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Elias and 'The Habits of Good Sociology'

In the acceptance speech that he gave in Aachen, Germany, in 1977 when he was presented with the Festschrift, *Human Figurations: Essays for Norbert Elias* (Amsterdam, Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift), to mark his eightieth birthday, Elias started by recalling a nightmare which, he claimed, had regularly disturbed his sleep in the 1950s and 60s. It started to become less frequent in the 1970s, he said. It involved him repeatedly shouting into a telephone, 'Are you there? Can you hear me?' He never got an answer.

The dream is simple to analyse. Elias had been convinced from a young age that he had important things to say. However, as we have shown in previous chapters, a combination of external events such as the rise of the Nazis, his enforced migration to France and then Britain, the Second World War, and the death of his parents, especially his mother, had contributed to preventing him from getting all his ideas into publishable form. Added to this were such more personal circumstances as that he found himself forced in the late 1930s to start writing in a foreign language, English, and the self-confessed neurotic difficulty which he admitted to having in allowing manuscripts to be taken from him for publication. Both of these had contributed further to his not having been able to convey as many of his ideas to a wider sociological and educated lay public as he had wanted. Ilse Seglow, one of his PhD students in Frankfurt and later a successful group psychoanalyst in London, used persuasively to say that Norbert's writings were his 'children' and that he was a 'possessive father' who found it difficult to let his 'children go'. In a word, as Michael Schröter has suggested, Elias was ambivalent towards publishing. (See Schröter's editorial afterword to Elias's *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius*, 1993.) Using a term that Elias had experimented with in conversation, Stephen Mennell, who worked closely with Elias on the English translation of *Was ist Soziologie?*, described Elias's tendency in this regard as indicative of his 'counter-ego' (Mennell 2006). Indeed, Elias's fear that 'no-one was listening' was often set against his frustration with the presentation of his ideas by others. He initially opposed the publication of Mennell's, *Norbert Elias: Civilisation and the Human Self-Image* – a text that is now widely regarded as a seminal introduction to Elias's work. In fact, it was not until late in his life that Elias came to accept that there was scope for any kind of

secondary introduction, and even then he only did so with some resignation (Mennell 2006).

Elias: Established *and* outsider?

During the late 1960s and the 1970s, Elias's work began to attract substantial readerships, especially in the Netherlands, Germany, and France. In that period, as we saw in previous chapters, Elias gradually came to be recognised as a sociologist of world stature and, as his reputation grew, his recurring nightmare correlatively subsided. But this wider recognition of his work by no means constituted its acceptance – nor arguably its full comprehension – by Elias's contemporaries. Indeed, as we have discussed throughout this book, the question of determining Elias's enduring influence within sociology, and his broader intellectual legacy is not a straightforward one.

Elias's work continues to this day to have a somewhat ambivalent status. It is perhaps surprising, particularly given the central foci of his work, that it is not more widely known. For example, as Newton and Smith (2002) observed in relation to the field of organisational studies, while there has been a rapid expansion of interest in recent years in areas such as the study of: 'networks'; 'power, control and resistance'; 'culture, language and knowledge'; 'change'; 'identity, the self and emotionality'; etc., there has not been a corresponding rise in engagement with Elias's work which arguably offers a framework in which all these themes are woven into a unified perspective (Newton and Smith 2002: viii). In some cases, Elias's work is embraced but misconstrued in important ways; in others, as we have seen, it is dismissed as a naïve, crude, teleological progress theory. It has attracted a curious mix of passionate advocacy and vehement dismissal, in one or two cases at different times by the same authors (see Mennell's discussion of this tendency (1992: 227–250)). On the whole, Elias retains a somewhat marginal 'outsider' status in relation to 'mainstream' sociology. However, by a few authors, his approach is considered as constituting an 'orthodoxy'. In the early 1990s, Dutch sociologist, Dick Pels (1991: 178), went so far as to suggest that, in the Netherlands, 'figurational sociology' had '... risen into what is today one of the most distinctive, prestigious and successful academic establishments'. This was probably not an over-estimation of figurational sociology's reputation in the Netherlands at the time of Pels's writing, though it is perhaps less the case today.

Sociologists who have been directly influenced by Elias have, at various times, been described as a 'sect'. Alternatively, they are said to be an 'industry' who seek only to canonise the 'great man and his work'. According to Pels (1991), they are involved in an unspoken politics of theory that entails a kind of symbolic violence based around paradigm conquest. Those who have argued that Elias's work constitutes a sociological 'breakthrough' have also been charged with

‘intellectual immodesty’ (Pels 1991: 177) – a term that Elias would, no doubt, have found sociologically interesting, and perhaps also amusing, given his central engagement with the nexus between power, notions of ‘modesty’, and the development and transgression of codes of etiquette more generally.

This latter point is more than simply flippant. Pels may well be correct in depicting Elias as a scholar who would not have been satisfied with the establishment of a ‘mere school’ based upon his ideas (1991: 177). However, Elias’s tendency in this respect amounted to considerably more than personal ambition, empire building, ‘immodesty’, and egoism. Indeed, it is evidently Elias’s interest in and passion for the development of sociology as a subject with an expanding knowledge base, rather than a simple preoccupation with self-interest, that underpins his entire approach. Following his ideas concerning the development of knowledge, Elias understood the widespread tendency within sociology towards multi-paradigmatic conflict and the more general lack of agreement and consensus regarding the sociological enterprise itself, as themselves constituting problems to be addressed. To borrow Kuhn’s (1962) terms, sociology has thus far been a mostly ‘revolutionary’ science, with little or no ‘normal’ science in its output. While, from Elias’s perspective, paradigm specialisation, inter-school rivalry, and theoretical heterogeneity have at times been quite significantly productive and of considerable importance to the expansion of sociological knowledge, the self-same tendencies have also come, from his standpoint, to impede the development of the discipline.

As has been discussed throughout this book, Elias sought to establish a sociological re-orientation in which he envisaged his own work as representing little more than a theoretical-empirical point of departure – one which might at best sensitise growing numbers of subsequent researchers to conceive of sociological problems in a relational and processual manner. As such, his ambition was for other sociologists, not simply for himself, to embark upon a programme of research-theorising that would hopefully lead over time to the establishment of a set of agreed-upon standards, principles, methods, and analytical approaches, together with a body of relatively certain knowledge, that could be used to shift the balance of ‘autonomous’ and ‘heteronomous’ evaluations employed in the development of such knowledge decisively in favour of the former and away from the latter. Of course, the very notion of theoretical ‘reconstruction’, and Elias’s ‘project’ (as some no doubt would construe it) of epistemic consensus-building, transgresses a dominant intellectual code within current sociology premised, as the latter is, upon the legacy of deconstruction, paradigmatic divergence, and eclecticism. In particular, Elias’s undertaking falls foul of a prevailing sentiment that might best be described as ‘relativistic egalitarianism’. It is a sentiment which encourages liberal theoretical pluralism over and above conceptual usefulness. It also involves the implicit stipulation that no single perspective or orientation should be elevated or ‘privileged’ over and above any other (see, again, Pels 1991).⁵⁵ Indeed, as we have sought to

demonstrate in this book, the underpinnings and consequences of such an intellectual code – the prescribed ‘habits of good sociology’ as it is at present understood – themselves constitute a subject deserving closer scrutiny than they have so far received.

The question of how Elias’s proposed ‘sociological reorientation’ might be realised, and, more specifically, the extent to which the premises of his work can be reconciled with those of other authors, past or present, remain pertinent concerns. In what follows, we shall explore some of the applications and appraisals of Elias’s work in relation to a number of key studies. Whilst noting some of the misapprehensions and misrepresentations of Elias’s work that have arisen in this connection, our ultimate goal is to explore the utility of his insights *outside* the ‘figurational paradigm’ through a comparison and dialogue with other key sociological thinkers, especially those who have been in some way influenced by him.

Key issues and controversies

An examination of a recently published collection of essays, edited by Mary Fulbrook, provides a useful starting point for our consideration of the adoption and appraisal of Elias’s work in sociology more generally. In a number of key respects, Fulbrook’s book serves to exemplify the reception of Elias’s work within what we might call the ‘critical cultural studies’ genre. The volume is entitled: *Un-Civilising Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias* (Fulbrook 2007). Almost without exception, its contributors argue against a crude caricature of Elias’s work as some kind of twentieth century ‘throwback’ to the rudimentary eighteenth and nineteenth century theories of Western superiority and inevitable ‘progress’. However, Elias is simultaneously presented here as an important and in many ways sophisticated social thinker who, in *On The Process of Civilisation*, has provided a ‘path-breaking’ and ‘searching’ study that has much to offer in relation to a series of substantive concerns. Lack of space means that it is only possible in this context to examine Fulbrook’s Introduction to the book.

In her exposition of Elias’s work, Fulbrook repeatedly uses the terms ‘civilisation’ and ‘modernisation’ as synonyms. As an aside, it is worth noting that Elias was highly critical of the concept of ‘modernisation’ when it crept into sociological usage in the 1960s. The point is more than merely pedantic. His major objection to the term is that it has a time-reference only and is lacking in any connotation of content or structure in the way that structure and process concepts such as ‘industrialisation’, ‘urbanisation’, ‘bureaucratisation’, ‘democratisation’ and ‘civilisation’ manifestly do. ‘Modernisation’ is also, Elias repeatedly pointed out in lectures and tutorials, a term which implicitly

resurrects the old ideas of social development as unilinear, inevitable and irreversible progress as found especially in the work of Comte and, to a lesser extent, Marx, and their eighteenth century predecessors. By contrast, as we have seen in this book, in *On The Process of Civilisation*, Elias concentrated mainly, though by no means solely, on the differential developmental trajectories of the three countries in which he had lived up to the time of writing it – England, France and Germany. He was at pains to depict processes of development as invariably complex, multi-linear, multi-levelled and reversible. Briefly, what he attempted to show was that the emergent social units that in the course of time became England and France, were unified earlier than the emergent unit which became Germany. As we have discussed in earlier sections of this book, this was largely because the territories they occupied were smaller, their populations smaller and more homogeneous, and their languages and cultures more uniform. Such overall basic unity gave them initial advantages in European power struggles and in colonising the rest of the world, helping them to become successful imperialists, while the more disunited Germans lagged behind both domestically and in the scramble for territories overseas. However, despite such shared properties, France and England (or, more properly, Britain) differed from one another in numerous ways. France, for example, was more highly centralised and bureaucratised, while, as an island, Britain depended more on its navy than a land army for purposes of attack and defence. It was perhaps in part because he regarded every society's (and every person's) development as in some ways a unique variation on a common pattern that Elias deliberately refrained from referring to Germany's *Sonderweg* (special path), although Dunning and Mennell used this term in the Preface to their English translation of *The Germans* (1996). One of Elias's central points was that, in an overall European context where anti-Semitism was widespread and where France in the late nineteenth century displayed the highest incidence of anti-Jewish feeling – as manifested most infamously in the Dreyfus case – Germany's late unification contributed in a myriad of interacting ways to that country's becoming what retrospective analysis shows to have been the European country where a Nazi takeover and genocidal policy towards the Jews were most likely. Germany's in some ways singular developmental path, however, was largely a 'blind' or unplanned and unintended process. We have returned above to the original arguments of Elias's text to show some of the principal problems with what is probably the most frequent criticism, exemplified by Fulbrook, namely that his study of the 'breakdown of civilisation' in Weimar Germany is an example of what she calls 'long-term structural teleology' (2007: 10).

It is evident that Fulbrook's reading of Elias is, in large part, informed by the work of Dennis Smith. Whilst Smith's account of Elias in *The Rise of Historical Sociology* (1991) is on the whole accurate, parts of his *Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory* (London, Sage: 2001) are problematic. Tellingly,

however, it is precisely on parts of Smith's miscomprehensions that Fulbrook seizes. She writes (2007: 7) that:

Smith suggests that lower classes had long had a history of 'disciplined practices' but that there is a lack [of] appropriate records on the basis of which to write this history. And in contrast to Elias, Smith sees the aristocracy as 'almost the last major group within medieval and early modern society to be confronted with the challenge of being tied down to a particular place and being forced to do what they were told by an overlord. They were latecomers to the modern game'. Once the aristocracy were forced into self-restraint, in Smith's view, it acquired a degree of prestige.

The implication of this seems to be that, *pace* Elias, it was the lower rather than the upper classes who were the first to become more 'civilised' because of the work disciplines to which they were subjected. By contrast, fighting, leading wars and ruling, the main activities of the upper classes, were undisciplined and unruly practices. There is, of course, something in the idea that written history tends to favour the literate classes because they have left the majority of records, but Smith neglects in this connection that it was members of the priesthood and not the warrior rulers who were the principal recorders in the European Middle Ages. More to the point, the term 'lower classes' is a general one which covers, among others, proletarians, peasants, serfs, slaves and craftsmen. It also covers people at varying levels of poverty/relative deprivation. Above all, Smith's argument fails to take into account the historically shifting balance between 'external constraint' (*Fremdzwang*) and 'self-restraint' (*Selbstzwang*) and the oscillating and irregular part played by violence, power struggles, competition for monetary and prestige rewards, and variable levels of pacification in the formation of habituses and emergent social patterns. Smith also seems to suppose, wrongly in our view, that Elias was offering some kind of 'total', 'fixed and final' theory of 'civilisation'. Such an idea ignores how *On The Process of Civilisation* was deliberately delimited in its focus to the upper classes of Western Europe, with only occasional forays into the lives and experiences of the middle and lower orders. Indeed, this is why Elias called Part I of his book 'Changes in the Behaviour of the Secular Upper Classes in the West', clearly implying that he expected others, or perhaps himself, to carry out comparable studies of elsewhere in Europe and non-Western societies, as well as studies of religious groups and European groups lower down the social scale. That said, Smith's observation in this regard raises some interesting empirical questions. For example, we might imagine a situation in which under a feudal system of servitude, a serf who is bound to an unruly master might at his (the master's) arbitrary will taunt, beat, and otherwise torment the serf and possibly members of his family, including raping them. Such a situation would place tremendous demands on the serf to exercise self-restraint, to not 'lose it' and strike back at his master, and to day-after-day suppress feelings of resentment and imagined revenge. This, once

more, highlights the need for further empirical-theoretical extensions and possible revisions to Elias's theory of civilising processes.

Similar ideas regarding Elias's work – particularly, as we have discussed, concerns about the allegedly normative or teleological connotations of the term 'civilisation' – have become enduring themes in critiques of his work, particularly by anthropological writers. Probably the most eminent of the anthropologists to have taken issue with Elias is – and here we shall further elaborate on a discussion that we commenced in Chapter 1 – Sir Jack Goody, Emeritus Professor of Social Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. Central to Goody's critique of Elias is how he met the latter in Ghana in the early 1960s and formed an impression of him as 'somewhat isolated from what went on around him'. He appeared, said Goody, 'the very opposite of an ethnographer'. Goody proceeded to write:

I believe my impressions are fully supported by looking at his (Elias's) autobiographical account of his experiences in (Ghana) and of his encounter with what he referred to as *Naturvolk*. The term is significant since it refers to those who have yet to undergo 'the civilising process'. They are nearer to nature and to the expression of man's biological nature.

As we saw earlier, with his training in philosophy, medicine and sociology, Elias never pretended to be an ethnographer. More importantly, as we have been at pains to point out in this book, he *never* used the concept of 'civilisation' in anything like the way of which Goody is rightly critical. Nor did he use the term *Naturvolk*. His (Elias's) discussion of 'civilisation' as a technical term always centrally involved, as we have seen, the argument that there is 'no zero-point of civilisation' and no 'absolutely uncivilised' human individual or society', with the partial exception of a newborn baby. According to Elias, 'civilising processes' are, and always have been, a human universal, a consequence of the biological evolution of *Homo sapiens* as a social species dependent on the cognitive and emotional learning of such universal 'social facts' as languages and social funds of knowledge. It goes without saying, of course, that, just as the 'civilising' or 'socialising' processes of individuals vary from person to person, group to group, and society to society, so societal 'civilising processes' vary considerably over space and time.

It should be clear from this argument that Elias would not have referred to the people of Ghana as a '*Naturvolk*'. This, we suggest, is Goody's projection onto Elias's text of a notion with which the latter disagreed as profoundly as any modern anthropologist would. That this is the case can be seen from some of the answers Elias gave in an interview published in his *Reflections on a Life* (1994) about his time in Ghana:

Q: And where did you find the primitive culture you were looking for?

A: I would not use the word 'primitive', I do not like it – 'simpler' is the right word, in the sense of 'less differentiated'.

Q: Much of what you say about Africa makes us think of children.

A: In that case you misunderstand how different it is ... With regard to such an experience there are two attitudes, both of which I consider wrong. The first is – the usual colonialist attitude: that we are more rational, more advanced, and that they are simply more irrational, more childish. In a word, we are better. The second attitude, just as wrong, stresses how much better it is to give free rein to one's feelings and affects. It is indeed more colourful and easy to romanticise. My own attitude is, I think, distinct from both. I see quite clearly that our way of life is only possible because our physical safety is incomparably greater than theirs. If we lived in similar insecurity, we too would seek the help of invisible powers. (Elias 1994: 68–71)

Elias, then, aimed explicitly at avoiding the very notion of a totally 'uncivilised' *Naturvolk* that Goody attributed to him. Goody next proceeds to argue that, while at the University of Ghana, Elias tried to have anthropology removed from the syllabus on the grounds that 'Africa should not be left to the anthropologists who had failed to understand its particular strangeness'. He wanted to replace it with sociology, says Goody. Similarly, in the Sociology Department at Leicester which Elias helped to set up, there was, according to Goody, 'effectively no element of anthropology in its curriculum'. Furthermore,

... (Elias's) book on 'What is Society?' [*sic*] has virtually no reference to anthropologists, except to Levi-Strauss in relation to the Whorf hypothesis and to Evans-Pritchard's *Nuer*. If anthropologists in Britain neglected Elias, it was perhaps partly because he neglected them and showed little interest in the range of society with which they were mainly dealing and which his universalising hypotheses might have expected him to include. (Goody 2002: 402)

The title of Elias's book is, in fact, '*What is Sociology?*' not *What is Society?* as Goody suggests. It is accordingly perhaps rather unreasonable to expect Elias to have provided extensive discussion of, and reference to, anthropological work in such a text. Perhaps more importantly, it is simply inaccurate to suggest that the Leicester Department in the 1960s effectively had no element of anthropology in its curriculum. The second-year courses on Empirical Sociology contained a substantial anthropological component and two trained anthropologists, Tanya Baker (who left after one or two years), and Percy Cohen, were appointed to the staff. They were ably assisted by Peter Duncan, Tony Giddens, and Sami Zubaida, all taught by anthropologist Peter Worsley at Hull, and by Geoff Hurd and Terry Johnson, two Leicester graduates who followed Elias and Neustadt, the Head of the Leicester Department, to Ghana. Few British sociology departments in that period can have boasted comparable competence in teaching about the kinds of societies regarding which anthropologists used, not without justification, to claim a particular expertise. Related to this, while we do not doubt that Elias tried to get rid of anthropology at the University of Ghana, we do doubt that his grounds for doing so would have rested on a notion of the failure of anthropologists to understand Africa's

‘particular strangeness’. It would have been far more consistent with his line of thinking to have argued against his anthropologist contemporaries because he perceived them as treating less differentiated societies as self-contained, static ‘systems’ and as ignoring their historical, colonial and wider world contexts.

We have seen in the previous chapters how, from Elias’s perspective, a rejection of ‘developmental’ concepts such as ‘civilising processes’ by some anthropologists might be understood to relate, at least in part, to a more fundamental rejection of notions of ‘social progress’ and ‘evolutionism’ in the wake of both world wars, the rise of Nazism, the Holocaust, and the demise of the British and other European empires. Such ideas also found expression in sociology. For example, in the early writings of Parsons was the implicit idea that nation-states are enduring, harmonious systems (Parsons 1951) which do not need to be studied historically or developmentally because ideas of ‘social evolution’ have fallen foul of the ‘evolution of ideas’. ‘Who now reads Spencer?’ wrote Parsons (1937: 3). His work is ‘the victim of a jealous god, Evolution, in this case the evolution of scientific theory’. Such deeply entrenched ideas may well have played their part in the general unreceptiveness towards Elias’s work shown by some key anthropologist and sociologist members of these generations. And yet, as we sought to argue earlier, Elias did indeed explore such issues head-on, and arguably presented a synthesis which satisfactorily addressed most of the principal objections of these scholars. It was a synthesis which also had a greater affinity and resonance with French *anthropologie* than it did with British and American anthropology. This is especially apparent in the work of writers such as Lévy-Bruhl, Mauss, van Gennep, and Bloch.

It is also pertinent in this connection to note that this hostility towards the term ‘civilisation’ – culminating in its status as a ‘watchword’ which arouses particular sensitivities – is not extended to anything like the same degree to the term ‘culture’. That is to say that, while generally speaking there is widespread acceptance of a distinction between the normative, value-laden, term ‘culture’ on the one hand, and the technical use of ‘culture’ as an anthropological concept, on the other, the same cannot on the whole be said of ‘civilisation’. As we have seen, Elias provides important insights into why this may be the case in his Introduction to *On The Process of Civilisation*. As we discussed in Chapter 3, what he centrally argued is that the anthropological concept of culture had its origins in the specifically German concept of *Kultur* which ‘... places special stress on national differences and the particular identity of groups’ (Elias 2012a: 17). It is, he suggested, a term which reflected the concerns of a nation which had continuously to form and reform its political boundaries and associated ‘we-images’ and repeatedly ask the question ‘what really is our identity?’ (Elias 2012a: 17). It is precisely by virtue of its origins in this German linguistic usage, Elias proposed, that the concept of ‘culture’ found widespread currency and adoption in anthropological and ethnological circles.

To expand again on an issue that we examined in earlier sections of this book, the term 'civilisation', by contrast, embodies a different structure of meaning. In the first instance, it expresses the national consciousness of countries, notably England and France, which had attained a high degree of political integration significantly earlier than Germany. Accordingly, it gives expression to the 'expansionist tendency of colonising groups' (Elias 2012a: 17) – to nations which had found some degree of resolution to the question of 'who are we?' precisely through their power over and perceived contrast with the 'others' whom they colonised. It was Elias's preoccupation with the processes by which particular groups came to see themselves as 'civilised' relative to others whom they deemed 'uncivilised', rather than a tacit acceptance of the veracity of such notions, that underpins his technical usage of the term. Elias, in fact, devoted a good proportion of his life to researching the competing and contested meanings of 'civilisation', its denotative and connotative associations, and how these emerged out of much broader processes of inter- and intra-state conflict and broader patterns of social development. Perhaps more than any other scholar of his generation, he was not just aware of the normative meanings of the term, but understood how such connotations came into use, and of what they express and reveal about different human figurations. His heightened awareness of the term, his reflexive understanding of its meanings, including of their inherent contradictions, was no doubt underscored by his first-hand experience of the horrors committed in the name of the relative 'civilisation' of different so-called 'races'. And yet, in 'civilisation', Elias also found a term which had certain linguistic advantages over 'culture'. Where the term 'culture' is somewhat static, the term civilisation is processual, and, in addition to questions of difference, distinction, and identity, also lends itself to investigations of social development and, in particular, to the structure of such processes.

It is somewhat paradoxical, then, that the focal point of Elias's contribution to sociology is also the single greatest source of its rejection by some. Even as his work has become increasingly widely known, and there has correlatively emerged a somewhat broader recognition of a distinction between Elias's technical and normative usage of 'civilisation',⁵⁶ the term continues to present an enduring hurdle. Time and again, Elias's work is dismissed without serious engagement with his ideas, seemingly on the grounds of little more than a repeated misapprehension of what he meant by 'civilisation'. For example, a year after Johnson and Monkkonen (1997: 2) arrived at the conclusion that '... a large number of historians of crime have become more interested in Elias because his work better describes what they have found than does that of other social thinkers', Elias's thesis on long-term trends in violence was abruptly dismissed by Bonnie Smith as one which is '... utterly fanciful' (Smith 1998: 216). In Smith's case, the dismissal of Elias was again based upon a fundamental misunderstanding of his ideas relating to 'civilisation'. Smith cites

the introduction to Jacques-Louis Ménétra's eighteenth-century *Journal of My Life* – in which rape is characterised as a 'normal' aspect of male sexuality – as evidence that disproves Elias's more general thesis. She says that Elias cannot 'see' such evidence because it lacks the 'credibility of official government sources' (216). Such 'non-official' sources and kinds of evidence, of course, were central to Elias's work. In particular, they were central to his arguments concerning how 'violence' became 'pushed behind the scenes' into 'private' life (rather than simply 'disappearing', as Smith wrongly interprets and portrays Elias's thesis).⁵⁷ Unfortunately, Smith makes no attempt to assess the degree of accuracy of Ménétra's portrayal. Nor does she present any analysis of whether a putative increase in male violence against women may in some ways be a *consequence* of processes of civilisation. Once again, the ideas are superficially dismissed, seemingly on the grounds of their perceived normative connotations. Thus, while Elias had excellent sociological reasons for highlighting 'civilisation' as a technical concept in his work, when conceived in terms of the promotion and 'marketing' of his ideas to other scholars, it has remained to date an important if in many ways superficial obstacle to their more widespread dissemination.

Elias and contemporary sociology

The arguments we developed in the previous section are not intended to suggest that Elias's work has continued to be widely rejected within sociology. Indeed, the man and his ideas were and are known by some of the most influential and important sociologists of the last few decades. Among these, three key figures stand out: Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. All of them were familiar with Elias's work and, to varying degrees, came to appreciate some of his contributions. In the remainder of this chapter we shall consider each in turn.

Giddens and Elias

If one were to enquire among present-day British sociologists which of their fellow countrymen they regard as having made the most important contributions to sociological theory since the Second World War, it is a fair bet that a substantial number would name Professor – now Lord – Anthony Giddens. Prior to teaching at Cambridge and the London School of Economics, Giddens spent eight years – 1961 to 1969 – at Leicester.⁵⁸ These were the years in which, as we have discussed in previous sections, the Leicester Department of Sociology was at the forefront of the expansion of the subject in Britain. Elias, together with fellow émigré scholar, Ilya Neustadt (the then Head of Department) held considerable sway over the intellectual agenda of the Leicester Department at the time. However, there remains some debate

concerning who out of Neustadt and Elias was the more significant *intellectual* influence over Giddens. Chris Bryant and David Jary in their Introduction to a book of readings on Giddens's work, suggest somewhat unequivocally that it was Neustadt who was the more important of the two, with Elias serving as more of a 'scholarly model'. They write:

With hindsight, the contribution of Elias to [the Leicester] concept of sociology is plain enough but it was not visible to students at the time and one of us, Chris Bryant, managed, not untypically, to leave Leicester in 1966, after three years as an undergraduate and a fourth as a postgraduate and tutorial assistant, without appreciating Elias's part in it and without knowing anything about Elias's figurational sociology. Giddens has told us that Neustadt was the greater intellectual influence ...; but he also says it was Elias who impressed him as a model of what a sociologist should be – the single-minded scholar willing to pursue a large-scale personal project, heedless of distractions, over ... many years ...

There are certainly some, especially in Britain and the Netherlands, who argue that Giddens owes more to Elias than he acknowledges ... [But] we have no reason to question Giddens's claim that he never knew enough about Elias's (at the time, largely unpublished) work for it to have been a major influence, although in 1961–62 he did attend Elias's first-year lecture course ... which was organised around the theme of development, and he did read Volume I of *The Civilising Process* in unpublished translation and later in German ... But there is a ... more profound sense – the provision of a role model – in which the influence of Elias may have been decisive. (Bryant and Jary 1991: 4–5)

There was, of course, never a single 'Leicester concept' of sociology. Nor would we wish to deny the influence that Neustadt exerted on Giddens. However, we suggest that it was primarily editorial rather than sociological/intellectual in character. That is, Neustadt was centrally involved in using his considerable editorial and linguistic talents – he was a fluent speaker of six languages – to instruct Giddens and people like Dunning in the skills of intellectual craftsmanship. Nor do we wish to deny Elias's influence on Giddens as a 'role model'. He (Elias) was certainly that in Frankfurt and for many of his students in Leicester and Amsterdam. It seems to us, however, that Bryant and Jary's arguments are overly individualistic and fail to see that Elias's influence on Giddens (and one or two others) is best understood as less a question of direct influence in lectures, seminars, tutorials etc. or through reading Elias's books – little by him was available in English until the 1970s and 80s – than of influence in a tightly-knit and dynamic department *via* exposure to a departmental culture in which Elias and his views of sociology were central foci of debate. Let us elaborate briefly on this.

In the early 1960s when Giddens taught at Leicester, the principal departmental opponent of what Elias then called 'developmental' sociology was Percy Cohen, later Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics. The heated but always on the surface apparently friendly rivalry between these two contributed to a lively but polarised intellectual environment.

This was enhanced by its cosmopolitan character, a cosmopolitanism evidenced in the fact that Neustadt and Elias, the two central Europeans, attracted to the teaching staff scholars from the USA, Germany, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, Iraq, and South Africa, besides a minority of native Britons. At the time, as we noted earlier, Elias seemed to many of his departmental opponents to be championing a regressive return to an outmoded 'evolutionism' rather than arguing, among several other things, for a synthesis of the best elements of classical and modern theories. To his credit, Giddens was one of those who grasped Elias's synthesising aims. However, there are great differences between his sociological practice and that of Elias. Let us sum up what we take to be the principal similarities and differences between the sociological work of Giddens and Elias.

Giddens's work undoubtedly constitutes what Bernstein described as a 'remarkable achievement'. However, while Elias's greatest strength lay in his capacity as an original thinker and in the synthesis he began to forge between biology, psychology, history and hitherto antithetical approaches to sociology, and that his greatest weakness lay either in ignoring, or in the not fully substantiated comments that he sometimes made on the work of others, with Giddens the balance of strengths and weaknesses arguably lies the other way around. That is, if we are right, Giddens – and we are referring to what might be called the primarily theoretical phase of his career in the 1960s, 70s and 80s – developed most of his key ideas and insights on the back of interpreting, summarising, and critiquing the work of others. That said, however, there are a number of similarities between the sociological approaches of Giddens and Elias. Both share a commitment to an historical and comparative approach. Both acknowledge a dependency on Marx, yet are simultaneously critical of Marxian theory and seek to move beyond it. Probably the greatest similarity between Giddens and Elias in this regard is that both – to express it in terms of which Elias would have partly disapproved – see 'the state' as relatively autonomous from 'the economy' and stress that a process of pacification under the aegis of developing state-control was one of the preconditions for the development of modern capitalism. Although his language is less 'Eliasian', Giddens seems to us to have made precisely this point in what is in our view his most important book, *The Nation-State and Violence* (1985).

Giddens and Elias are both concerned to seek a better way to handle problems of 'structure and agency' than has proved possible in sociology up to now. Both, too, reject Parsons's claim to have made a decisive epistemological breakthrough; locate their respective contributions within the heritage of classical sociology; and seek to synthesise that with modern achievements. However, despite their common desire to build on classical foundations, it is in what they take to be most significant in the classical heritage that the differences between Giddens and Elias become most readily apparent. For example, while Giddens identifies Marx, Weber and Durkheim as having been

the most significant 'founding fathers' and rejects Comte almost entirely, Elias, while acknowledging his debt to the 'holy trinity' and others such as Simmel, Mannheim, and Lévy-Bruhl, deliberately laid emphasis on the work of Comte as one of the most important influences on his emergent synthesis.⁵⁹ Along with the fact that he worked with Mannheim, this helps to explain, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, the centrality in Elias's work of what philosophers call 'epistemological' concerns. By contrast, Giddens dismissed Comte as a somewhat eccentric and outmoded nineteenth century figure who held a naïve faith in science and focused equally deliberately on what philosophers call 'ontological' issues, as if it were possible meaningfully to discuss 'ontological' issues entirely independently of 'epistemological' ones. Elias, in short – unlike Giddens – set great store by the need to develop an empirically researchable theory of knowledge. This, of course, as we saw again in Chapters 4 and 5, is one of the keys to a proper understanding of Elias's work.

It was Elias's concern with the sociology of knowledge, together with his experiences as a doctoral student of philosophy in Germany in the early 1920s, that led him to believe that the Western, Kantian, and neo-Kantian philosophical traditions are irremediably flawed and that sociologists should fight against philosophers' claims to be the arbiters of scientific method. To repeat an argument developed earlier in this book, Elias used to argue that 'methodology', i.e. a 'science of method' as opposed to particular methods *per se*, is a philosophers' invention. In a criticism of an early draft by Eric Dunning of the Preface to the first edition of their *Quest for Excitement* (1986) he wrote: 'Eric my dear, I do not have a *methodology*. It is an ideology foisted on us by philosophers who have outlived their usefulness. I may have a "method"; I'll have to think about it'. By contrast, Giddens argued that 'the social sciences are lost if they are not directly related to philosophical problems by those who practise them'. In saying that, he provided confirmation of Kilminster's (2007) telling argument that late twentieth-century sociologists were more deferential to the professional culture of the philosophical establishment than their precursors had been in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In other words, in marked contrast to Elias, Giddens believes (or used to) that what Elias would have described as a 'flight into philosophy' is an essential precondition for the development of sociology. Perhaps this helps to explain why Giddens has, for the most part, eschewed empirical research while, throughout his life, Elias constantly immersed himself in and tried to make theoretical sense of the details of empirical data? Nowhere is this difference between Giddens and Elias more apparent than in their treatment of problems of 'agency and structure'. It is to these hoary old issues that we shall now return.

Giddens claims to have 'resolved' the 'agency-structure dilemma' – in more old-fashioned language, the conundrum posed by trying to synthesise 'nominalist' and 'realist' ways of conceiving the relationships between human individuals and the societies they form – by means of what he calls the

‘theorem of the duality of structure’. In *The Constitution of Society* (1984), he summarised his basic argument thus:

Structure, as recursively organised sets of rules and resources, is out of time and space, save in its instantiations and co-ordination as memory traces, and is marked by an absence of the subject. The social systems in which structure is recursively implicated, on the contrary, comprise the situated activities of human agents, reproduced across time and space. Analysing the structuration of social systems means studying the modes in which such systems, grounded in the knowledgeable activities of situated actors who draw upon rules and resources in the diversity of action contexts, are produced and reproduced in interaction. Crucial to the idea of structuration is the theorem of the duality of structure ... The constitution of agents and structures, are [*sic*] not two independently given sets of phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality. According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise. Structure is not ‘external’ to individuals: as memory traces, and as instantiated in social practices, it is in a certain sense more ‘internal’ than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense. Structure is not to be equated with constraint but is always both constraining and enabling. (1984: 25)

Despite his complex language and the high level of abstraction at which he wrote, Giddens’s stress on structures as enabling as well as constraining can, we think, be said to represent an advance relative to many earlier formulations. In our view nevertheless, it is doubtful – as critics have already pointed out – whether the ‘theorem of the duality of structure’ can be said in any meaningful sense to ‘resolve’ the ‘agency-structure dilemma’. There are at least six reasons for suggesting this:

- (i) Unless it is an unnecessarily complex way of suggesting that ‘structures’ do not exist as such, that is, independently of their particular manifestations, the idea of structure as ‘out of time and space’ is a literally metaphysical construct;
- (ii) The idea that structure exists only in its ‘instantiations’ and as ‘memory traces’ seems to us to be little more than a complex way of saying that it exists only in the behaviour and memories of individuals. The impression that this is what Giddens meant is reinforced when he writes that: ‘structure is not “external” to individuals ... (I)t is in a certain sense more “internal” than exterior to their activities in a Durkheimian sense’ (1984: 25). This is a nominalist, highly subjective formulation. It fails to embrace what might be called the ‘relational’ dimensions of social structures, for example, those signified by concepts such as ‘interdependency chains’ or ‘social networks’. Although nothing readily visible or tangible links the individual human beings who form structures of these kinds, they, in some ways like electricity which, although it is factually traceable, is also invisible

most of the time, are as 'real' as the individual men and women who form them and not reducible to their individual components. More particularly, they involve material linkages *via* sight, sound and brain activity, together with such properties as the length, density and duration of interdependency chains and the degrees of openness/closure of social networks. As Elias and Elizabeth Bott (1957), among others, have shown, such properties play a part of some importance as determinants of the personality and behaviour of individuals. Giddens writes, we think scientistically rather than scientifically, about what he calls 'time-space distanciation' and 'time-space stretching' but does not seem to see that these concepts are arguably incompatible and inconsistent with his nominalist definition of structure;

- (iii) While rules self-evidently play an important part in producing and reproducing the patterned character of social life, they are not exhaustive as determinants of social structure. For example, as Durkheim (1982) recognised when he wrote of growing 'material density' as a necessary though not sufficient condition for an increase in the division of labour and as Simmel (1964) recognised when he wrote of the 'significance of numbers in social life', variables such as group size and population density are important influences on social patterning at both the 'micro' and 'macro' levels of social integration. In fact, in tying his conception of structure so closely to rules, Giddens appears close to an idealist position and to be endorsing a variant of the 'Parsonian' or 'normative functionalist' concept of social structure. However, structure in the sense of 'order', 'pattern' or 'regularity' exists even in the absence of rules as Durkheim (1952) showed through his concept of 'anomie' and as Elias (2012b) showed through his discussions of the 'primal contest' and the scientific as opposed to the normative concept of 'order';
- (iv) The idea that agents and structures are not 'independently given phenomena, a dualism, but represent a duality' seems to us to be little more than a play on words. As Callinicos (1985) has pointed out, it involves nothing more than the substitution of two letters – 'ty' – for two others – 'sm' – and, as such cannot be held to constitute a 'resolution' of the 'agency-structure dilemma'. Simple plays on words, even simple reasoning, cannot on their own tell us anything about the relationships between agents and structures because such a task cannot possibly be accomplished by philosophical reasoning, only by theory-informed scientific observation. That is, in order to contribute to an advance in the understanding of such issues – not a once-and-for-all 'resolution' of the kind Giddens has attempted – what is needed is the kind of detailed, painstaking observation-guided research, informed by and orientated towards the testing and elaboration of theories

undertaken by Elias of how the structure of habituses, personalities, and individual behaviour are formed and changed over time in conjunction with changes in social organisation, and *vice versa*;

- (v) By providing a subjectivist definition of structure, Giddens reduces structure to agency. In addition, he also arguably reproduces the agency-structure dilemma by introducing a dichotomic distinction between 'structure' and 'system';
- (vi) Lastly, as Kilminster (1991, 1998, 2002) has argued, Giddens's concept of the 'human agent' is overly rationalistic and prevents him from developing an adequate theory of emotions, more particularly of the interdependence of and balance between cognitive and affective processes in human behaviour. That this may help to explain Giddens's neglect of 'pleasure-producing' activities as was suggested in 1991 by John Urry when he wrote that: 'Giddens's conception of human activity is too routinised, too boring, and it is difficult in his framework to conceptualise pleasure-producing activities such as travel, leisure, holiday-making, sightseeing, playing sport, visiting friends and so on' (1991: 168).

This hiatus in Giddens's work is all the more surprising when one takes into consideration that his 1961 MA thesis at the London School of Economics was a pioneering study in the sociology of sport. Although Urry did not refer to them in his stimulating (1991) text on tourism, it was precisely this range of activities that Elias and Dunning sought to grapple with in the 1960s when they wrote their essays on excitement and the 'sparetime spectrum', later published along with a number of other joint and solo essays as a book entitled *Quest for Excitement* (1986; revised edition, 2008). During the 1980s and 90s, it began to become widely recognised, centrally by authors such as Scheff and Retzinger (1991), that one of Elias's major contributions was to the sub-field which acquired the label 'the sociology of emotions'. Scheff's work in particular has focused centrally on Elias's contributions to the sociology of shame and shaming (see, for example, Scheff 2004). Elias would have welcomed this growing recognition but not, we think, unequivocally. His concern was with a synthesising sociology focused on the study of what he called 'human beings in the round' (Elias 1970) and we are sure too, that Elias would have sought to alert us to the dangers of this new – to use a phrase of Max Weber's – 'parcelling out of the soul' (Weber 1944 (1909): 127).

Foucault and Elias

Another centrally important figure, both in presenting a potentially complementary perspective to that of Elias, and as a scholar who engaged with

the latter's work, is Michel Foucault. It is a little known fact that, towards the end of his life, Foucault produced his own French translation of Elias's *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985).⁶⁰ While Foucault clearly had an interest in Elias's work, and for that matter, Elias in Foucault's, the degree to which one may have influenced the other remains unclear. It is noteworthy that, in *The Order of Things* (1966), Foucault devoted the first chapter of his book to an analysis of the painter Diego Velázquez's masterpiece, *Las Meninas*. Perhaps not coincidentally, Elias discussed the same painting at length in the Introduction to *Involvement and Detachment* (2007a: 49–63). There are some shared elements in the two analyses which are, to a degree, illustrative of the more general common ground of the two authors. For example, both Foucault and Elias used Velázquez's painting to explore the representation of representations, the interplay between aesthetic perspectives and intellectual perspectives and between visual reflections and self-reflections, and the corresponding more widespread shift in cognitive structures that the picture serves to exemplify. Both also consider the particular kind of reflexive consciousness that is represented and enshrined in the painting.

For Foucault, *Las Meninas* signals a sharp contrast between the 'rationalities' of the modern and the classical ages. The painting, he explains, can be understood as standing at the juncture between the two epochs. Its aesthetic structures express a characteristic kind of reciprocal, internally contradictory, self-reflecting rationality – that of a person who stands in a relationship to 'their own' involvement in and reflection upon the world. In *Las Meninas*, this is played out through an array of visual cues, most centrally in the ambiguous relationships of rendered 'visibility' between the observers *of* and the depicted observers *within* the painting. For example, Foucault suggests that Velázquez has depicted himself in the composition, precisely figured in the process of 'depicting' and 'observing the observer'. His:

dark torso and bright face are half-way between the visible and invisible... As though the painter could not at the same time be seen on the picture where he is represented and also see that upon which he is representing something. He rules at the threshold of those two incompatible visibilities... We are observing ourselves being observed by the painter, and made visible to his eyes by the same light that enables us to see him. And just as we are about to apprehend ourselves, transcribed by his hand as though in a mirror, we find that we can in fact apprehend nothing of that mirror but its lustreless back. The other side of a psyche. (Foucault 2002: 4, 7)

Elias's analysis of the painting is also centrally concerned with the distinctive kind of self-consciousness expressed by the inherent ambiguities of Velázquez's composition. For Elias, *Las Meninas* illustrates a shift towards a cognitive self-distancing characteristic of a nascent court society. It is also, he argued, a painting which, through its indeterminate open-endedness, places a particular set of demands upon the imaginations of those who observe it. In its own way, it expresses, on the one hand, the nexus of Velázquez's 'involvement' in the

composition, for example, the inclusion of his own image in the scene; and on the other, it expresses his simultaneous 'detachment', more particularly, *via* Velázquez's use of perspective to create a realistic illusion of three-dimensional space. In a similar manner, a viewer of the painting is first drawn into the composition through its realism and subject matter, and then through the use of subtle aesthetic clues. In particular, the open-ended relationship between observer and observed in the composition is secondarily involved through a central focus upon such qualitative visual arrangements.

This pattern of a 'detour *via* detachment' followed by 'secondary involvement', Elias suggests, underpins Velázquez's exceptional capacity to capture the enigmatic facial expression that precisely characterised his own (Velázquez's) highly involved preoccupation with the act of painting. But how, Elias asks, was he able to do this? How did he know how he himself would appear when engrossed in his pictorial apprehension? This problem of acting simultaneously as the subject and object of one's own 'reflection', or perhaps better, of the inherent competition of demands for simultaneous involvement and detachment is, for Elias, a defining one. Indeed, he suggests, it came to preoccupy many subsequent painters, notably Picasso when he painted his own version of *Las Meninas* in 1957. Elias wrote:

Picasso may have felt that Velázquez in his painting *Las Meninas* was, like himself, occupied with the problem of the painter's peculiarly divided self-consciousness, as someone who stood outside, who observed the world and formed pictures of it in his mind, and who, at the same time, was also very much part of this world – who was, in a word, detached and involved at the same time. (Elias 2007a: 63)

However, Elias argued, a particularly notable characteristic of Velázquez's self-representation is that the artist showed himself, not as an isolated individual, but as the member of a social group of which he actually formed part. Moreover, he depicted himself in a prominent, but, importantly, not *the most* prominent position within this group. This judgement led Elias to direct his analysis, rather more than Foucault had done, towards the social relationships expressed in the painting. In particular, Elias was led to the differences in social rank characteristic of the courtly figuration to which Velázquez belonged. According to Elias:

To perceive and to represent oneself as such required a high capacity for seeing oneself from a distance as one might be perceived by others. I have already indicated that this self-representation by Velázquez as one amongst others was closely connected with the characteristics of a court society. For members of such a society, it was more difficult than it is for members of industrial societies to forget that individualisation has its limits, that every human being is almost continuously dependent on others. In contemporary industrial societies many people experience themselves as a little sun around which the universe revolves. It is much more difficult in these societies to find full understanding for the fact that individual identity is closely linked to a group identity. For members of a

court society it was far easier to recognise that an I-identity goes hand in hand with a we-identity ... As [Velázquez] presented himself in this group portrait his personal pride in what he had achieved as court painter and the king's personal servant was unmistakable, but so too was his awareness that he was not the centre of his world. (Elias 2007a: 63)

Once again, we can observe here a similarity between the analyses offered by Elias and Foucault. Like Elias, the post-structuralist Foucault was reacting against the idea of a Cartesian *cogito*, a Kantian 'autonomous agent' or, perhaps better, the image of a 'we-less I', both ways of thinking that have come to dominate Western thought since the Renaissance. Elias, however, couched his argument in terms of his more general critique of *homo clausus* thinking. Velázquez, he suggested, took a decisive step towards more accurately perceiving himself as others might, a step towards, to use Elias's terms, 'distancing himself from himself' (Elias 2007a: 57). Such a step, Elias suggested, also underpinned more general shifts in the human self-image and the development of scientific knowledge, notably the transition from the geocentric world-view towards the heliocentric model. A similar shift was involved, Elias argued, in the development of philosophical theories of knowledge that assume as their point of departure a fundamental subject-object relationship: 'This hypothesis, too, demands that people can distance themselves sufficiently from themselves to be able to perceive themselves as people acquiring knowledge about objects existing outside, and apart from, their own persons' (Elias 2007a: 57). But, he continued, such a step in itself is not sufficient. It:

represents one to oneself as if one existed in isolation, as a '*wirloses Ich*' – an 'I without we'. It does not go beyond it; the subject-object hypothesis makes it appear that an individual person – oneself – can acquire adequate knowledge about objects alone and single-handed, without learning knowledge from other human beings. It requires yet another step of self-distancing to integrate into theories of knowledge the awareness that every individual step of enlarging the social fund of knowledge presupposes the acquisition, by the individual subject concerned, of a social fund of knowledge, including knowledge and language, from others. (Elias 2007a: 57–8)

For Foucault, the departure from Descartes and Kant leads in a similar, but ultimately distinct, direction. Again, one of his aims in the *Order of Things* was to problematise the Cartesian '*cogito*' and the Kantian ideal of the autonomous social agent by reconstructing the history of their 'constructions'. According to Foucault, the painting by Velázquez illustrates how both notions are the product of an inherently contradictory form of reflexivity emblematic of the modern age. Put simply, in the classical age the 'representer' was understood to be standing separately from the 'represented'. He or she was not viewed as 'part of the picture': classical reflexivity involved the understanding that people use language, painting, music and other symbols to present in a transparent manner a God-given order. Human knowledge, as such, was understood to be

the relatively unmediated expression of God's creations. By contrast, Foucault argued, the modern age involves a new epistemological foundation or 'regime', one in which humans are themselves increasingly 'centre stage'. This regime is characterised by a rapidly increasing level of interest in our-'selves' as 'objects of our own reflection'. At the same time, it involves a heightened awareness of how language, culture, and our 'individual uniqueness' set limits to knowledge of the world. And herein lies the paradox of this form of reflection: on the one hand, there is in the modern era a growing capacity to understand that humans are 'part of the picture' – they are inextricably bound up with the conditions of knowledge and, as such, can never fully come to 'know themselves' or penetrate to the origins of thought itself. On the other hand, modern individuals have the insight '... that we can know the world in a way that transcends the limitations of our own positioning within the order of things' (Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 48). As such, Foucault sought to highlight the paradoxical character of 'the reflecting human subject' as itself a 'reflection', a 'modern' 'discursive formation' which involves at once the representer and the represented, the creator and the created. Such notions, he argued, are logically deficient. They are contradictory, and ultimately tautological. They involve a series of simultaneous 'doubles' or dichotomies which are inherently irreconcilable. Modern thought, Foucault wrote, is predicated upon:

the simultaneous appearance of the Double, and that hiatus, minuscule and yet invincible, which resides in the 'and' of retreat *and* return, of thought *and* the unthought, of the empirical *and* the transcendental, of what belongs to the order of positivity *and* what belongs to the order of foundations. Identity separated from itself by a distance which, in one sense is interior to it, but, in another, constitutes it, and repetition which posits identity as a datum, but in the form of distance, are without doubt at the heart of that modern thought to which the discovery of time has so hastily been attributed. (Foucault 2002: 370)

The 'doubles' to which Foucault is referring in this passage are, respectively: the retreat/return of origin – the epistemological foundation of critical theory and hermeneutics; the thought/unthought double of phenomenology; and the empirical/transcendental double of positivism. In each case, Foucault argues, the logical premises of these positions encounter the same core dilemma: a 'hiatus' between, on the one hand, seeking to provide a basis for positive knowledge about ourselves, and on the other, through that self-same undertaking, undermining the very basis for such knowledge. For Foucault, this fundamental paradox is thus a product of its formulation. It is an artefact of modern thinking that is self-defeating. It is rendered through its non-rendering: it is the 'missing' subject – the 'observed observer' in Velázquez's painting – that can only be depicted by its absence. And it is this paradoxical, 'objectified' subject that, Foucault suggests, is also the wrongly-conceived premise of all distinctively modern human sciences such as biology, psychiatry, and political economics.

Once again, we can observe a similarity between Foucault's critique of the 'analytic doubles' intrinsic to modern epistemology – the prescribed notion of an '[i]dentity separated from itself by a distance which, in one sense is interior to it' – and Elias's critique of such notions as presenting an image of humans as *homo clausus*. Like Foucault, Elias sought to circumvent this basic problem of modern epistemology – the fabled 'I' without a 'we', irretrievably lost in the dilemma of '*how can I know*' when *my knowledge of the world 'out there' is governed by my simultaneous involvement within it* – through rejecting its very premises. In Elias's case, this involved reformulating the problem as one which pertains to human figurations as *homines aperti*, and to the conditions under which certain kinds of knowledge might develop. This is a problem that Elias discussed at length in the chapters subsequent to his analysis of *Las Meninas* in the Introduction to *Involvement and Detachment* (see also Chapter 5 in the present book).

Ultimately, however, the analyses of *Las Meninas* presented by the two authors proceed in quite different directions. Foucault uses the example to lead into what he called an 'archaeology' of changing epistemic regimes – the shifting power/knowledge conditions for accepted 'truth'. Elias, by contrast, employed the analysis, firstly, to examine shifting 'we-I' balances, and secondly, to consider the changing figurational conditions, especially the changing power-balances, for differential ratios of involvement and detachment. Importantly, and unlike Foucault, Elias did not entirely reject the possibility of 'positive' knowledge being derived from 'human sciences', though, of course, he would not have conceived the issue precisely in these terms. Indeed, Elias's ultimate aim was to lay the foundations within sociology for the inter-generational development of a social fund of knowledge about human figurations which might help to avert the recurrent crises – the conflicts, privations, injustices, brutality, and more general causes of human suffering – that are characteristic, to a greater or lesser extent, of societies which possess at different developmental levels different control chances over the interlocking relationships of which they are comprised. As we have seen, in this respect Elias's position presents us with the possibility of the human generation of more autonomous knowledge, albeit under specific figurational conditions and through a detour *via* detachment.

Foucault, by contrast, understood the quest for 'positivity' in human scientific knowledge to be a chimera. As he saw it, it was ultimately the expression of, and disciplinary vehicle for, a power/knowledge complex which *produces* a 'docile' modern subject. Foucault developed as an alternative to positivism/empiricism an 'archaeological' – and subsequently a Nietzsche-derived 'genealogical' – method as a kind of 'discourse about discourses' (Foucault 1969: 205) in which his express intention was precisely not to elevate one account of scientific knowledge over and above that which it takes as its subject matter. In this way, Foucault sought to part company from the likes of Althusser (1969) who, in the final analysis, presented his own critical insights, firstly, as the only

source of 'true knowing', and secondly, as always in opposition to 'ideological' accounts of social reality produced by 'state apparatuses' that are expressive of class interests. In fact (and again, the influence of Nietzsche can be observed here), Foucault more fundamentally disavowed any forms of 'absolute truth' or totalising explanation and metanarrative more fundamentally since, from his perspective, all knowledge is partial: all is expressive of a particular 'order of things', of particular interests, of particular historical periods, of particular social groups – everything is inevitably the medium and outcome of particular sets of power relationships which govern the limits of discursive and scientific possibility. This is similar to the critique of 'historicism' developed by Mannheim in the early 1920s. Indeed, as we have seen, for Foucault the very notion of 'absolute truth' is predicated upon a fictional human subject – the autonomous knower entirely devoid of epistemic finitude – which itself is little more than an artefact of the 'modern sciences of man'. However, in rejecting the truth/ideology opposition and the notion of 'absolute truth', Foucault sought equally to avoid abject epistemic relativism. He did so, in part, by rejecting the enterprise of 'epistemology' itself.

In pursuing what he termed the 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' of knowledge, Foucault sought to replace the 'modern' epistemological question of 'what constitutes valid knowledge?' with questions about the 'effects' and 'consequences' of particular forms of power/knowledge and discursive practice. In a manner in some ways reminiscent of W. I. and Dorothy Thomas's (Thomas and Thomas 1929: 572) earlier cited definitive statement that 'If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences', Foucault sought effectively to move away from the thorny issues involved in the arbitration of truth claims, and in debates about what is 'real' and what 'illusory'. Instead, he explored the power effects of particular nexuses of seeing, saying, and doing which, according to his approach, are inevitably expressive of social power (Layder 2006). For Foucault, moreover, it was precisely the process by which some truth claims came to be attributed with a privileged legitimacy status relative to others – including those within the field of sociology and other human sciences – that is the proper concern for archaeological and genealogical analyses. So, for example, he would have been less interested in the question of whether notions of addiction as a 'disease' are 'valid' or 'true', and more concerned with the discursive and epistemic conditions under which they come to be *accepted* as 'true', and, furthermore, how such ideas might be drawn upon in therapeutic encounters to *produce* a 'clinically addicted subject' with all the associated 'power effects'. For Foucault, then, questions of 'truth' are better conceived and approached as effectively questions about legitimisation contests concerning the shifting configuration of 'normalising' discourses that consist within a particular historical set of knowledge conditions or, to use his term, *épistème*.⁶¹

Foucault's approach to these issues smacks once again of, to reinvoke the formulation we adopted earlier in this chapter, a sentiment of 'relativistic

egalitarianism'. Indeed, in seemingly positing that all expressions of knowledge are equipotent discourses, Foucault ostensibly shared with the 'strong programme' in sociological studies of science something akin to a 'symmetry principle'. His position was definitely not to suggest that his analytical disciplines provide a basis for a 'true' or 'liberating' account of the world. Indeed, Foucault's work is perhaps at its most powerful and insightful in exposing the fallacy of any such undertaking. But in rejecting the notion of absolute truth and in recognising the inevitably partial character of knowledge, Foucault's alternative strategy – of exploring what comes to count as knowledge and its power effects – leaves the abyss of epistemic relativism that he sidestepped firmly in place. To continue with the arguments from previous chapters, in the techniques of archaeology and genealogy, Foucault provided only a means for examining the 'value-congruence' of knowledge – *via* reconstructing the legitimating trajectories of particular forms of discourse – but provided no basis for determining the object-adequacy or reality-congruence of any supposed or postulated item of knowledge. Indeed, such an undertaking would, for Foucault, once again inevitably entail the production of yet another discourse which, in turn, would serve to 'normalise' and 'regulate' particular ways of understanding and 'being in the world'. It would also have its own particular power effects. Rather, as Smith (1999) astutely observed, Foucault's position is ultimately that the only responses, once the dynamics of a 'disciplinary society' are properly understood, '... are either direct political attack upon its structures or radical action to subvert the consciousness of the self it imposes upon us ... [including] the pursuit of limit-experiences through various forms of experimentation with the bodily senses' (1999: 82).

It is evident that Foucault's renunciation of epistemology, the humanist, 'centred' autonomous subject, and the truth/ideology binary are each, at least in part, related to a more fundamental rejection of utopian thinking and his tacit acceptance of the diffuse ubiquity of '... the fact of domination... and its brutality' (cited in Lukes 1974: 231). The inspiration for this is, once again, Nietzschean (Kilminster 1998: 88). Similarly, Foucault's advocacy of subverting consciousness through limit-experiences can be seen as relating to a Nietzschean or Heideggerian aspiration to achieve more 'direct experience of the "depths of being"' (Smith 1999: 82). We agree with Kilminster (1998) on this issue that, while Foucault positioned his approach as distinct and separate from philosophies of knowledge – particularly through the invention of 'archaeology' and 'genealogy' as analytical alternatives to epistemology – it ultimately did not mark as fundamental a break from these as he claimed.

Despite its at times 'dazzling conceptual artistry' (Kilminster 1998: 85), Foucault's work remains dependent on much of the terminology and assumptions of the philosophy that was its point of departure. The concept of *epistème* is a case in point. Its Kantian underpinnings are particularly evident when Foucault defines the term as the 'historical *a priori*' (1966: 157). As we suggested earlier,

the concept of *epistème* refers to a kind of axiomatic backdrop which contains certain guidelines for what can be thought or said, what comes to count as knowledge and what does not, and which orders both the limits to and the possibility for certain forms of 'truth'. An *epistème* is not so much a totality, or monolithic set of discourses. Rather it defines the relationships between discourses. As such, it involves a shifting set of *intersections*, a configuration (Kilminster 1998: 87). As Kilminster puts it:

Each discursive formation has its own rules, its own unity, which defines the 'mode of being' of objects and *enables them to appear* and be recognised as objects. In other words, in typical Kantian fashion, any unity or regularity in the world does not reside in the object, but rather is shaped by the *a priori* conditions, in this case discourses. For example, for Foucault mental illness in the nineteenth century *was* all that was said in all the statements that made up the discourse. It was, and still is, the interplay of the rules of the discourse that make it possible for the object of mental illness to appear at all. (1998: 87)

The adoption of a re-worked Kantian *a priori* thus seems to lead Foucault on the road towards nominalism. And yet, in many important ways, Foucault's work arguably *does* mark an important departure from the philosophy it was predicated upon. As we have seen, Foucault shared with Elias a concern with the historical emergence of the particular forms of subjectivity that much philosophy takes as its starting point. Indeed, Smith goes so far as to suggest that, in their respective accounts in *The History of Sexuality* and *On The Process of Civilisation*, Foucault and Elias have provided a kind of 'unwitting collaboration' which presents a critical analysis of the transformation of 'perceptions of selfhood and society along with standards of behaviour with respect to bodily functions and the management of feelings' from the 'pre-Socratic to the post-Kantian eras' (Smith 1999: 81).

There are, however, significant differences between Foucault's and Elias's approaches to historical analysis. A device used by Foucault throughout his work, but perhaps most notably in the opening sections of *Discipline and Punish*, consisted of contrasting the dramatic 'ruptures' between a previous order and a succeeding one. In this sense, we can observe a greater emphasis by Foucault than Elias on historical/epistemic discontinuity. This tendency is not accidental. Foucault used such dramatic contrasts as a means of 'making strange' and undermining the supposed legitimacy of the prevailing discourses of the present. It is also part and parcel of a more fundamental rejection of grand theory, in particular of evolutionary accounts of social development such as those provided by Spencer, Comte, and Marx (Layder 2006: 129). To return once more to an argument from preceding chapters, Foucault's emphasis on historical/epistemic discontinuity as a reaction to the grand narratives of the Enlightenment involves in many ways the substitution of one problematic set of assumptions for another. For Elias, the assumption of either inevitable growth or inevitable rupture ought to be jettisoned in favour of investigations

into the shifting ratio between continuity and discontinuity in the development of particular social fields (see again the arguments presented in Chapter 5).

In this respect, we can locate Foucault's work within the primarily philosophical, 'epistemological break' tradition exemplified by writers such as Gaston Bachelard and his pupil, Georges Canguilem – both of whom were explicitly cited by Foucault. As we have seen, Elias's work can be seen, by contrast, as having arisen out of a sociological tradition exemplified by Comte (against whom writers such as Bachelard and Canguilem directly reacted) and which places a greater emphasis on historical continuity. In Elias's case, however, it is a question, not of 'continual progress', but of the theoretical-empirical determinability of the balance between 'continuity' and 'discontinuity'.⁶² Such differences in intellectual lineage present considerable difficulties to those who wish to engage in a comparison of these authors' works. As we have aimed to stress throughout this book, Elias was fastidiously concerned with the clarity, precision, and reality-congruence of the technical language that he used. He saw it as necessary to depart from philosophical precepts and language in order to develop a more properly sociological orientation. This involved avoiding reification; developing processual and relational conceptual formulations; and in particular adopting forms of language which are attuned to pluralities of human beings, not '*the individual*' as a static and isolated abstraction. From a figurational perspective, Foucault's language is replete with *homo clausus* formulations and reifications. The concept of power is a particular case in point. It is rendered in Foucault's writing as a self-consisting entity that 'possesses' and exercises intentions and plans. This can be seen, for example, in formulations where 'power' is held by Foucault to 'establish a network in which it freely circulates', 'installs itself and produces its real effects', 'surmounts the rules of right' and 'extends itself beyond them' (cited in Kilminster 1998: 88). That said, such formulations are at odds with Foucault's more general understanding of power as relational, multiple, diffuse and without 'essence'.

It could be argued that it is unfair to criticise Foucault on grounds such as these since his intellectual lineage afforded him a degree of licence for what is, in places, a kind of critical conceptual poetry. He had his own reasons for avoiding the adoption of a scientific (perhaps more properly 'scientistic') lexicon. Equally, however, this 'poetic' tendency is such that, at times, it presents an obstacle to the precision and conceptual utility of his ideas. In addition, Foucault's tendency to declare what his work is *not* – the manifold qualifications and provisos that often precede his key arguments – sometimes lends to it a degree of 'philosophical awkwardness' (Kilminster 1998: 84). By equal measure, however, we can see how, from a Foucauldian perspective, Elias's writing takes on all the rhetorical force of a science – its tight, precise, detached formulations render a world where fantasy and imagination are little more than mythology, and where Freudian formulations are unapologetically adopted. Indeed, in an imaginary dialogue between Elias and Foucault, we

might find Elias challenging Foucault to place the discourse of philosophy itself on Foucault's analytical operating table. Likewise, we might observe Foucault challenging Elias to undertake a sociogenetic examination of the Freudian 'repressive hypothesis' – as manifest, for example, in the notion of libidinous 'animalic' aspects of the self and their 'restraint' – and to consider the 'power effects' of this notion in the production of the fabled 'modern subject'.

In a spirit of openness, we shall avoid seeking here a final resolution to our fictional dispute (though, of course, we hope to have answered many of the imaginary charges against Elias in this and preceding chapters)! It is worth adding in this regard that, at the time of our writing, there appears to have been an increasing amount of shared interest in dialogue between Eliasian and Foucauldian scholars. For example, there has recently taken place a well-attended conference entitled 'Care or control of the self' at the University of Hamburg in 2008.⁶³ There is also a special edition of the journal *Foucault Studies* devoted to a comparison of the work of the two authors, published in 2010.

Elias and Bourdieu

As we sought to demonstrate above, while an important hurdle to a conceptual comparison of the work of Elias and Foucault is constituted by the differences in language and intellectual orientation of the two men, this is considerably less the case for Elias and another of his contemporaries, Pierre Bourdieu. Indeed, Bourdieu's self-conscious adoption of relational concepts, his explicit identification with the enterprise of developing a 'scientific' sociology, and his rejection of dualistic theorising, all present a promising source of potential common ground with Elias. Unlike Foucault and perhaps to a lesser degree, Giddens, Bourdieu stands apart as one of the few key sociologists of the twentieth century to have engaged seriously with Elias's work. It is perhaps not insignificant that both Bourdieu and Elias wrote on a range of topics not normally addressed by major sociological theorists. These include: sport, art, leisure, taste, and quotidian aspects of social life such as eating habits, manners, and standards of dress. Importantly, both authors were simultaneously researchers and theoreticians; both developed concepts and more general theoretical models in relation to empirically embedded and grounded study; both lamented the divorce of theory from research; and both shared the aim of, to use a phrase of Bourdieu's that we cited in the Introduction, '... preventing people from being able to utter all kinds of nonsense about the social world' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 53).

In addition to a substantial number of citations of Elias in some of his (Bourdieu's) major studies, notably *Distinction*, *In Other Words*, and *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, Bourdieu frequently expressed his admiration

for and intellectual sympathy with Elias in interviews and public workshops. However, Bourdieu tended to depict Elias more as a 'fellow traveller' than as a founding influence on his own ideas. Bourdieu suggested, for example, that commonalities in the fundamental principles of his and Elias's sociology derived from the shared intellectual heritage of Weber, Durkheim, and, with regard to their common stress upon relational concepts, Ernst Cassirer (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 92; 97). The degree of direct influence of Elias's sociology on that of Bourdieu is more difficult to determine. It is notable that, while the term *habitus* is generally attributed to Bourdieu, Elias employed the concept extensively in the original (1939) German version of *On the Process of Civilisation*. The term was rather problematically translated as 'psychological makeup' in the first English version, published in 1969. More importantly, however, while a number of other key thinkers – Weber, Durkheim, Husserl, and Mauss among them (Bourdieu 1990: 12) – also employed the term prior to Bourdieu, they did so arguably without the centrality and level of theoretico-empirical articulation of the concept found in the work of Elias and subsequently Bourdieu. A number of secondary commentators have identified what they consider to be a clear line of influence from Elias to Bourdieu in respect of the concept of *habitus* (see, for example, Pickel 2005). However, whether or not Elias was a significant influence on Bourdieu, there are definite similarities between the work of the two scholars.

As we mentioned above, in a manner similar to that of Elias, Bourdieu opposed 'theorising' as an enterprise separate from researching. In an interview with Loïc Wacquant (Wacquant 1989: 50), he emphatically stated that:

I never 'theorize', if by that we mean engage in the kind of conceptual gobbledygook (*laïus*) that is good for textbooks and which, through an extraordinary misconstrual of the logic of science, passes for theory in much of Anglo-American social science. I never set out to 'do theory' or to 'construct a theory' *per se*... it is a complete misapprehension of my project to believe that I am attempting some kind of 'synthesis of classical theory' *à la* Parsons. There is no doubt a theory in my work, or better, a set of *thinking tools* visible through the results they yield, but it is not built as such.

In his introductory text on Bourdieu, Richard Jenkins (2002) argues that Bourdieu's statements concerning 'theorising' in the above passage are rather too 'modest', and do not square easily with his use of the term 'theory' to describe his work elsewhere – examples include *Outline of a Theory of Practice*; 'Elements for a Theory of the Political Field', etc. Nor do they fit with the more general intellectual project that Bourdieu's work constitutes. According to Jenkins, it '... amounts to nothing less than an attempt to construct a theory of social practice and society' (Jenkins 2002: 67). In particular, Jenkins takes issue with Bourdieu's proclamation that theory '... is a temporary construct which takes shape for and by empirical work' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 50). For Jenkins, it is unequivocally *not* the case in Bourdieu's work that theory is

‘subordinate’ or secondary to empirical research since ‘Bourdieu has developed a body of *social theory* which is worthy of detailed discussion in its own right’ (Jenkins 2002: 67; our emphasis).

However, this misses an important aspect of Bourdieu’s, and by comparison Elias’s, overall orientation towards sociology. Bourdieu shared with Elias an approach to sociology that entailed the conscious and consistent interweaving of the ‘empirical’ and the ‘rational’ ‘theoretical’ components of sociological inquiry. Like Elias, Bourdieu was centrally concerned with avoiding the extremes of reification and determinism on the one hand, and reductionism and voluntarism on the other. Both authors understood that a key means by which it becomes possible to move beyond the selection between such static logical extremes resides in the development of a different vehicle for sociology, one which, in a manner similar to that of the physical sciences, effectively dissolves the conventional distinction between ‘theory’ and ‘research’, and in which general conceptual models take form gradually and inextricably in conjunction with – indeed as an integral component of – substantive investigations. Thus, in both Elias’s and Bourdieu’s work, ‘grand theory’ of the type presented in the programmatic statements of Parsons or the elaborate social ontology of Giddens, is very largely absent. And yet – and to this extent we agree with Jenkins – each author does present a coherent body of sociological insights, concepts, and observations which have profound implications for debates within theoretical sociology, and which might indeed involve a synthesis of classical and modern ideas, whether or not they were designed or ‘constructed’ as such.

Notwithstanding the previous point, what both Bourdieu and Elias opposed is the fetishistic treatment of ‘theory’ as an enterprise in and of itself – as a kind of professional specialism which can be undertaken largely in isolation from empirical research. In this respect, Jenkins’s comments are rather more problematic. Bourdieu explicitly opposed the abstract discussions of ‘social theory’ involving the ‘... endless and unassailable “conceptual melting pots” of neologisms, refurbished categories, and pseudo-theorems, generally closed by a call for further research or empirical application, preferably by others’ (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 50). To this end, Bourdieu developed the distinction between ‘theoretical theory’ and ‘scientific theory’.⁶⁴ In ‘theoretical theory’, he argued, theoreticians treat theory as a substitute for research. In that context, ‘theory’ as such invariably takes the form of sterile, abstract polemics. It becomes a self-perpetuating and ultimately ‘vacuous meta-discourse around concepts treated as intellectual totems’ (1989: 50). Scientific theory, by contrast, ‘... emerges from a programme of perception and of action – a scientific habitus if you wish – which is disclosed only in the empirical work which actualises it’ (1989: 50). Within sociology, Bourdieu argues, ‘theoretical theory’, ‘theory without object’ is, *via* a professionally-instilled separation, practically divorced from research which frequently

involves 'science without a scientist' as in surveys of public opinion and the 'scientific monster' of 'methodology' (1989: 51). He states:

This opposition between the pure theory of the *lector* devoted to the hermeneutic cult of the scriptures of the founding fathers (if not his own writings), on the one hand, and survey research and methodology on the other is an entirely *social* opposition. It is inscribed in the institutional and mental structures of the sociological profession, rooted in the academic distribution of resources, positions, and competencies, as when whole schools (for example, conversation analysis or status attainment research) are based almost entirely on one particular method, and reinforced by the political demand for instruments of rationalisation of social domination – and it must be rejected. (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 51)

Similar arguments pertaining to the divorce of theory from research have been developed in a number of seminal treatises (see for example, Merton 1957; Mills 1959; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Blumer 1969; Goudsblom 1977). Indeed, Bourdieu directly invokes Glaser and Strauss's image of theoretical theorists as 'theoretical capitalists' (though Bourdieu preferred the term 'rentiers') who, after furnishing grand classificatory schemes, set 'proletarian researchers' to work testing and operationalising such honoured logical hypotheses – a depiction which, as Goudsblom (1977: 102) observes, aptly captures the flavour of Etzioni's preface to a 600 page theoretical treatise which contains the statement: 'The power of the propositions produced by this theory have [*sic*] to be tested in empirical research and social action' (Etzioni 1968: Goudsblom 1977: 102). As Bourdieu implies in the passage cited above, there is an inherent elitism, a sociogenetic power differential both to this separation of theory and research, and to the specialist linguistic obfuscation that often accompanies the practice of theoretical theory. In the same way, he suggests, the prevailing distrust of the scientific status of sociology stems from reasons which are considerably more 'social than epistemological' (1989: 52). For Bourdieu – and again we can observe some important similarities with Elias in this connection – in order to bypass such problems, it is necessary to depart in two key ways from what became, in the mid-twentieth century, conventional sociology: firstly by developing an alternative sociological *practice* and *method*; and secondly, by deploying a radical 'epistemic reflexivity' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 48). Let us consider each undertaking in turn.

With regard to statements concerning his sociological 'practice' or 'method', Bourdieu was, on the whole, considerably more explicit and didactic than Elias. Bourdieu referred to his distinctive approach as one of 'social praxeology' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 10–11). As we have seen, like Elias, this practice and method entailed at the most fundamental level a '*logic of research* which is... *inseparably* empirical and theoretical' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 50).⁶⁵ Also, in a manner again comparable to that of Elias, Bourdieu's practice involved addressing perennial issues,

debates, controversies, and philosophical dilemmas by reframing and in some cases circumventing certain basic 'epistemological' and 'ontological' problems through revisiting the manner of their formulation. A comparison can also be drawn between Elias's image of 'steering the sociological vessel' between the 'Scylla of philosophical absolutism and the Charybdis of sociological relativism' (Elias 1971b: 358) and the sociological strategy developed by Bourdieu. As Wacquant proposes, Bourdieu's approach harnesses the 'epistemic virtues' of, on the one hand, an empiricist *social physics* which apprehends social reality from the 'outside' as a set of objective structures, and which seeks to uncover the 'determinant relations' of social existence; and on the other hand, the lens of *social phenomenology* in which society is understood to be 'produced', continually 'made' and 'remade', saturated with meanings and representations, and as such, approached from the 'inside' through the 'life-worlds' of those who constitute it (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 8–9).

For Bourdieu, the basic problem of sociological knowledge is that '[s]ocial facts are objects which are also the object of knowledge within reality itself because human beings make meaningful the world which makes them' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 7). In many ways, this is a parallel of the problem that Foucault and Elias addressed in their analyses of *Las Meninas*. The principal danger with the *social physics* approach, from Bourdieu's perspective, is the slippage from model to reality by means of the reification of institutions and other structural regularities as 'agents' which 'act', leading social reality to be conceptually reduced to the operation and execution of a model that is, paradoxically, intellectually constructed through methodically ignoring the experiences people have of 'it' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 7). Conversely, *social phenomenology* provides no means of accounting for the resilience of certain social regularities, the 'objective configurations' that individual strategies and acts of classification produce and reproduce (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 7). Thus, to overcome the limitations and seize upon the virtues of each, in Bourdieu's *social praxeology* elements of structuralism and constructivism are combined as different analytical phases into a kind of 'genetic structuralism' (Bourdieu 1990: 14) through the blending and interweaving of considerations of 'class' and 'classifications', 'positions' and 'dispositions', and so forth. As Wacquant explains it:

First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures (spaces of *positions*), the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation (*dispositions*) that structure their action from the inside. It should be stressed that, although the two moments of analysis are equally necessary, they are not equal: epistemological priority is granted to objectivist rupture over subjectivist understanding. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 10–11)

The nod here to Bachelard – towards 'objectivist rupture' – and indeed, the sharp delineation between 'objectivist rupture' and 'subjectivist understanding',

'external constraints' and 'interactions', and 'positions' and 'dispositions', mark significant differences between the intellectual orientations of Bourdieu and Elias. We shall return to them shortly. For the moment, it is sufficient to note that this passage has something of the appearance of the self-same 'theoretical theory' that Bourdieu wished to avoid. Indeed, Wacquant's depiction of Bourdieu's work as involving a fusion of elements of structuralism and phenomenology implies that, *pace* Bourdieu's earlier cited comments, it involves precisely the kind of 'classical synthesis' and conceptual elaboration that Bourdieu took as his point of departure. However, the passage was written (by Wacquant) as part of a more general exegesis of Bourdieu's approach in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. It is something of a paradox that – just as we have done in the present book in relation to Elias's sociology – the very process of conceptual exposition and discussion necessitates, to varying degrees, the splitting off of 'theory' from 'research': the extraction of an abstracted theoretical model from the more general work of which it forms an integral part. And yet a key tenet of the approach thus discussed involves laying stress upon the necessary and fundamental integration of theory and research. It is perhaps, then, not coincidental that Bourdieu left it to Wacquant to write the introduction to his (Bourdieu's) approach in *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Elias's resistance to secondary introductions to his work is also perhaps easier to understand in this light.

That said, Wacquant was describing, albeit rather abstractly, a sociological practice in which both theory and research are combined, first through the development of concepts aimed at establishing a 'theoretical stance, a principle of methodological choice' as part and parcel of the research process, and subsequently the '*ex post*' systematisation of ideas whereby concepts are gradually tried, tested, and selected according to their utility and capacity to 'bear fruit' within an on-going programme of research (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 51). The 'trick' to Bourdieu's sociological practice is, he suggests, to combine '... immense theoretical ambition with extreme empirical modesty': to treat precise and seemingly mundane 'objects' of study in a manner which, nonetheless, permits an engagement with 'high theoretical stakes' (Bourdieu in Wacquant 1989: 51). The 'habits' of Bourdieu's sociology are all the more interesting in the context of the notion of 'intellectual modesty' advocated by Pels that we discussed earlier in this chapter. Like Elias, Bourdieu's intellectual humility did not extend so much to his intentions regarding the development of a scientific sociology, as to the substantive concerns of his work. Again, we might observe the commonalities shared by Elias and Bourdieu in respect of their focus upon topics not normally treated as worthy of 'grand theory' – sport, leisure, the arts, manners, etiquette, etc. – as Bourdieu puts it: '... the power of a mode of thinking never manifests itself more clearly than in its capacity to constitute socially insignificant objects into scientific objects ... or ... to approach a majorly socially significant object in an unexpected

manner' (1989: 51). In these key respects, then, the sociological practice of Bourdieu and Elias shares some remarkable similarities.

That said, on the face of it, Bourdieu's concept of 'epistemic reflexivity' would appear to point towards a more substantial difference between the work of the two authors. A simple reading of the term smacks of the classical epistemological invitation to engage in cognitive self-reflection, or 'navel gazing': to consider time and again how our knowledge of the world 'out there' might reflect only what's 'in here' – how it may be little more than a reflection of our own 'subjective' experiences and modes of representation. In previous chapters, we have discussed at some length Elias's objections to this way of posing problems about knowledge. However, as Wacquant argues, Bourdieu's term actually points towards a sociological practice which permits the historicisation of scientific rationality without dissolving it. It allows, in short, for a reconciliation of 'modernist certainty' and 'postmodernist relativism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 47). Indeed, Wacquant suggests that, 'Far from encouraging narcissism and solipsism, epistemic reflexivity invites intellectuals to recognize and to work to neutralize the specific determinisms to which their innermost thoughts are subjected...' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 46). Bourdieu thus maintains a commitment to the desirability and possibility of scientific knowledge *à la* Habermas on the one hand, whilst at the same time recognising the social contingency of such knowledge. On the other hand, together with the argument that knowledge categorisations are '... instruments of (symbolic) power possessing a constitutive efficacy', he stresses that knowledge has 'power effects' of the kinds discussed by Derrida and Foucault (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 46). As we have sought to show throughout this book, for Elias, though he did not use the term, such 'reflexivity' was conceived more in terms of an awareness of, and orientation towards, seeking to understand the long-term development of human figurations and the different ways in which knowledge of the social world is tied to this development. He also sought to explore such issues as the position of sociological knowledge relative to that of other sciences, the development of the 'triad of basic controls', and more generally, problems of involvement and detachment. For Bourdieu, 'reflexivity' pertains more specifically to the social 'field' of academia, and involves an awareness of the peculiarly political implications of sociological knowledge. It is in respect of the latter, in particular, that we find the most significant differences between the two authors.

For Bourdieu, sociology is an eminently political and moral science. While he concurs with Elias that sociologists should strive to become 'destroyers of myths' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 49), Bourdieu maintains that the very process of myth-destroying has moral and political implications. Sociologists, Bourdieu argues, are centrally concerned with – and embroiled within – an academic social field involving power struggles over symbolic domination. As such, there can be no such thing as a 'disinterested' or 'neutral' sociology.

It can never reach the 'uncontroversial status' of the natural sciences (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 50). Bourdieu accordingly suggests of the social sciences that:

The idea of a neutral science is a fiction, and an interested fiction, which enables one to pass as scientific a neutralised and euphemised form of the dominant representation of the social world that is particularly efficacious symbolically because it is partially misrecognisable. By uncovering the social mechanisms which ensure the maintenance of the established order and whose properly symbolic efficacy rests on the misrecognition of their logic and effects, *social science necessarily takes sides in political struggles*. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 51)

This is a problem to which Elias arguably paid less attention than Bourdieu. That is, according to Bourdieu, through the very character of their subject matter, sociologists are involved in a science which has *inevitable* political ramifications. Elias's work is no exception in this regard. His stress upon conceiving the social universe in terms of pluralities of open, bonded, figurations, not isolated individuals, is a direct counter to the earlier-cited neo-liberal mantra uttered by Margaret Thatcher in 1987 that there is 'no such thing as society'. Indeed, Elias's work as a whole might be understood as constituting a sustained attack on the myth of the 'autonomous individual' or 'self-made man' (to use the colloquial and sexist formulation). Similarly, Elias's emphasis on understanding 'economic' activity as an aspect of human relationships effectively 'dispels' the myth of the 'market' as a kind of 'god' which has its own agency; its own 'natural' 'equilibrium' – and that, like water, it will always find its own level. For Elias, markets are not 'gods' to which we must offer 'sacrifices' in order for them to be appeased. In this sense, Elias's ideas, while not formulated as political doctrines, nonetheless have a profoundly political relevance.

For Bourdieu, advances in the field of social scientific knowledge towards greater autonomy do not go hand in hand with greater 'political neutrality'. If anything, in his view, the more 'scientific' that sociological knowledge becomes, the more its political significance increases, if only in its capacity to act as a 'shield' against '... forms of mystification and symbolic domination that routinely prevent us from becoming genuine political agents' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 51). That is to say, particular accounts of the social world are advanced and resisted in the legitimisation struggles between different social groups. As such, inaccurate models of the social universe might not be simply erroneous forms of knowledge, but deliberate attempts, deployed in power struggles within asymmetrical human figurations, to mask or obfuscate an oppressive social order.

It would appear, then, that their views on the political status of sociology mark a clear separation between the work of Elias and Bourdieu. Van Krieken (1998) has argued as much, suggesting that it is in this key respect that Elias's sociology of knowledge remains one of the most problematic aspects of his overall body of work (1998: 83). Van Krieken concludes that, in contrast to Bourdieu and scholars who argue similarly, Elias has: '... an essentially Weberian position on

scientific “value freedom” (1998: 82). And in relation to his emphasis upon ‘detachment’ concerning ‘... the politics and social context of sociological theory and research’, Elias’s approach affords us, says Van Krieken, ‘... very little purchase on either the rough and tumble of social scientific practice, or the impact and effects on social life of sociological knowledge itself’ (1998: 82).

However, once again, Elias’s position is rather more complex than it might at first appear. As we have endeavoured to demonstrate in various sections of this book, *pace* the arguments of van Krieken, Elias shared with Bourdieu an objection to the notion of a ‘watertight separation between fact and value’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 48). He proposed, directly *contra* Weber, that the notion of absolute ‘detachment’ or absolute ‘value freedom’ is a chimera. He maintained, instead, that sociologists should consider such issues in terms of the *different* ways in which knowledge about the world is tied to the structure, values, and interests of different social groups. To put it simply, it is not just a question of whether or not knowledge is value-laden, but a question of the *degree* to which and the *ways* in which it is value-laden. It is also a question of *which values?* and *whose values?* Do, for example, such values stem from a commitment to understanding the world as it *is*, or more from understanding the world as it is believed that it *ought to be*, or indeed, *ought not to be*? Thus, for Elias, questions concerning value congruence must necessarily be considered in conjunction with questions about reality congruence. The representation in the passage from Bourdieu cited above of an absolute division between a ‘completely detached’, ‘value free’, ‘disinterested’ social science on the one hand and a highly involved political sociology on the other is, in this sense, problematic. The notion of degrees of ‘involvement’ and ‘detachment’ advanced by Elias as opposed to such dichotomous polarities as ‘true’ and ‘false’, ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’, ‘neutral’ and ‘interested’, is expressly intended to contribute to a movement beyond such oppositions. That is the case because they make the problem to which they pertain intractable through steering thinking away from conceiving of *degrees* of approximation, and *degrees* of agreement between ‘understandings of the world’ and ‘the world thus’. Indeed, the notion of an ‘absolute truth’ that is masked by an equally absolute ‘ideology’ that is brought to mind by Bourdieu’s images of the ‘myths’ that ‘cloak the exercise of power’ (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 49) paradoxically reintroduces a pointed distinction between ‘the exercise of power’, ‘the world as it really is’ – ‘facts’, and ‘the world as we are compelled to see it’, the ‘cloak of mythology’ – and ‘values’. Such notions stand in contrast to a consideration of how, as we have discussed, even highly-involved ‘ideological knowledge’ may have an albeit limited degree of reality congruence *as well as* a high degree of value congruence, and of how investigations of one form of approximation without the other inevitably steer us back to the model of a clear-cut separation between ‘reality’ and ‘fantasy’, and ultimately, ‘fact’ and ‘value’.

Where van Krieken principally goes wrong, in our view, is in his treatment of the concept of 'detachment' in Elias's work as a *substance* rather than an aspect of a *relationship*. Detachment, Elias argued, must always be understood *in relation to* involvement. It was only van Krieken's artificial divorce of the concept of 'detachment' in this manner that allowed it to be treated as effectively synonymous with the notion of 'value freedom'. It is also misleading to suggest, as van Krieken does, that Elias equated 'detachment' with political neutrality. As Goudsblom expressed it in his funeral oration for Elias in *Theory Culture and Society* in 1990, while Elias claimed that he had worked, 'not to please any power', his sociological insights, notwithstanding this aim, are nonetheless potentially valuable as political tools. It is useful in this connection to draw a distinction (though, of course, not a cast-iron one) between political *incursions* into scientific knowledge, and the political *significance* and *ramifications* of such knowledge.⁶⁶ Employing this distinction, it is arguable that Elias's concept of 'detours *via* detachment' stresses precisely the *political significance* of sociological knowledge, indeed, of all scientific knowledge. For Elias, an *orchestrated* political role for sociology is perhaps some way off. It might be progressively realised in tandem with the development of a relatively stable stock of more reliable reality congruent sociological knowledge. Nonetheless, the potential for sociological knowledge to have political utility, or perhaps better, to serve as a basis for systematic interventions in the sphere of human figurations, is of paramount importance. For Elias, it is *the raison d'être* of sociological knowledge to provide a more adequate and secure basis for such interventions so as to secure more intended relative to unintended consequences in the struggle against social injustice, the spread and perpetuation of human suffering, the recurrence of social catastrophes including wars, famines, and ultimately the destruction of the planet. Of course, the problem of 'which interventions' and 'whose control of whom?' (van Krieken 1998: 82) – that is, of the 'abuse' of social scientific knowledge, remains pertinent. For both Elias and Bourdieu, such a concern points all the more sharply to the need to establish greater scientific autonomy within the social scientific field. As Bourdieu argued:

There is in history what we may, after Elias, call a *process of scientific civilisation*, whose historical conditions are given with the constitution of relatively autonomous fields within which all moves are not allowed, in which there are immanent regularities, implicit principles, and explicit rules of inclusion and exclusion, and admission rights which are being continually raised. (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 189)

In other words, Bourdieu, like Elias, stressed the need for the development in sociology of institutional safeguards to ensure higher degrees of professional autonomy and to maintain a high degree of control over the knowledge thus produced. Bourdieu, again like Elias, was concerned to guard against the incursion of non-scientific political agencies into sociological research.

Bourdieu envisaged sociology as becoming a discipline in which scientific knowledge is progressively established not so much through the elaboration of ethical norms or methodological rules, but in the scientific competition between different accounts of the social universe. Thus, for Bourdieu, 'genuine intellectuals' are those who have been able to achieve a degree of independence from 'temporal powers', a degree of autonomy from the interventions of political and economic authorities (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 56). Like Elias, Bourdieu stressed the importance of simultaneously maintaining a 'critical detachment *and* involvement' (1992: 55). The key point for Bourdieu was to recognise that, while science is a 'political activity' in the sense that the knowledge it produces has political ramifications, it is not '... *merely* a politics and therefore incapable of yielding universally valid truths' (1992: 47). For Bourdieu, scientific knowledge is paradoxical in that it can 'escape history' in the sense of gaining a degree of autonomy from historical specificity, but only under certain conditions. These conditions in particular are those in which safeguards for 'the institutional bases of rational thought' are continuously produced and reproduced (1992: 48). As such: 'To conflate the politics of science (knowledge) with that of society (power) is to make short shrift of the historically instituted autonomy of the scientific field and to throw the baby of sociology out with the bathwater of positivism' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 47–48).

Thus far we have found rather more in the way of agreement than disagreement between Bourdieu and Elias. However, there are indeed important differences between the two. The most significant of these, as we have alluded to above, relates to the residual structuralist and Kantian elements which arguably remain embedded in Bourdieu's approach. As Layder (2006: 194) astutely observed, a key difference between Bourdieu and Giddens (and Elias by extension) is that Bourdieu ultimately maintains the notion of an 'objective world' which is distinct from the world of 'situated behaviour': that there are 'generative mechanisms' which stand as separate from the observable realm of 'situated interaction', with 'habitus' acting as a kind of conduit which conjoins these. This is not to suggest that Bourdieu adheres to a simple, mechanistic determinism, but rather that, for him, there are aspects of the social universe beyond the level of social 'encounters'. For example, Bourdieu wrote:

It is good to recall, against certain mechanistic visions of action, that social agents construct social reality, individually and also collectively. We must be careful not to forget, as the interactionists and ethnomethodologists often do, that they have not constructed the categories they put to work in this work of construction. (Bourdieu 1989: 47)

In a classical Kantian sense, then, there is something 'prior' to action, in this case, 'categories'. They are more enduring than the products of social agents. It is as if such categories could be understood as not themselves the 'products'

of human 'figurations'. Indeed, while Bourdieu's use of the term 'social field' looks, superficially, like a rough equivalent to Elias's use of the term *figuration*, there are considerable differences between the two concepts. Most importantly, Elias's concept of *figurations* defines the (diachronic) structure of relations between *people*. For Bourdieu, by contrast, the concept of a social field implies the structure of relations between *positions* in a manner similar to Bhaskar's (1989) notion of a 'position-practice system' (Vandenberghe 1999: 22). Bourdieu's approach stems from an essentially realist social ontology wherein a sharp delineation is drawn between 'things in themselves' *as opposed* to things as they are apprehended by the senses *via* their phenomenal characteristics. But critically it also involves the clear possibility of *things in themselves* operating without observable consequences. As such, the observable structural regularities of 'fields of positions' are understood to be *expressive of a priori* governing conditions or 'noumenal' structures (*à la* Bachelard); 'generative mechanisms' (*à la* Harré); or 'tendencies and causal powers' (*à la* Bhaskar). As the latter explained it:

If science is to be rendered intelligible, the world must be seen as one of persisting things, of differing degrees of structure and complexity, to which powers and tendencies are ascribed; it cannot be reconstructed as a world of atomistic events apprehended in sense-experience... Generative mechanisms, I have argued, must be analysed as the ways of acting of things; and their operations must be understood in terms of the exercise of tendencies and causal powers. (Bhaskar 1978: 184)

Elias's insistence that social *figurations* consist of the relationships between human beings, marks him out from this perspective as an unreformed empiricist. It would seem that Elias is only concerned with the *prima facie* characteristics of the social world, and as such, is unable to apprehend 'deeper' aspects of reality that cannot be 'observed'. But, of course, this would be a rather too simplistic reading of his position. For Elias, different aspects of social reality, different planes of the social universe, exist not as 'distinct realms', but as *different levels of integration* and *different levels of structural complexity*. To provide a basic example: as a social *figuration* becomes more complex, it may well become increasingly 'opaque' to the people who comprise it. Accordingly, it is impossible for them to 'see' or 'apprehend' it in any simple or direct sense. Thus 'structures' might be considered to be 'deep' in the sense that they involve levels of complexity that cannot be directly apprehended by the senses, or directly 'observed'. Nonetheless, this by no means obviates the possibility that they can be understood, over time, through the systematic interweaving of theory and enquiry by interdependent generations of scholars.⁶⁷ The conceptual 'partitioning' of social reality into ontologically discrete spheres which then sit 'in relation' to one another, bridged by the concept of 'habitus', is, for Elias, restricted in its utility for serving as an orientation towards social reality. It presents a sociological schema which is only in part 'relational'.

It sits, to use Depelteau's (2008) 'classification' of Bourdieu's model, somewhere between a 'deterministic' and a radically 'relational' position, as a kind of 'co-deterministic' halfway house. The net outcome of such a position appears, moreover, to involve, to the degree that Vandenberghe's (1999) analysis of Bourdieu's position is accurate, the pursuit of questions which range from a resurrected epistemological 'how can I know the world out there?', in the form of 'how do we know that those transfactual structures exist?', through to a 'great man' view of scientific knowledge apparent in such questions as: 'Who has accorded primacy of the unobservable over the observable? Who speaks for those structures? Who speaks in their name?' (Vandenberghe 1999: 35). Elias's reservations concerning the premises and fruitfulness of such questions have been discussed by us at length in the preceding two chapters.

There are, then, elements of Bourdieu's approach which ultimately return his thinking to some of the classical philosophical dilemmas that Elias (and to an extent Bourdieu himself) sought to escape. Nonetheless, as we hope to have shown, perhaps more than any other theorist, there is much in Bourdieu's work that is compatible with the work of Elias. Bourdieu's work also provides a useful consideration of some areas that were neglected by Elias, in particular the political role of sociology, plus his extensive discussion of the *practice* and *reflexivity* of sociologists. In many ways, to answer the critique of Elias presented by Rojek (1986), Bourdieu provides more than Elias in the way of a 'drill', a model of sociological practice in terms of which individual researchers might be able to negotiate the problems of cross-fertilising theory and research, and of blending and balancing their involvement and detachment in sociological inquiry.

We now turn to the conclusion of this book by considering the prospects for the realisation of Elias's great hope: that he would have made a contribution to the beginnings of a more general reorientation of sociology – as we have called it, a 'relational turn'.