous chapter, it was one of Elias's key contentions that sociological research and theory, the conjoined, indivisible and equally necessary basic components of the subject, are hindered rather than helped by thinking in terms of such simple dichotomies as 'value-bias' and 'value-neutrality', or their equivalents such as 'subjectivity' and 'objectivity', 'irrationality' and 'rationality'. It is better, he maintained, more in tune with and appropriate for understanding the complex and dynamic, that is, processual and relational character of humans and the societies they form, to think in terms of fluid and complex balances in which emotional as well as rational aspects of human behaviour and life together are taken into account. Elias subscribed neither to a view of scientific knowledge as completely 'value-free', nor to the notion that the social contingency of knowledge renders all accounts of the social world equally 'valid' as in the case of a crude epistemic relativism. The key for Elias was to consider, and in small part contribute towards, conditions under which an inter-generational community of social scientists might develop more adequate understandings of the world, and, indeed, develop a more secure *basis* for their value-judgements (Elias and Dunning 1986: 144; Elias 2008: 125) than they have managed so far. That is, Elias's aim was to provide a basis for constructing more autonomous sociological values that are 'sounder' than those currently

available. For Elias, they would be 'sounder' to the degree that they would facilitate the foundation of a collective orientation towards developing more reliable knowledge in relation to the sphere of human figurations. Ultimately, such values would be sounder to the degree that they would possess the potential to make life more meaningful and enjoyable than it has tended to be up to now for large numbers of people, as well as helping humanity as a whole to adjust successfully to such threats as nuclear war and 'global warming'.

It is useful to compare Elias's position on these issues, firstly, with that of the original members of the 'Frankfurt School' – 'critical theorists' such as Adorno and Horkheimer – with whom, as we have seen, Elias was personally acquainted, and, secondly, with some of the key arguments put forward more recently by proponents of a 'cultural studies' approach and adherents to some of the principal variants of poststructuralist theorising.

The position of critical theorists on questions of involvement and detachment was cogently summed up by Robert Bocock in 1983. He wrote:

Epistemologically critical theory stresses the importance of sociology and social theory being critical of scientism in the realm of methodology. Scientism means here the uncritical attempt to copy the methods of the natural sciences in doing social science. Critical theory tried to retain links between social philosophy and ethics, rather than severing them in order to make sociology seem more like a natural science – something which it is in principle impossible to do anyway as far as this epistemological position is concerned. The social world is *appraised* in the very language used to describe, analyse, explain and understand it. Neutral scientific sounding language does not avoid such an appraisal: it merely suggests that there is nothing in that which it is analysing to get worked up about either politically or morally. Critical theory developed its epistemology under the shadow of the Nazi regime, and it has always held that liberal, well-intentioned 'value-neutrality' in the social sciences aided the rise of Nazism by appearing to students and others to be unable to offer any political values worth caring for, thus providing a gap which fascism filled. (Bocock 2002: 22)

As we noted earlier, Elias was one of Karl Mannheim's assistants – we would perhaps say in English 'teaching assistants' – in the Sociology Department at the University of Frankfurt from 1929 to 1932, a time which coincided with the early days of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's privately funded Institute for Social Research, the institutional setting of 'the Frankfurt School'. In fact, the University rented rooms for the Sociology Department in the Institute. The building, which they jointly occupied, came to be known by students and teachers at the University as 'the Marxburg' on account of the communist affiliations of many of the Institute's staff. As we saw earlier, Elias related to Dunning and others in the early 1960s more than once how, at considerable personal risk, he (Elias) had been instrumental in helping Adorno to escape the Nazis.

We have mentioned this incident again in order to make it crystal clear that Elias, too, and not only the 'Frankfurt School', developed aspects of

his 'epistemology' – as his distance from philosophical modes of thinking increased, he came to prefer to refer to it simply as a 'theory of knowledge' – under the shadow of the Nazis. Yet despite his contacts with members of the Frankfurt School, familiarity with their writings, and exposure to many of the self-same dangers, Elias came to different conclusions regarding issues of involvement, detachment, methods and 'methodology'. He shared Adorno and his colleagues' opposition to 'scientism' – the inappropriate attempt to use natural science methods in social science research. But, as we suggested earlier, he did not share their largely uncritical embrace of an unreformed 'Kantian' or 'neo-Kantian' philosophy and the idea that there can be a 'methodology', that is, literally a science of method that is equally applicable to the physical, chemical, biological, psychological and social realms. What he insisted on, instead, was that sociology can, indeed must, be made *more* scientific than it is at present but that, for that to happen, its practitioners will have to develop methods, concepts and theories appropriate to the complex and dynamic character of its subject matter and the fact that it is comprised of thinking, feeling humans, each endowed with a capacity to act and, except in marginal circumstances, make choices. For Elias's preferences to become a reality, however, it is not just a question of creating methods, concepts and theories, but of institutionalising autonomous evaluations strongly enough to prevent the intrusion of heteronomous evaluations. This is not easy for at least two reasons: firstly because social processes continually generate involved thinking; and secondly because the institutional boundaries surrounding sociology have remained porous up to now.

Except in his 'Adorno Prize' speech in 1977 (Elias 2009b: 82–92), Elias never criticised the work of the 'Frankfurt School' at length. He did, however, part company with them over what he regarded as their non-dynamic/non-developmental, that is, non-processual view of language and values. He did not seek to deny that the language employed by the practitioners of some forms of social science, for example, those which Mills (1959) dismissed with the label 'abstract empiricism', while making claims to be 'neutral' and merely 'descriptive', can nevertheless mask a concealed, perhaps even unconscious 'appraisal' of the social world. Elias contended, however, that 'appraisal' – making 'value-judgements' – is not a simple 'either-or' matter, a dichotomy, but yet again a question of nuances and degrees of 'scientificity' or, to put the same thing the other way around, a question of *types* and *degrees* of subject-orientation or *types* and *degrees* of 'value-bias'. In short, Elias felt it to be a much more complex and fluid issue than is usually assumed. More particularly, there are different *kinds* of 'values', or 'evaluations' in Elias's terminology.

Ideologies, or 'belief systems' to give them a more neutral-sounding name, differ in their degrees of reality-congruence, too. For example, the secular ideologies of the modern world – 'conservatism', 'socialism', 'liberalism', 'humanism', 'agnosticism', 'atheism', etc. – are all relatively more congruent

with observable ‘reality’ than were the ‘magical-mythical’, ‘other-worldly’, mainly religious belief systems of former times (Elias 2012b). That is because the secular ideologies of today contain more empirically ascertainable elements than do (or did) magical-mythical beliefs because the latter are fundamentally concerned with human constructs such as ‘God’ or ‘the gods’ which are not empirically observable in anything other than their human manifestations. Secular ideologies, by contrast, contain a greater number of empirically testable components. To say this is not to suggest that religions of various kinds are entirely lacking in reality-congruence. If that were the case, they would probably have low survival-value for their adherents. However, it is known, as archaeologists such as V. Gordon Childe (1928: 36), on whom Elias partly depended, have shown, that the priests in Ancient Egypt, although they believed the Nile was a deity, observed it closely and became able to predict the time of its annual flood. They used this knowledge to control the subject population of peasant-farmers because the latter who depended on the flooding for growing their crops, believed the priesthood were able through their prayers and invocations to persuade the ‘river god’ to flood and this became a major source of priestly power. Similarly, an important part of Comte’s ‘law of the three stages’ held that the fetishism-polytheism-monotheism sequence occurred as a consequence of advancing knowledge and that the belief in a single, all-powerful ‘God’ was an early stage in the realisation that there are universal and observable ‘natural laws’ such as Newton’s ‘inverse square law’, popularly known as the ‘law of gravity’ (Comte in S. Andreski (*ed.*) (1974)). It is important, finally, in this connection, to point out that, although modern science fundamentally developed in the first instance in post-Reformation, post-Renaissance Europe, important contributions had been made in the Middle East, the Arab world, and China at a time when Europe was mired in the ‘Dark Ages’. Indeed, the much celebrated fourteenth century Islamic scholar, Ibn Khaldun, was a polymath who is credited, variously, with being a forerunner if not a progenitor of many ‘modern’ social science disciplines, among them sociology and economics (see, for example, Gates (1967); Alatas (2006); Khaldun (1958)).

According to Elias (Elias 2007a: 32), ‘the capacity for detachment is a human universal’. We *all* possess it in some degree or another. It is a constitutive feature of the species *Homo sapiens*. Take, for example, such ostensibly simple activities as the earliest, stone-age humans making tools or weapons. We have chosen this example because it is easier to understand than would be the case if we started by referring to the present-day West where this universal capacity has to some extent become masked by a complex division of labour, a high level of material affluence, and a high degree of routinisation, mechanisation and automation. As Elias put it, in order to undertake such tasks as making tools or weapons, the earliest humans had to learn ‘to detach themselves to some extent from their immediate internal or external situation’. They had to learn

to be able not to act immediately in response to hunger pangs, sexual urges, fears of wild animals, threats from other humans and dangers in the physical environment. In other words, making artefacts such as tools and weapons is not a direct means of sating hunger or dealing with an environmental threat. It involves 'the capacity for distancing oneself from the situation of the moment, for remembering a past and ... anticipating a possible future situation where the work of one's hands ... might be of use' (Elias 2007a: 32). These operations, said Elias, 'are essentials of the variety of self-regulation described as detachment' (Elias 2007a: 32). In other words, a greater or lesser capacity for detaching oneself cognitively (rationally) and affectively (emotionally) from a given situation or bodily state is a property of all human beings, part of the condition of being human. It is *not* just a property of scientists in their research.

This universal human capacity for detachment is dependent in part on the biological constitution of the species, above all on the directing, coordinating, problem-solving functions performed by the cerebral cortex and the fact that this organ is generally dominant over the lower parts of the brain.⁵³ It is also dependent on the related fact that the cortex, which at the start of life is virtually a *tabula rasa*, a 'blank slate', crucially depends on learning from experience, especially from what Elias called humanity's 'social funds of knowledge' (Elias 2007a) which are stored, not only in the brains of individuals but extra-corporeally in libraries and, increasingly nowadays, digital information retrieval systems. However, according to Elias, detachment is necessarily always blended with involvement. He expressed this form of psychic interdependence thus:

One cannot say of a person's outlook in any absolute sense that it is detached or involved (or if one prefers, 'irrational', 'objective' or 'subjective'). Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in what they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now; and again only the insane can remain completely unmoved by what goes on around them. (Elias 2007a: 68)

We think that Elias would have agreed that the only 'completely detached' human beings are dead ones. In *all* human societies, adult behaviour normally lies between the two extremes and shifts to and fro between one and the other during the day, from day to day, season to season, and at different stages in the life-course. As Mennell (1998: 160) observes, Elias's 'emphasis on this point is in clear contrast to Parsons's notion that the distinction between *affectivity* and *affective-neutrality* ... is a clear-cut, dichotomous, mutually exclusive choice between opposites'. In other words, for Elias yet again, it is a question of continua, of overlapping and shifting balances or degrees.

Crucial in this regard is the degree to which a society's fund of knowledge is understood primarily in 'magical-mythical' terms or in terms that are more 'scientific'. The concept of 'magical-mythical' thinking refers to thinking in terms of anthropocentric, that is, human-centred, and anthropomorphically

conceived 'demons', 'spirits', deities' or 'gods' which are believed to have a super-powerful, essentially human form, or at least the capacity to take one on. The concept of 'scientific' thinking refers to thinking that can be shown empirically and theoretically to be *more* congruent with 'reality' than its magical-mythical antecedents. An example would be the shift from thinking of the sun as a 'god' as opposed to a gaseous body that generates heat and light. Another would be the shift towards thinking of our solar system in 'heliocentric', that is, sun-centred, as opposed to 'geocentric' or earth-centred terms, together with the realisation that our solar system is but one small part of a galaxy, the 'Milky Way' which, in turn, is but one among billions of observable galaxies. A sociological example might be the shift from Hegelian thinking in terms of spirits and ideas, for example, the idea that 'democracy' is part of the contemporary *Zeitgeist* or 'spirit of the times', to Marxian materialistic thinking which directs researchers to deeper, more determining aspects of the social world. Indeed, it is arguable that a shift from Marxian thinking in law-like, monocausal terms to Elias's stress on the need for 'structure-and-process models' like the theory of 'civilising' processes serves as another sociological example.

It is worth stressing yet again that this is a question of balances and degrees. Even the funds of knowledge of the scientifically most 'advanced' societies that have existed so far – 'advanced' in the sense of having knowledge such as of the working of electricity or nuclear fission and fusion which permit these forces to be recurrently put to constructive or destructive human use – contain layers or residues of magical-mythical thinking. Similarly, many, even of the most famous scientists, have continued to adhere to religious ideas. Some two-thirds of Newton's published work, for example, dealt with theological issues and Einstein, when he first encountered quantum physics, is famously reputed to have said: 'God didn't play dice with the universe'! It is worth adding, however, that Einstein is also known as having said that 'The word God is for me nothing more than the expression and product of human weaknesses'. His key point, however, concerned the observable regularities in this connection which pointed to relativities rather than metaphysical laws.

Parallel to the idea that there remain traces of magical-mythical thinking in even the scientifically most 'advanced' societies is Elias's contention that the members of no human society, no matter how 'simple' in material terms and no matter how 'knowledge-poor' relative to the 'scientific-industrial' nation-states of the modern West, could ever have survived without a measure of reality-congruent knowledge about themselves and their immediate socio-geographical environments. Indeed, as we have seen, extreme forms of magical-mythical thinking have been gaining prominence in recent years, not only in Middle Eastern and Eastern contexts with the shift to Moslem extremism but in the West as well with the rise of forms of Christian fundamentalism and beliefs in 'creationism'. Coupled with this is the fact that the members

of 'tribal' societies had or have funds of orally transmitted knowledge about, for example, local flora and fauna the counterparts of which have been lost by people in the West or which are perhaps stored in libraries and known only to a few specialists. However, notwithstanding provisos such as these, it remains the case that, throughout most of humanity's existence, magical-mythical thinking has predominated, and the level of reliable knowledge remained correspondingly low. That is, people were trapped in a 'vicious circle' or what Elias, following Bateson *et al.* (2000 (1956)), called a 'double-bind'. Although, as Comte recognised, the people thus caught were unable to prevent the slow, long-term development of understanding which contributed in important ways to the transition through the stages of the fetishism-polytheism-monotheism and the theology-metaphysics-positivism sequences, magical-mythical thinking was not, in general, conducive to amassing reality-congruent knowledge, and the lack of reality-congruent knowledge kept people's ability to exercise control low. As a result, the dangers to which they were subject and their corresponding fears remained high and their levels of fear kept them locked into magical-mythical thinking, for example, in praying to their 'God' or 'gods' asking for deliverance from individual and collectively experienced traumas such as plagues, pestilence, drought and attack by outside groups. This gave them emotional comfort, but failed to help them in a practical sense. (See Elias's 'The Fishermen in the Maelstrom' 2007a: 105–178.)

According to Elias, there have so far been two main breakthroughs from the double-bind trap experienced in this connection. The first occurred in the Ancient World and involved a limited flowering of science as expressed, for example, in the geometrical and other discoveries of the Greeks. Subsequently, as Elias colourfully and mischievously expressed it at a conference held at Balliol College, Oxford, in 1980, this flowering 'drowned in a sea of Christianity'. He was, of course, aware that much of the Greek legacy was preserved in monasteries. The second breakthrough began in Renaissance Europe and proved considerably more substantial and enduring. It is a process in which we are still caught up today, though in a similar manner, it, too, is under threat from the revival of the forms of extremism found in the Christian and Moslem worlds to which we referred earlier.

Implicit in our arguments so far in this chapter is the fact that Elias's position on questions of scientific method is bound up with a theory of the development of knowledge. This theory is based partly on the observation that, over the millennia, but with quickening pace since the Renaissance, people have succeeded in building-up larger funds of more reality-congruent knowledge. They have been able, as Elias put it, to construct 'small islands of certainty in the vast oceans of their ignorance' (Elias 2009c) and these, in turn, have enabled them to exercise a greater degree of environmental control. However, these developments have occurred faster with respect to physical, chemical

and biological processes than regarding humans and the societies they form. In Elias's words once more:

Over the millennia, human groups, with the help of the growing social fund of their knowledge, have been busily building into the undiscovered and uncontrollable universe a widening safety area for themselves – an area of known connections which they can more or less control. As a result, people are now able in certain areas to steer their way through the flow of blind and unmanageable processes better than their forebears – at least at the physical levels, if less so at the human levels, just as people aboard ships steer their way through the unmanageable waters of the ocean or, in spaceships, through the uncontrollable processes of the sun-system. In that way, by expanding their control within the uncontrollable flow of events, humans, in the more advanced societies, have managed to provide themselves with a larger protective shell designed, as far as possible, to keep out the dangers that emanate from the non-human levels of the overall process. They have not yet managed to develop an equally comprehensive and realistic fund of knowledge at the human or social levels. Hence, they are not yet able to bring under control the dangers that human beings constitute for each other and themselves. (Elias 2007a: 115–16)

Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom (2002) named this area where humans have established an ability to exercise relatively high degrees of control 'the anthroposphere', after the Greek word, 'anthropos', meaning in the general, non-gender-specific sense, 'man'. It is important to add a rider here about Elias's use of language, more particularly about his use of the adjectival phrase 'more or less control'. It is a verbal device he used frequently. It strikes many people as sloppy and imprecise. However, in Elias's usage it is rather an acknowledgement of the belief that, at the present stage of knowledge, it is impossible accurately to quantify many phenomena, in this case the degree of human control over some area of 'nature'. It is thus more precise than the scientific or pseudo-scientific attempts of some sociologists to claim that they have available to themselves, forms of mathematics capable of being accurately applied to phenomena in the complex, fluid human social world (see Goldthorpe 2000).

One of the central hypotheses advanced by Elias in relation to this general area is that the growth of knowledge since the Renaissance has been, in part, a consequence of and in part contributory to a 'civilising spurt', a speeding-up in the 'civilising' process which began around that time. As we saw earlier, he had in mind in this respect such discoveries as Copernicus's demonstration that the earth revolves around the sun rather than *vice versa*. We could add Newton's discovery of the 'inverse-square law' and Harvey's discovery of the circulation of blood in this vein (if readers will excuse the pun). Putting it differently, Elias suggested that one of the preconditions for the growth of modern science has been an increase within specific but later widening groups, first of all inside but later on outside Europe as well, in the socially instilled capacity of their members to exercise self-distanciation and self-restraint. This is revealed,

for example, in the shift from the Ptolemaic to the Copernican or Galilean view of the solar system. The Ptolemaic view was anthropocentric and geocentric, and appealed to human self-love in thus regarding humans and their earth as being at the centre of all things. It was also based on immediate appearances rather than scientific, observationally based fact because the sun does *appear*, like the moon which really does, to revolve round the earth. The Copernican, or Galilean, view, by contrast, is based on detailed and systematic in-depth observation – which was aided by the invention of the telescope in Galileo's case – and required its advocates to distance themselves from the comforting view that our planet stands at the centre of all things and was created for the benefit of its human inhabitants by their anthropomorphic construct, 'God'.

However, by consolidating the experience of the self as a *homo clausus*, Elias argues, the self-same process which facilitated the growth of the natural sciences acted as a blockage to the emergence of their social counterparts, contributing to the later, slower, lesser and more contested growth of the latter inside and outside academic circles. Added to this, in sociology in particular, have been the paradigm wars we discussed in our Introduction. At the same time, according to Elias (1956; 2007a), the growth of the natural sciences has contributed to an exacerbation of social problems such as war, for example, by increasing the destructiveness of weapons and the ranges over which they can be used. In the course of the twentieth century, weapons were developed with the capacity to destroy humanity and perhaps even life on earth in its entirety, all of which prompted Elias to advocate the need for more adequate understanding of the sociogenesis and psychogenesis of wars.

Elias was realistic but not entirely pessimistic in this regard. For example, he recognised that the social sciences, including sociology, *have* grown to *some* degree and saw himself as having made a small but hopefully significant contribution which, he hoped, would come to be recognised and built upon by future generations. More particularly, he saw himself as having contributed to the development of a post-classical, post-functionalist, scientific-humanist form of sociology which came to be called 'figurational' and later 'process sociology'.

Towards the end of his life in discussions with friends, Elias added 'global warming' and other present day 'ecological crises' to the problems he saw as having been at least partly caused by the application of findings from the natural sciences and which, in his view, increase the need for advances in the sociological, psychological, and related fields to deal with them. That is because they are partly based on such social roots as individualisation and status- and achievement-striving which are fuelling human dependency on cars, and other consumer goods, especially in the West. However, just as important, if not more so, it is because they will almost certainly require for their solution changes in human behaviour and social structure on a substantial if not massive scale. It is also easy to see that, if the social and environmental roots

of global warming are not effectively tackled, resultant problems such as land and water shortage could easily contribute to the causing of wars. These in turn could contribute to the further uncontrollable consumption of oil, in that way representing a threat to the success of attempts to curb carbon emissions and hence global warming, and so forth in a compelling and possibly long-lasting and destructive double-bind trap. These wars might 'go' nuclear, and the combination of nuclear war and global warming could lead to destruction and impoverishment on a massive scale, if not to the wiping out of humanity in its entirety and perhaps even of life on earth.

It was not only the slow crystallisation of sociology and related subjects such as anthropology, politics and economics as fledgling sciences that led Elias to suggest that people, especially in the more 'advanced' societies, are gradually coming to adopt a more detached view of themselves. He contended, as we noted earlier, that the emergence of such a view is also to some degree inherent in the secular political ideologies of our age that had no real counterparts in the Middle Ages and emerged in conjunction with what has widely come to be called 'modernisation'. That is the case because these ideologies, notwithstanding the fact that there are religious political parties in some European countries, tend to be secular rather than religious in character and hence devoid to a greater or lesser degree of anthropomorphic concepts such as 'spirits', 'gods' and 'demons'. It is also inherent in the fact that the more secular ideologies of today contain at their roots beliefs such as the systemic idea of 'society' and ideas in terms of which it is believed that 'societies' can be made 'fairer', 'more affluent' or 'more efficient' through the implementation of policies by 'the state'. That said, however, present-day ideologies, whether of the left, centre or right, continue to contain 'voluntaristic' ideas such as that it is possible on the basis of currently available knowledge to 'engineer utopias', that is to mould societies according to fantasies, wishes and dreams.

According to Elias, however, voluntaristic thinking about human relations is in many ways akin to magical-mythical thinking. If you want something strongly enough, that is the gist of it, it will be possible to achieve it in the 'real' world. Beliefs of this kind, he suggests, may provide a degree of comfort, emotional warmth and satisfaction in what is for many people a cold, impersonal, rapidly changing, complex and puzzling social world, especially if the beliefs are shared with others and involve the group performance of apparently meaningful rituals. However, experience up to now suggests that, when translated into action, ideology-driven policies lead as often as not to a higher degree of unanticipated and undesirable consequences relative to those that are intended. It was for such reasons that Elias regarded it as vital for sociologists to strive for greater autonomy in relation to political, religious and other movements and ideologies. Even though they represent a development towards greater detachment in certain respects, present-day belief systems of a predominantly ideological kind continue to place items of blind and

insufficiently examined faith at the forefront of the agenda. Examples are the idea that public ownership of the means of production will lead, *ipso facto*, to greater equality, that the maximisation of individual wealth is a certain route to happiness and fulfilment, or that unregulated markets generate the greatest wealth for all. At the risk of over-repetition, in Elias's view, by contrast, a greater current need is for a larger fund of more reality-congruent knowledge than is available today about ourselves and the societies we form, that is for knowledge that will increase our capacity to control social processes and events and to avoid the age-old problems associated with what Merton (1936) famously called 'the unintended consequences of intended social actions'.

Elias never ceased to talk and write about how rudimentary our sociological knowledge is at the current stage of the subject's development and that included his own contributions. He never pretended that he 'had all the answers': only that he had some ideas about how to 'set the ball rolling' in the direction of knowledge-growth. While Elias never explicitly said so, it would, we think, be consistent with his assessment of the present level of sociology's development to say that, if Marx's work constituted one symptom of a beginning, his own constitutes another. However, because he was able to build on the foundations laid by Marx – and others such as Comte, Weber, Mannheim, Simmel and Freud – Elias's work may be in some senses more advanced. It is a symptom of a beginning nevertheless. All sociologists are workers in a fledgling science. Elias never claimed that any of his theories were anything but starting points, incomplete and needing further theoretical-empirical work. They were, he was fond of arguing, small but hopeful breakthroughs in the process of people's growing knowledge about themselves. Indeed, at the present level of the development of sociology, a fully-fledged or 'final' theory of civilisation, manners, power, knowledge, state-formation, food, sport, leisure, smoking, football hooliganism or, indeed, anything else is a chimera. Elias wrote of scientific method thus:

The aim of (scientific) inquiries is to find the inherent order of events ... independently not of any, but of any particular observer, and the importance, the relevance, the value of what one observes is assessed in accordance with the place and function it appears to have within this order itself. In the exploration of nature ... scientists have learned that any direct encroachment on their work by short-term interests ... is liable to jeopardise the usefulness which their work may have ... The problems which they formulate and, by means of their theories, try to solve, have in relation to personal or social problems of the day a high degree of autonomy; so have the sets of values which they use; their work is not 'value-free', but it is, in contrast to that of many social scientists, protected by firmly established professional standards and other institutional safeguards against the intrusion of heteronomous evaluations. (2007a: 72–3)

Elias's reference to 'heteronomous evaluations' was again indicative of his opposition to the argument that sociology should be the tool of a particular

class, 'race', interest group or gender. He accepted in conversation that there had been a destructive, to some extent unconscious and unintended masculine bias in much work in the discipline's earlier phases, but argued that it would be wrong to replace this with any form of equally biased politics of representation. Nor did he accept the idea that a sociology which is not expressive, say, of the interests of the working class is, by virtue of that fact, expressive of the interests of their rulers. Rather, he urged sociologists to strive for autonomy and against heteronomy, that is against interference in determining their work agendas and findings by any outside, that is, non-sociological, group or its representatives whether these be governments, employers, trades unions, political parties or whatever. To this end, he advocated the development of standards, institutions and modes of proceeding similar to those of the 'natural' sciences but moulded to the specific properties of humans and the figurations that they form.

'Methodology', 'epistemology', 'ontology', and the problem of method

Beyond this broad stipulation – of the need for sociologists to attune their methods to the specific properties of human figurations – Elias did not dwell extensively on problems of 'methodology'. Nor, in this sense, did he focus on issues concerning his 'epistemology' and 'ontology' as such. Indeed, as we suggested earlier, Elias abandoned these terms as part of a more general attempt to develop a conceptual vocabulary less imbued with modes of thinking at odds with the sociological or 'post-philosophical' (Kilminster 2007) reorientation that he sought to advance. At the simplest level, problems of 'epistemology' characteristically relate to the kinds of *questions* asked; problems of 'methodology' typically pertain to *how* such questions are pursued; and problems of 'ontology' relate to the *character* of that to which such questions are addressed – of what can be said to 'exist', in our case in social 'reality'. Thus, while one would search in vain to find Elias's definitive statement of his 'methodological', 'ontological' or 'epistemological' position, he, nonetheless, addressed such concerns both in discussions of substantive topics – such as in his analyses of scientific establishments and of established–outsider relationships between community groups in particular locales. He dealt with such issues, that is to say, through the very medium of his work, his sociological 'practice', that is, his distinctive approach to *doing* sociology and the theoretical-empirical vehicle for his analyses that this implied.

The task of extracting from Elias's corpus of work a comprehensive exegesis of his 'methodological' and 'epistemological' positions is beyond the scope of our focus here. Nonetheless, we shall offer to this end a number of tentative observations. In order to elucidate Elias's position on these issues, it is necessary

to return, once again, to the central components of his distinctive sociological approach. His key sociological foci are processes, relationships and syntheses. These components are, at once, the 'subjects' and the 'objects' of Elias's approach. As such, they inform – to consider questions of 'epistemology' and 'methodology' first – both the kinds of questions that he asked, and the manner in which he approached their 'solution'. As our earlier chicken and egg example of the impossibility of determining which comes first serves to demonstrate, some conceptual problems are intractable only as a consequence, firstly of how they have been formulated, and secondly, of their consideration in isolation from empirical study. Further to this, how such problems are presented, including the very terms employed and the conceptual axioms they embody is, in itself, a topic worthy of sociological investigation. For Elias, the dominant but by no means uniform tendency, particularly in Western philosophy since the Enlightenment, to formulate problems which centre on a singular, static, ideal, 'developed', adult, 'reflexive' 'subject' and the terms of 'its' 'engagement' with the 'objects' of 'its' knowledge is in itself not simply expressive of a particular strand of rationality, but of a particular historical juncture, a particular phase in a series of interconnected long-term social processes. In the same way, the current tendency within much sociology towards an embrace of epistemic relativism, conceptual eclecticism, the conceptual oscillation between the twin pillars of 'the autonomous social agent' and 'impersonal structures of subjugation', the increasing engagement of poststructuralist theorists with 'culture' and 'cultural artefacts', and the tendency to assume that history is structureless and characterised by patternlessness and social decline are all, in their own ways, indicative of more than the ascendancy of particular sociological paradigms.

If we were to distil Elias's epistemological position into a single question, putting aside for the moment all the difficulties attendant upon doing so, it would be this: *how did 'this' come to be?* Such a question immediately facilitates an engagement with processes. As Elias expressed it in *Involvement and Detachment*: 'By "Why questions" ... I mean genetic questions' (Elias 2007a: 182n). To take an example that has been considered in detail elsewhere by one of the authors of this book (Hughes 2003), the question 'Why do people smoke?' involves a formulation which in itself invites a process-blind 'answer'. It is as though there is *a* 'reason' for smoking, and at that, a reason shared by all smokers in all historical periods. Adopting a process-orientated approach necessitates a re-formulation of the question along the lines of 'how did this come to be'. A reformulation of the kind referred to above involves making the question itself an on-going substantive and not merely *a priori* concern. As a starting point, it might prompt one to ask several other questions such as: to what extent and how have understandings of tobacco use, including the questions of why people smoke and why they say they smoke, changed over time and in different cultures? To what extent and how have tobacco

consumption and patterns of its use changed over time and in different cultures? To what extent and how might these understandings mediate experiences of tobacco use and of being a 'tobacco user?', and so forth. At the level of an individual smoker, one might seek to pursue the question of the different ways in which a person 'becomes' a 'smoker'. But even this is in some ways process-reducing – very few smokers can define a specific 'moment' at which they made the transition from non-smoker to 'smoker', or after having stopped, from 'smoker' to 'ex-smoker' (while some claim they will always remain 'smokers' whether or not they continue habitually to place cigarettes, cigars, or pipes into their mouths) (Hughes 2003).

Howard Becker (1998) provides a similar example, not in exposition of Elias's approach, but in highlighting a processual 'trick of the trade' used in qualitative research. A researcher might, for example, be interested in how it came about that a man 'decided' to undergo a sex change operation. The question might be asked in the following way: 'What would lead a seemingly normal American man to have his penis and testicles amputated?' (Becker 1998: 26). But such a line of investigation would, Becker suggests, ignore the process of 'becoming': how, by degrees and successive approximations, and not by a simple and continuous trajectory of development, a man might move from being drawn towards some kind of homosexual activity, towards entering a social world in which homosexuality is viewed positively and as 'normal', to encounters with others who suggest possibilities he had not previously considered, to perhaps experimenting with female clothing and make-up, to mimicking the physical mannerisms of a woman, to wondering how it would feel to become like a woman in a more permanent physical sense, and so forth.⁵⁴ Viewed in such a processual manner, we are able to understand a 'decision' to have sex change surgery, not so much as the sudden radical 'choice' of a person gripped by spontaneous impulses, but as just one in a series of relatively small but connected decisions; a sequence of 'small steps' that must be understood as a processual whole. As Becker writes:

At each of these points, our mythical young man finds himself doing some things he had at some earlier time never heard of and, having heard of them, had not imagined he might do. The steps he takes are never so very radical. Each one is simply another small step on a road from which he might at any minute turn to some other of the many roads available. Each small step is intellectually and emotionally understandable to people who themselves are nothing like this young man, *once the circumstances are made intelligible to them...* (Becker 1998: 27; emphasis in the original)

Beyond illustrating, once again, the importance of understanding social issues as processes, the examples of transvestism, sex change, and smoking also have significance for questions of methodology. The examples serve to highlight Elias's more general point regarding the need for sociologists to adopt methods matched to and appropriate for the relational and dynamic,

that is, processual, character of their subject matter. Elias's personally favoured method was that of documentary analysis since this is particularly well suited to the more general historical-comparative approach he advocated. His work in *On The Process of Civilisation* is replete with examples of this method in use. Typically, as we saw in Chapter 3, Elias presents a number of textual examples in time series, each numbered as a sequence. He then reflects upon the changes from one example to the next – both what has been added as well as what has been removed, what has changed as well as what remains more or less basically the same, what was said and what was unsaid. Crucially, such examples are always conceived as diachronic *Gestalten* or patterns: that is, it is not so much the individual fragments of historical documents – their authority, authenticity, reliability, or representativeness – that concern Elias, as it is the connections between such data. To use the analogy of an old-fashioned motion picture film roll, which Elias sometimes used in his lectures and tutorials, his method involved focusing less on the individual 'stills' than on the 'movie' these generate when viewed as a sequence. While each frame in a motion picture might have particular characteristics – it might be shot from a particular angle, have particular lighting, contain an aberration caused by dust or some other intrusion – no individual frame can be properly understood in isolation from the film as a whole or its position in a sequential order.

In his other research, whilst he was by no means totally hostile to a limited use of quantitative methods (see, for example, his use of 'game models' in *What is Sociology?* (2012b) and road accident statistics in his essay, 'Technisation and Civilisation' (1995)), Elias most commonly used qualitative methods. In the 1960s, for example, he secured government funding from the UK Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR), the predecessor of the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), now the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), for a large-scale study of *The Adjustment of Young Workers to Work Situations and Adult Roles*. This aspect of his work is now little known, partly because the project was ill-fated, ending in a dramatic fall-out between Elias and some of the researchers employed to conduct the fieldwork (for a fuller account of the project and its demise, see Goodwin and O'Connor 2006). Part of the disagreement centred on the research methods and orientations adopted by the researchers. Some decades before what has been termed the 'reflexive turn' in sociology, Elias tried to encourage these researchers to adopt the method of depth-interviewing *in situ*, recording lengthy written transcripts of the conversations that took place, and, most interestingly, noting their own reflections on these conversations. These contained everything from comments on how the researchers felt the interviews had gone, through to their 'subjective' evaluations of (and moral judgements on) the participants' living conditions and personal appearances (see Goodwin and O'Connor 2002). Clearly, Elias felt that the patterns of researchers' involvement in a process of research is as important a consideration as the data gleaned from their more detached role

as ‘investigators’ or ‘observers’. The methods adopted in the ‘Young Workers’ study involved an attempt to explore the intersection between life phase and orientations to work, and more generally, between history and biography. In the original application, Elias summarised the project thus:

The project is concerned with the problems which young male and female workers encounter during their adjustment to their work situation and their entry into the world of adults. When they go to work, or begin to train for work, young workers have to make a wider adjustment to a situation and to roles which are new to them, whose implications are often imperfectly understood by them and by the adults concerned, and for which they are in many cases not too well prepared. The project will differ from other studies investigating this wider adjustment which young workers have to make in their relationships with older workers and supervisors in the factory or workshop: to job problems and to their role as workers; and to their roles as money earners in home relations and in their leisure time. The factors to be examined will include differences between age groups, between sexes, in size of the organisation, in nature and status of job, and between young workers from working class and middle class home backgrounds. We intend to pay special attention to the overall characteristics of industrial societies responsible for the specific problems of adjustment for people in this age group.

To readers familiar with Elias’s approach in works such as *On The Process of Civilisation* and *The Court Society*, it may be surprising to read his summary of what looks by today’s standards like a fairly ‘conventional’ empirical study. However, it is clear that the key ingredients of Elias’s characteristic mode of sociological analysis – the relationship between sociogenesis (here, the overall characteristics of industrial societies) and psychogenesis (here, the adjustment of young workers to work environments); the idea that the experience of work should be studied as a process of continual transition; indeed, the very notion that an important distinction should be drawn between younger and older workers – underpin the inception and design of the research and relate to the more general principles of process sociology.

The lack of a lengthy discussion of methodology in Elias’s work, or to use a formulation with which he would have found more agreement, with problems of method, is no accident. Elias’s position was that such problems should not be so much a matter to be finalised prior to undertaking research through the resolution of ‘timeless methodological dilemmas’, as they should be substantive, ‘live’ concerns germane to the particular problems and topics under investigation. Moreover, as discussed in the previous chapter, Elias objected to the notion that the ‘worth’ or ‘value’ of any piece of research can be established through determining the extent to which the researchers adhered to specific methodological standards and procedures. He did so partly because he saw this tendency as a hangover from ill-conceived attempts by sociologists to ape the practices of the natural sciences (and what he regarded as a caricatured and idealised model of the natural sciences at that), and partly because, as

we have seen, the issue of establishing the occurrence of ‘developments’ or more specifically ‘advances’ in knowledge involves considerably more than questions of method. More particularly, it pertains to a consideration of the connections between theoretico–empirical research contributions as part of an ongoing knowledge process. Two cases which Elias used repeatedly to refer to were Fleming’s serendipitous discovery of penicillin and Crick and Watson’s discovery of the double-helix structure of DNA. Looking solely at the latter, the American, Linus Pauling, was the first to hit on the idea that a helix is involved in genetic inheritance but Crick and Watson (Watson 2001 (1968)) report how one of them saw in an X-ray crystallograph taken by Rosalind Franklin of King’s College, London, that this basic genetic process is a question of two intertwined helices. They did not tell her but, on their return to Cambridge, were able immediately to construct a model and write a paper for which they won a Nobel Prize. The history of science, Elias used to say, is littered with examples of such serendipity/accidentality and sharp practice. In a word, it is not the simon-pure affair often depicted in idealised accounts but a social process characterised by unplanned as well as planned components and involving a labile, shifting balance between cooperation, rivalry and outright conflict within and between groups. It needs, Elias said, to be studied as such.

To return again to the example of a motion picture film reel, questions of methodology demand that we should become preoccupied more with the particular fragment of data in hand, with individual frames and stills, and with their peculiar characteristics – ‘Who said this?’ ‘Why was it said?’ ‘How “true” is it?’ ‘Can it be corroborated by what others have said?’ ‘How reliable is this?’ ‘How valid is this statement?’ ‘What lies “behind” this?’. Insofar as one can generalise, methodological questions – at least as these have tended to have been discussed in the field of sociology up to now, tend, on the whole, to be somewhat less concerned with the connections between frames, the *diachronic Gestalt*, and the procedures by which the film might be played back than they ought to be if seen in relational, dynamic, and synthetic terms.

Sociology and historical analysis

Elias’s emphasis on the need for sociologists to engage with social phenomena as longer-term processes, and in particular, his stress on the largely ‘blind’ course of social development, runs counter to the dominant present-day idea that humans can control the processes in which they are entangled. That is, Elias’s characteristic focus on long-term processes is an approach that renders ‘events’ and ‘intentions’ secondary to the shifting course of social development. Such an approach is, in important ways, at odds with conventional ‘historical analysis’, particularly that which is allied to political ends and in which analysts seek to find the ‘smoking gun’ of intent behind the origins say, of a particular social problem

or the subjugation and exploitation of a particular group. It is ostensibly far more politically useful, in a short-term sense, to posit unambiguous models of historical causality in order to show how specific social problems can be traced to the actions of particular groups or individuals, in order to assign – and, indeed, to cease such analysis after assigning – unequivocal ‘historical blame’. Equally, however, Elias’s emphasis on long-term ‘blind’ historical processes should by no means be taken as denying how, at particular historical junctures and under certain figurational conditions, specific individuals have been able for a while to ‘steer’ the course of social development in limited but nonetheless important ways. As suggested earlier, Napoleon in France in the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries and Hitler in Germany in the 1930s and 1940s are obvious examples. In an article in the special edition of *Der Spiegel*, the German magazine, in 1989 (42–44), published to mark the 100 years since Hitler’s birth, Elias wrote of the would-be destroyer of the Jews as a ‘charismatic ruler’ and went on to show how Hitler had substantial power until he declared war on the USA in 1942 and thereby sealed his own and Germany’s fate (See Elias’s discussion of the ‘charismatic ruler’, 2008: 164–9).

The idea that *all* sociological analysis is, by virtue of its subject matter, inevitably historical, or perhaps better, processual and developmental, is not without its critics. Derek Layder (1994), for example, warns against treating ‘historical sociology’ and ‘social analysis’ as though they were identical. He proposes that those who claim these enterprises are ‘identical’ are in danger of making the ‘analytic mistake’ of claiming that ‘[An] historical analysis of general social processes can give us an adequate framework for the development of research which has a contemporary focus and which relies heavily on observational data culled from situated interaction’ (1994: 177–178). It would seem that Elias, from Layder’s perspective at least, is in danger of making such a mistake in much of his empirical work which has a ‘contemporary focus’: the earlier cited example of the ‘Young Workers’ study is a case in point. Another is the research Elias conducted with John Scotson into the ‘established-outsider’ figurations of Winston Parva. Layder’s key reservation concerning the idea that ‘historical sociology’ and ‘social analysis’ can be treated as equivalent enterprises appears to reside in his insistence upon a distinction between ‘situated interaction’ and ‘general social processes’. He is, accordingly, critical of Elias’s tendency, as he (Layder) sees it, to ‘mask’ important differences between, in Layder’s words, ‘general institutional changes’ and ‘situated encounters’. He writes:

Elias’s (1978) analysis of the development of a personality type emphasising internal (superego) control of behaviour from a previous type which lacked such controls – as a consequence of a civilising process general throughout western societies – is excellent as a general analysis of behavioural changes that occurred in tandem with various institutional changes... However, in the absence of a clearly delineated appreciation of the quite distinct properties of situated

encounters as compared with general institutional processes, there is always the possibility that such a general framework is seen to be sufficient in itself for the analysis of present-centred research drawing on situated data.

The danger is compounded in Elias's case by his insistence that there is no real distinction between the individual and society and that for all intents and purposes they should be viewed to be part of the same phenomenon. Such a view obscures an important distinction between the formation of general personality types and the development of specific personalities through unique biographical circumstances. Overall, Elias's position masks significant differences between, on the one hand, general institutional change and situated encounters, and on the other, between general personality types and unique individuals. In this respect, Elias's framework appears rather more comprehensive than it really is. (1994: 177–178)

Implicit in Layder's critique is a normative assumption regarding a supposedly clear-cut and unequivocal distinction between 'past' and 'present'. It is as if 'historical processes' somehow stand as ontologically separate from the 'here and now stuff of social life'. Indeed, the notion that a 'contemporary focus' is separate from an historical one reproduces the idea of a dichotomy between an eternal 'present' that is divorced from 'its' 'historical' context. But, as we have argued in previous sections of this book, even if we subscribe for the moment to such a clear-cut separation between past and present, and by extension, between historical sociology and social analysis, where should the line be drawn? How can the distinction be anything other than arbitrarily conceived? Put simply: at what 'point' does a 'contemporary' focus become an 'historical' one? At what 'moment' does the 'present' become the 'past' – after a period of years? Months? Days? Seconds? Nanoseconds? The issue is not merely a question of timing, or even simply of time perception or temporal semantics. Once again, Elias's apparently simple concept of 'process' has fundamental and wide-reaching implications. In stressing an understanding of social reality as fundamentally dynamic – as processual and developmental – Elias's endeavour involved him precisely in seeking to *avoid* the tendency to reduce social processes to static phenomena, albeit ones which are held to 'have' an 'historical context' or 'backdrop', or which 'move' at certain 'points', and which led him explicitly to challenge the crude, seemingly self-evident (to certain groups in certain historical periods) dichotomy between concepts such as 'past' and 'present'.

That Layder should find it axiomatic to divorce 'the past' from 'the present' or 'historical' from 'social' analysis relates to a topic to which Elias devoted considerable attention in his *Time: An Essay* (1991), which we discussed in Chapter 2. It is an issue to which it is worth returning. The tendency relates in part to a socially learned self-distanciation. The very ability to think in terms of 'past', 'present' and 'future', Elias argued, stems from an historically emergent capacity that humans have to engage in 'detour behaviour'. An example of such self-distanciation is where early humans learned to distance themselves

from their immediate situation and to restrain spontaneous impulses in order to fashion tools which would help them better in serving their survival needs. The use of tools, in turn, required the capacity to picture, in the 'mind's eye' as it were, a 'future' in which ends are being met – a capacity dependent on the formation of mental abstractions relating to temporal categories including the notions of 'now' and 'the future'. But this human tendency to think of past, present, and future as separate, and indeed, the more general *homo clausus* tendency to think of 'society' (or general institutional changes) as something 'out there' and separate from the 'in here' as experienced through 'situated encounters' – both of which are based in a particular kind of self-distancing – is, Elias argued, inadequate as a means of orientation towards social processes. In Layder's case, it underpins a reproduced variant of the 'structure-agency' dilemma whereby 'general institutional changes' are viewed as separate, and as having 'a life of their own', existing beyond the level of human beings and the figurations that they form. It is almost as though 'general institutional changes' are not, at any level, constituted from 'situated encounters'.

Layder's insistence on sustaining such a dualism can also be seen in relation to central concepts in his work – 'interaction' and 'structure'. His use of the term 'encounters', for example, implies 'face-to-face' 'interactions' which, in turn, are seen to be 'situated' in social 'structures'. As we discussed elsewhere in this book, however, according to Elias what people may experience as face-to-face 'encounters' always involves more than just 'interaction'. Take, for example, the following very much oversimplified hypothetical example of a 'situated encounter' between a customer and a clerk ('teller' in the USA) in a bank. The customer is a married schoolteacher with a wife and three children, two of them of school age, and he wants to cash a cheque, among other things to pay his bus fare and provide his children's school dinner money. The bank clerk is an unmarried woman who lives with her parents, both of them retired, and who is engaged to be married to an airline pilot. It does not take much imagination to realise that each person in this encounter is variably interdependent, not only with the others and the people in the bank at the same time but also with countless family members, work colleagues in other branches of the bank, neighbours and, through the medium of money and the banking system, countless thousands of other people at the national and international levels as well. This is the sort of thing that is meant by saying that such interactions always involve chains of interdependence with others whom the people 'interacting' may never 'meet' or 'see' 'face-to-face'. Thus a person's 'plans', 'intentions' and 'actions' within any 'encounter' are always inter-related and interdependent with the 'plans', 'intentions' and 'actions' of others, and these interdependencies are parts of chains which stretch across time and space. For Elias, the intermeshing of human 'strivings' and 'impulses' forms a 'tissue', a 'web' which gives rise to an order that is 'more compelling and stronger than the will of the individual people composing it' (Elias 1994: 444) – once

again, a 'figuration'. At one level, this order can be seen as involving 'general institutional change'; at another 'social structure', at another 'society'. Elias argues that it is because this 'order' at the most general level largely follows a 'blind' course that it is often conceptualised as having 'a life of its own' or as having an existence beyond the level of human beings. But, according to Elias, it is an order that, while not reducible to any particular individual, nor to the actions of any particular group, is not independent of individuals and groups as such. For Elias, the key 'analytic mistake' in this respect is precisely the reverse of what Layder takes it to be: it is to reproduce the idea of structures and agents as if they were ultimately separate and ontologically distinct – in Layder's case under the guise of a posited dualism between 'general institutional change' and 'situated encounters', the 'past' and the 'present', 'historical analysis' and 'social analysis', and ultimately, in his implicit understanding of the difference between the terms 'process' and 'interaction'.

It follows from this that Elias's approach is arguably not so much one which '... masks significant differences between ... general personality types and unique individuals', as it is one that seeks to provide a means by which to explore the historically variant relationships between the lives of 'unique individuals' such as, for example, Louis XIV (Elias 2006b; 1969), Mozart (Elias 1993a), Velázquez (Elias 2007a; 1987a) or Hitler (Elias 1996) and 'general personality types'. And rather than ignoring the different properties of 'institutional change' and 'situated encounters', Elias explicitly aimed at developing a conceptual vocabulary that sensitises researchers to the different characteristics of, for example, processes of 'sociogenesis' and 'psychogenesis' whilst avoiding the tendency to treat such processes as ultimately separate. Beyond these points, however, it should be noted that it was one of Elias's key concerns to build an understanding of the processes by which 'the individual' – with all the connotations this term now evokes such as 'uniqueness', 'sovereignty', 'freedom', 'difference', 'knowledgeability', etc. – has come to be an overriding concern, even a guiding ideal, in political ideologies such as neo-liberalism, and in much recent theorising in sociology. Indeed, from Elias's perspective, research which stems from *homo clausus* theorising – in which humans are studied as 'essences of uniqueness contained within individual vessels' – is far more likely to find and reveal 'individuality' since, conversely, such thinking serves to obfuscate how ostensible 'uniqueness' may in fact be related in important ways to more general social processes.

Ultimately, it may well be that Elias and Layder are in greater agreement than the latter appears to recognise. In a later critique of Elias, Layder writes that:

What is needed more than anything else is a clear distinction between general and specific claims as they relate to ... different levels of analysis... For example, a concentration on the socially constructed nature of sexuality or self-identity, as they can be traced over long periods of development, must be distinguished from

a specific individual's identity and sexual development. Although all people must to some degree be affected by the social contexts in which they are raised... this does not and cannot mean that they are simply reflections of these circumstances. (Layder 2006: 145)

While he would have disagreed with how Layder has formulated the problem here, the intersection between what we might for shorthand purposes call 'historical' and 'biographical' processes, is, if anything, Elias's principal concern throughout the bulk of his work. The key point for Elias was to recognise that 'biographical' processes are inevitably 'historical ones' and, conversely, that 'historical' processes are 'biographical' ones – and in doing so not to reduce one to the other, but rather, to recognise their indissolubility at the same time as their analytic distinctness. For example, the specific details of the Dutch Renaissance humanist scholar, Desiderius Erasmus's, life, his particular biographical circumstances, his personal idiosyncrasies and proclivities, the perhaps unique aspects of his character, all have their place in understanding the man and his work (various aspects of which are at times discussed by Elias in *On The Process of Civilisation*). But of equal if not greater sociological importance is Erasmus's positioning at a particular historical juncture and how his writings as an individual, albeit with their own distinctive nuances and character, are related to more general, historically specific social mores, manners, customs, and codes of etiquette. Moreover, if Elias's analysis is accurate, they are indicative of broader processes of social development.

'Involved detachment'?

Building on an argument developed by Richard Kilminster (2004), the above discussion of *homo clausus* thinking can be seen to raise a further issue relating to Elias's ideas on involvement and detachment. In much of his writing on this subject, Elias provides examples – notably Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Fisherman in the Maelstrom' and, as we saw earlier, the astronomer Copernicus's pivotal role in the shift from a geocentric to a heliocentric cosmology – which highlight the importance of developing more detached knowledge with rather fewer illustrating the significance of its logical opposite, more involved knowledge. It is somewhat paradoxical that, on the one hand, Elias viewed the human capacity for detachment as central to the development of knowledge, and yet, on the other, his central thesis concerning civilising processes is that psychic detachment, and more specifically, self-distancing, emerge as part of civilising processes and underpin a socially-instilled disengaged self-experience which also informs *Homo clausus* thinking. For Elias, it requires a further effort at self-distancing to realise how such disengagement, specifically the feeling of a dividing line between 'me in here' and 'society out there', might inform our approaches to the social world, and yet, at the same time, it is only through

a degree of disengagement and self-distancing that such insights are possible. This point serves to illustrate the highly complex character of the relationship between involvement and detachment as conceived by Elias.

It would be misleading to suggest that Elias discounted more involved knowledge altogether. His notion of a 'detour *via* detachment' bears out more generally his argument that '... while one need not know, in order to understand the structure of molecules, what it feels like to be one of its atoms, in order to understand the functioning of human groups one needs to know, as it were, from inside how human beings experience their own and other groups, and one cannot know without active participation and involvement' (Elias 1956: 237). For reasons such as these, Elias often encouraged postgraduate students to carry out research into areas in which they were directly interested and involved. Thus, in Frankfurt, as we saw in Chapter 3, Ilse Seglow, the actress, and Gisele Freund, the photographer, were encouraged by Elias to write their doctoral theses on, respectively, the acting profession and photography. In Leicester, university footballer Eric Dunning was encouraged to write his Masters thesis on the development of football, his favourite sport. At the same time, however, students were urged by Elias to strive as hard as possible when they were engaged in the research process to distance themselves from the objects of their research, to take a detour *via* detachment in order to maximise the degree of reality-congruence of their findings, that is to make these findings correspond as far as possible to the structure and qualities of the research objects themselves rather than to their own (the researchers') personal fantasies and feelings, or to personal and/or group interests and myths of various kinds. Then, armed with potentially more reality-congruent and in that sense more practically reliable knowledge, researchers were encouraged by Elias to apply, *via* what he called 'secondary involvement', their more reliable knowledge to the addressing of social and political problems of various kinds. In a similar way, the work of painters such as Masaccio, van Eyck and Velázquez also involved, Elias argued, a detour *via* detachment. Elias was able to show, for example, how the illusion of three-dimensional space *via* a more realistic sense of spatial perspective in the work of these painters was a capacity based on their greater detachment: an approach which made an appeal both to a viewer's self-same capacity for detachment, and then to stimulating their (the viewers') emotional involvement through visual clues and aesthetic arrangements (Kilminster 2004: 33).

Elias's position was that adding to knowledge *per se* should be paramount over short-term interests, values, and concerns both in research and in deciding the merits of particular authors and pieces of work. However, Elias was crystal clear about the fact that, in striving to achieve these aims, sociologists cannot and *should not* abandon their political interests and concerns. As he expressed it:

The problem confronting [social scientists] is not simply to discard [their more individual, political] role in favour of ... [a more detached, scientific one].

They cannot cease to take part in, and to be affected by, the social and political affairs of their group and their time. Their own participation and involvement, moreover, is itself one of the conditions for comprehending the problems they try to solve as scientists... The problems confronting those who study one or the other aspects of human groups is how to keep their two roles as participant and enquirer clearly and consistently apart, and, as a professional group to establish in their work the undisputed dominance of the latter. (2007a: 84)

Elias can be observed, here as elsewhere in his work, as envisaging sociology as an emerging science which, at the current stage of its development, has yet practically to resolve the dilemma generated by the tension between degrees of involvement and detachment as he conceived it. His argument was that part of the means by which this difficulty may be practically overcome involves reframing it by using more sociological concepts, and by considering at once both degrees of individual psychic distancing and the development of social conditions conducive to the greater detachment of academic communities from the pressures of heteronomous, that is, 'outsider' evaluations. However, as Rojek (1986) argued, while Elias provides useful examples of the detour *via* detachment, and while the concepts of involvement and detachment represent a useful re-orientation towards key problems concerning the development of sociological knowledge, these are not sufficient in themselves as a basis for guiding an individual sociological researcher towards what needs to be undertaken in order to follow the 'detour *via* detachment'. In short, Elias provides no 'clear' drill for sociological research other than the model embedded in his own sociological practice. That is, Elias's work has less explicitly to say on how, at the level of an individual social researcher, greater detachment can be achieved, greater self-distancing maintained, and such knowledge blended and alloyed with knowledge which is more involved. Moreover, if sociologists are resigned to the fact that, at its current stage of development, the subject is generally not one in which autonomous evaluations take precedence over heteronomous evaluations, and that in order for sociological knowledge to develop, there needs to be greater and more widespread acceptance and establishment of the former relative to the latter, how might an individual researcher – albeit one committed to 'autonomous evaluations' – proceed? To this end, Kilminster has offered a useful means of addressing the concern. He suggests that part of the answer resides in adopting the *anticipatory motif* of Elias's sociological practice (2004: 34). That is, researchers who are committed to 'autonomous evaluation':

should apply in their practice of sociology the criteria of cognitive evaluation and the standards of detachment which *would* be widely taken for granted if the discipline, as a special science, had achieved a higher degree of self-perpetuating, institutional autonomy, and a corresponding authority, than at present. The consistent application of these criteria and the standard of detachment anticipates their future embodiment in a stronger institutionalisation of the discipline and,

hopefully, will help bring it about. Although there are no guarantees as to how far this process can go. (Kilminster 2004: 34; emphasis in the original)

Such an anticipatory motif, Kilminster suggests, is, as we discussed earlier, in important ways less problematic than certain other conceptions of 'ideal states' as regulatory models for research such as, for example, Habermas's or Apel's notion of 'ideal speech situations'; Adorno's 'utopian moment of the object'; or Bauman's notion of 'being-for-the-other' (Kilminster 1998: 50–54). The motif of 'greater detachment and secondary involvement' is thus best conceived as a kind of 'controlling imperative' which, unlike a philosophical eternal or transcendental argument from which to derive regulatory principles, has neither logical necessity nor a metaphysical status: it is instead an orientation towards the concrete social and psychic conditions which inhibit or facilitate, as Kilminster put it '... the achievement of *greater* self-perpetuating institutionalised standards of detachment, without assuming that a final state of pure detachment can be achieved' (2004: 34; emphasis in the original).

As Kilminster suggests, it would be profoundly at odds with the ideas of Elias to assume that sociology is, as Smith (1984) proposes, somehow being pulled towards a preconceived ideal state of complete detachment by some kind of eternal *telos* or *logic* of its own development. Indeed, this is unequivocally *not* what is meant by Elias's anticipatory motif. The idea of '*greater* detachment and secondary involvement' necessarily implies that sociology, like any other science, is never 'complete', never 'finished'. It is in a 'continuous process of becoming' (2004: 34). A key condition for it to become more established and self-perpetuating, argues Kilminster, is the '*... sustained transfer of controlled affect into 'autonomous evaluations'* through a process of institutionalisation' (2004: 35; emphasis in the original). In other words, the sociological passion that has come, in many ways, to be a defining characteristic of the discipline, particularly in the sense of being associated with specific political views, or with a general commitment to eradicating social injustice, should instead be channelled, *via* an intergenerational 'detour' (in the way that Elias intended this term) into the pursuit of sociological knowledge which has greater congruence with the *world as it actually is* – knowledge which might well demonstrate the one-sidedness, perhaps the false character of understandings of *the world as we might think or want it to be*.

Ultimately, Kilminster's arguments suggest a different kind of relationship between involvement and detachment than is usually assumed of Elias's work. It is one which allows for alloys and blends along the lines of 'passionate detachment' – for example, a fervent commitment to the *discipline* of sociology – and equally, 'dispassionate involvement' – for example, in seeking to build a more detached understanding of both the influence and insights deriving from one's own involvement in that which is studied. Such formulations serve, once again, to illustrate that, rather than expressing a 'dialectical' or bi-polar

formulation, and rather than simple logical alternatives or a zero-sum relation, the concepts of involvement and detachment refer to different aspects and components of the development of knowledge, and may well point towards particular strategies and orientations towards sociological research – a few of which we have endeavoured to highlight in this chapter and throughout this book as a whole.