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Introduction

Sociology and its discontents

A number of excellent introductory texts on the work of Norbert Elias have already been published. Central among them are Stephen Mennell's seminal *Norbert Elias: an Introduction* (1998); Richard Kilminster's path-breaking *The Sociological Revolution* (1998) and *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology* (2007); Johan Goudsblom's pioneering *Sociology in the Balance* (1977); Robert van Krieken's insightful *Norbert Elias* (1998); Jonathan Fletcher's highly original *Violence and Civilization* (1997); and Cas Wouters's excellent *Informalization: Manners and Emotions Since 1890* (2007). To these must be added two outstanding German texts: Hermann Korte's *Über Norbert Elias: Das Werden eines Menschenwissenschaftlers* (*About Norbert Elias: Becoming a Human Scientist*) (1988) and Helmut Kuzmics's *Der Preis der Zivilisation: Die Zwänge der Moderne im theoretischen Vergleich* (1989) (*The Costs of Civilization: The Pressures of Modernity in Theoretical Comparison*); and Marc Joly's *Devenir Norbert Elias* (*Becoming Norbert Elias*) (2012). While our aim in the present book is not to provide a wholly comprehensive account of Elias's work, we share with the authors of all these texts three central endeavours – 1) that of bringing the sociology of Elias to a new and wider audience; 2) that of providing an explication of some of his key ideas; and 3) finally, that of exploring the implications of his work for sociology more generally.

The distinctive features of our book are threefold. The first is that a central focus of the text is upon Elias's sociology of knowledge. We explore, in particular, Elias's vision of how sociology might proceed in a more 'scientific' manner, with a focus on the principal conceptual reorientations he sought to advance in relation to this undertaking.¹ The second is that we have attempted to position our discussion of Elias's approach within the context of a more general 'crisis', both of sociology as a subject and of the human world at large. Thirdly, and in relation to these other undertakings, we have endeavoured throughout this book, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly or more *sotto voce*, to advance a central line of argument concerning these twin 'human' and 'sociological' crises on the back of our exposition of Elias's work.

In essence, our central argument is that, since social relations form an often unrecognised, frequently misunderstood, and variably important part of everything humans are and do, sociology – the study of these relations – is a discipline which is potentially of significance for and benefit to humankind. There resides in this statement a set of assumptions concerning the role of

sociological knowledge which obviously require considerable qualification and clarification. We shall explore such issues at some length in the chapters that follow. For the moment, it is enough to say that sociology, along with humanity itself since its earliest times, has faced a series of recurring 'crises'. In the case of sociology, such crises appear in the longer term to have escalated. Our contention is that Elias's 'figurational' or 'process-sociological' approach, his distinctive model of sociological practice, and many of his key concepts – interdependence, interdependency chains, power balances, figurational dynamics, changing we-I balances, the triad of basic controls, blind processes, 'civilising' and 'decivilising' processes, double-bind figurations – offer considerable potential utility for combating the two-levelled, simultaneously practical and academic crises we humans have thus far faced, and are still currently facing. While, as we shall show, there remain aspects of Elias's approach that require development, extension, and revision – and as he himself recognised, at the most his work constitutes a hopeful 'starting point', not a 'finished' or in any sense 'finalised' paradigm – his work enshrines a model of the sociological endeavour that, we shall argue, potentially offers the basis for what we might call a 'relational turn' within the discipline. Such a 'turn', we suggest, would involve a programme of conjoined theory and research that could serve as a more adequate means of orientation towards the recurrent human crises we have alluded to above, and would indeed constitute a move beyond the current sociological crisis.

The sociological 'crisis'

The term 'crisis' has a series of connotations, some useful, some less so for the purposes of our present discussion. Etymologically, the word derives from the Greek noun, *krisis*, literally meaning 'decision', and in turn from the verb *krinein*, 'to decide'. It was used by medical philosophers such as Galen and Hippocrates to refer to the 'turning point' of a disease, and, in relation to these origins, has come since the seventeenth century to mean a 'decisive point' (OED 2005). Within intellectual circles, the term has become increasingly politicised. In sociological usage, talk of a 'crisis' might variously refer to: a society on the precipice of rapid change or 'collapse'; social conditions *in need* of urgent and radical transformation; an intransigent social or political phase that, through its own immanent dynamics, is set to become transformed at some point in the future; times of intense social upheaval, change, or volatility; and periods of 'rupture', 'break', and historical discontinuity. In using the term, we wish to avoid some of these connotations, in particular the overtones of historical staccato, and the tendency to think about humans as a species and sociology as a discipline, in a 'hodiecentric' (Goudsblom 1977), that is, present-centred manner. Indeed, as will shortly be discussed, successive waves of sociologists

have declared the discipline to be facing a ‘crisis’; and similarly, generations of humans have variously proclaimed their societies to be facing rapid and critical decline, characteristically calling for a return to an imagined ‘golden age’ that is or was considered to reside somewhere in the distant past (Elias 1987a: 357). At all costs, we wish to avoid the impression that we consider the ‘crises’ to which we are referring in this book as representing the ‘culmination’ of long lines of development which somehow ‘finish’ dramatically in the present and, at that, with hitherto unparalleled problems and difficulties. That said, where the term crisis is rather more useful for our purposes lies in its invoking of a sense of urgency. More specifically, its connotation of a need for change is intended here to convey our view that there needs to be some reconsideration of how the sociological enterprise is conceived, particularly in relation to how sociological knowledge might be developed and utilised, specifically to help avert some aspects of the ‘human crisis’.² Also, in a rather pragmatic sense, the term crisis provides us with a means for considering the development of sociology as a discipline in conjunction with a number of specific social developments. It thus allows us to explore the inter-relationships between social problems and paradigmatic problems within the discipline.

In 1970, a highly influential book by Alvin Gouldner was published with the title, *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology*. Gouldner’s central thesis in that book was that America was then in the throes of a multi-layered rebellion in which the black civil rights movement, the women’s movement, and protest against the Vietnam War were central. It was a rebellion mainly of younger people which spread widely through the West, with university campuses forming major sites of resistance to the *status quo*. In such a context, Gouldner argued rhetorically that:

Social theorists today work within a crumbling social matrix of paralyzed urban centers and battered campuses. Some may put cotton in their ears, but their bodies still feel the shock waves. It is no exaggeration to say that we theorize today within the sound of guns. The old order has the picks of a hundred rebellions thrust into its hide. (Gouldner 1970: vii)

In such a context, Gouldner maintained, sociologists were becoming increasingly drawn into ‘the coalescing military-industrial-welfare complex’ with the consequence that it was becoming ‘unthinkingly evident that sociology has become dangerously dependent on the very world it has pledged to study objectively’ (1970: 511). In short, sociologists were being increasingly incorporated into the *status quo* and used as instruments of management and social control. They were, Gouldner proposed, producing ‘interested’ accounts of the social world and, in that way, becoming both part of the problem and of the forthcoming sociological crisis as Gouldner envisaged it. His solution was to call for the development of a ‘radical’ and ‘reflexive’ sociology practised by self-aware and critical sociologists dedicated to gathering knowledge which could be used in ushering in a new era.³

The Western world and its universities have, indeed, changed in fundamental ways since Gouldner wrote, but the changes have not necessarily followed the lines he envisaged. With his partly Marxist leanings, he seems to have expected – and he was by no means alone in this – a series of broadly egalitarian social changes to occur both within Western countries and between the West and ‘the rest’ (Hall 1992). Instead, at least until the banking crisis of 2008, the agents of corporate capital have increased their national and international control; neo-liberal economics have, albeit through new iterations, arguably become increasingly hegemonic globally; the gap between developing countries and the West has tended, with notable exceptions such as China, India and Brazil, to widen and, as part of this, the former Soviet Union has collapsed and lost control over its former satellites in Eastern Europe. Some of these, especially the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland, have subsequently become more integrated with the West. To this must be added the growing significance of Christian-Moslem and Moslem-Jewish, and Moslem-Moslem tensions, including, in recent years, internal tensions culminating in the wave of uprisings in the Middle East commonly referred to as the ‘Arab Spring’. All of this, of course, is to say nothing of the problems connected with the largely anthropogenic processes of ‘global warming’ and ‘climate change’, of which people have become increasingly aware in recent years.

In our view, the challenge to sociology produced in this situation is best understood in the context of this more general crisis. Both the changes in the 1960s and 1970s which worried Gouldner and about which he wrote so eloquently and with relative optimism – and the changes in the 1980s, 90s and early 2000s we have just discussed – can be seen as having occurred primarily as part of a process of accelerating and increasingly global social change which can be traced to the interconnected ‘scientific’, ‘industrial’ and ‘democratic’ ‘revolutions’⁴ which gathered momentum in Europe in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. An increasingly secular and ‘fact’-orientated approach to the understanding of these processes and their social origins and ramifications grew up as part of them. In short, in a period of accelerating social change and the uncertainties that it engendered, specific groups of intellectuals, at first outside the universities (for example, Comte and Marx), and later within them (for example, Durkheim and Weber), began to take humans and the societies they form as objects of ‘scientific’ reflection and research. In that way and in that sense, the ‘social sciences’ were ‘born’.

In order to explore how the work of Elias constituted an attempt to deal with and overcome the gathering sociological crisis, it is first necessary to outline some of its major characteristics. As we see it, ‘sociology’ began to emerge as part of this overall social process. A crucial early stage was marked by the invention of the term ‘sociology’ itself by Auguste Comte in 1835. He (and others such as his collaborator, St Simon) had previously used the term ‘social physics’ but, in 1835, Adolphe Quetelet, a Belgian statistician, published a book

which he called *On Man and the Development of Human Faculties: An Essay in Social Physics* (1835). This was anathema to Comte for two main reasons: first, he objected to Quetelet's vision of 'social physics' as a primarily statistical subject; and second, he objected to what he regarded as Quetelet's utopian and, in Comte's view, scientifically unwarranted egalitarianism (Coser 1971). Comte did not believe in the possibility of 'perfect equality' and he saw sociology as a science which, through a combination of observation and reasoning, would enable people to make a better life for themselves by transcending both the unrealistic dreams offered by 'theological' and 'metaphysical' thinking, and the 'wild', equally unrealistic terrors generated by what Comte regarded as these 'primitive' anthropomorphic and anthropocentric forms of thinking.

Another term coined by Comte was 'positivism'. The chief 'positive' method – a method liable to yield 'positive' results – that he recommended for use in sociology was the method of historical comparison. Even though the meaning of 'positivism' has changed (see our discussion in Chapters 4 and 5) such that it has now become something of a pejorative term referring to the inappropriate use of natural science methods in studies in the social field, a struggle between sociologists who advocate comparative-historical methods and those who advocate statistics has been built into our subject since its early days.⁵ Paraphrasing Dahrendorf's (1959) description of the 'new middle class' in capitalist societies, sociology can be said to have been 'born decomposed', that is, with differences, conflicts and tensions built into its core. Indeed, one might describe the subject as having been inherently 'crisis-ridden' from the outset.

These early sociological conflicts were fiercely fought. However, the conflicts between the proponents of opposing paradigms that surfaced in the 1960s and that continue through to today – which were manifestations, as we suggested earlier, of what Alvin Gouldner labelled in 1970 'the coming crisis' – are fiercer and more intense than past conflicts. For some twenty years following the end of the Second World War, advocates of functional and non-Comtean (that is, ahistorical and even anti-historical) 'positivist' sociology, many of them from, or émigrés to, the United States, reigned supreme.⁶ Then, for a variety of sociological and extra-sociological reasons, the functionalist-empiricist/functionalist-'positivist' hegemony collapsed and sociology, the subject which had been born 'decomposed', became multiply fractured and 'crisis-ridden' at its core. The sociological reasons for this process of decomposition included, among other things, the difficulties encountered by functionalists, especially Parsons and his followers, in dealing with issues such as conflict, power, and change.⁷ The extra-sociological reasons included the effects on a younger generation of sociologists whose adult identities and stances towards the subject were being forged in a context influenced by powerful events which included: the Vietnam war and the protest against it; the 'civil rights' struggle by 'blacks' in the USA; the rise of 'second-wave' feminism; the campus rebellions

which broke out in North America and many countries in Western Europe in the late 1960s; the growth of the 'sexual revolution' and 'informalisation' or 'permissiveness' as it was popularly called (Wouters 1977); and the power shift towards the younger generation propelled by technological change, egalitarian ideologies, and the increasing child-centeredness of parents. Sociologists who received their training in the late 1960s and early 1970s differed from their predecessors. The former worried less about the dangers of the 'Cold War' and the prospect of nuclear annihilation and focused more on struggling against capitalism which, for most Marxists and near-Marxists, was seen as the principal cause of most iniquities and global conflicts. Perhaps because fewer of them had directly experienced the Second World War, they were more inclined to take peace for granted.

The events in France in May 1968 are often cited as a crucial 'turning point' in the development of contemporary sociology. The dramatic student uprisings, factory occupations, and workers' general strike that took place then have been referred to as the '... last major revolutionary uprising in the Western world' (Kellner 2002: xvi). There remains considerable debate, though, concerning the precise significance of these events. On the one hand, they are seen by some to mark a watershed of 1960s cultural change that extended considerably beyond the French national context – marking a 'near revolution': namely the culmination and ascendancy of strengthening opposition to Western capitalism. Indeed, the 'explosions' of 1968 contained antisystemic elements that were repeated worldwide (Wallerstein 2004: 469). On the other hand, however, the events were and are for some also the source of great disappointment, symbolising 'the revolution that never came' and a victory for the French state led by its premier, Charles de Gaulle, who successfully anticipated and countered the insurrection, ultimately containing it, and in so doing demonstrating once and for all that the capitalist establishment could resist and absorb almost any form of opposition (Kellner 2002: xv-xvii). While Marxists such as Herbert Marcuse and Henri Lefèbvre found in the uprisings only confirmation of their core beliefs, for others who were involved in the protests – such as Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Jean Francois Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Julia Kristeva – the lack of revolutionary success demonstrated, or further reinforced, the need for fundamentally new forms of revolutionary thought; and with this the foundations of the poststructuralist movement were consolidated (Kellner 2002: xvii). As we shall endeavour to show towards the end of this book, Foucault and Elias each knew of the other's work and were to some extent influenced by it.

Poststructuralist and postmodernist writers variously called into question some of the most fundamental aspects of sociology as a discipline. In particular, these writers came to question aspects of what they considered to be the 'modernist project' of 'privileging' scientific knowledge as a basis for 'truth claims'. More fundamentally, they rejected the supposedly modernist

'faith' in human rationality, which they suggested at once constituted both the 'subject' and the 'object' of knowledge in the human sciences. In other words, they highlighted the paradox that human self-reflection is at once the condition for, and the limit of, knowledge about the social world, and as such, these writers rejected the very enterprise of 'social science' since this involved a fallacious cycle of proceeding '... from that which is given to representation to that which renders representation possible, but which is still representation' (Foucault 2002: 364). Thus the poststructuralist 'movement' – and the term is problematic, because it did/does not constitute a coherent or homogeneous school of thought as such – led *via* various different avenues of thought to a radical scepticism, not only about whether it was meaningful to talk about 'the real world', but of whether such a 'reality' was even amenable to human 'scientific' reasoning, or even 'existed' in any independent or literal sense. Against this backdrop, classical sociological writers such as Comte, Marx, Durkheim and Weber came by a number of influential scholars to be regarded as outmoded, as having their roots in the Enlightenment, and indeed as forming part of the rational scientific impetus that so characterised the 'modernism' against which postmodernist and poststructuralist writers sought to rally.

Part of the legacy of poststructuralism was ever greater paradigmatic diversification. Since the 1960s, rather than conciliation and paradigmatic resolution, or even ground-clearing, there has been on offer in sociology an increasing array of paradigms, albeit that some have now fallen from vogue. These include – and this is by no means an exhaustive list – various forms of functionalism (for example, 'neo', 'normative' and 'general', 'soft' and 'hard'); social systems theory; Marxism (for example, 'humanist' and 'structuralist'); feminist sociology (for example, 'liberal', 'socialist', 'Marxist', 'post-' and 'cultural'); critical sociology; conflict theory; Weberian theory; rational choice theory; ethnomethodology; symbolic interactionism; structuralism; post-structuralism (of which there are too many variants to list); postmodernist sociology; actor-network theory; critical realism; reflexive sociology; structuration theory; and figurational (also 'developmental' or 'process') sociology. Among other things, these paradigms differ regarding the positions taken by their advocates in relation to: (i) epistemological/methodological issues, that is how knowledge is obtained and how we can know what we think we know; and (ii) ontological/factual issues, that is how the universe and, as part of it, our world and our societies are constructed, what their basic characteristics are and how these are inter-related. Among the epistemological/methodological issues are the following:

1. Where the advocates of different paradigms see sociology located on the continuum between the arts/humanities and the sciences. As we shall see, Elias saw sociology as a 'human science' (*Menschenwissenschaft*) and himself as a 'human scientist' (*Menschenwissenschaftler*).

2. *If they see sociology as a science, whether, for example, they see it as a science in a 'soft' sense, for example in a comparative-historical or participant observation sense, or in a 'hard', non-Comtean 'positivist' sense based on mathematics, statistics and equivalents to laboratory experimentation. Or, indeed, whether they subscribe to alternative models of 'science', as in the case of, for instance, critical realism and figurational sociology.*
3. *Whether they see the purpose of sociological knowledge as an 'end in itself' (that is, as something that is interesting and valuable for its own sake), as a tool for improving human performance, for example, in education, work, or sport; or as a means to identify and achieve desirable socio-political goals, for instance reducing class, 'race', and gender inequality, or violence and crime.*

Among the ontological/factual issues are where the advocates of different paradigms stand in relation to such dualisms as 'materialism' *versus* 'idealism', 'agency' *versus* 'structure', 'social statics' *versus* 'social dynamics', and 'synchronic' studies *versus* 'diachronic' studies. The 'materialism' *versus* 'idealism' dualism centres primarily on the explanatory role of ideas in social processes relative to the role, for example, of 'economic forces'. The dualism of 'agency' *versus* 'structure' fundamentally concerns the degrees of choice that human individuals are able to exercise relative to the degrees to which their actions and beliefs are structurally determined or constrained. 'Social statics' *versus* 'social dynamics' – these concepts were first developed by Comte – and 'synchronic' *versus* 'diachronic' studies are both related to questions of processes over time and whether the advocates of different positions see sociology as concerned solely with the present, or whether they see it as primarily an historical or 'developmental' subject.

Approached in these terms, the abundance of sociological paradigms can be categorised as consisting of six basic types: functionalist paradigms; conflict paradigms; action paradigms; feminist paradigms; post-paradigms; and attempted syntheses such as: the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens, the reflexive sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, the neofunctionalism of Jeffrey Alexander, Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative rationality, and the figurational sociology of Elias – the subject matter of this book. Mention of these syntheses suggests another source of basic differences between paradigms: the way that advocates of each of them deal with the relationship of sociology to philosophy. Thus, while, for example, Giddens, the primary architect of structuration theory, advocates a heavy dependency of sociology on philosophy,⁸ Elias urged sociologists to maximise their autonomy in relation to other subjects, especially philosophy (Kilminster 1998; 2002; 2008).

Conflict, competition, and dissension of the kinds that have come to reign between the supporters of different sociological paradigms can, of course,

be conducive to the advancement of knowledge. Such conflict was no doubt important to the early development of the discipline – bringing to light many of the shortcomings of once hallowed or axiomatic principles, orientations, concepts and ideas that would perhaps otherwise have remained unquestioned. However, the consequences of the disunity have arguably also been deleterious, especially since the 1980s and 90s. In those two decades in particular, paradigmatic variety and disunity in sociology gave way increasingly to paradigmatic fragmentation, with a series of problematic consequences.

Firstly, the proliferation of paradigmatic alternatives has greatly facilitated the decline of any kind of coherent ‘core’ to sociology. Indeed, in tandem with a poststructuralist ‘decentring’ of the human subject, the ‘subject’ of sociology itself has also lost its ‘centre’. There is currently no clear agreement on the staple propositional knowledge required for even a basic mastery of the discipline. There is little consensus regarding what might constitute a standard sociological curriculum; no hierarchy of concepts or models to mark a commonly agreed upon learning trajectory for a newcomer to the subject. There is no set of ‘paradigmatic texts’ that are, by common consent, unequivocally agreed to form the basic ‘building blocks’ of sociology. Even the once relatively standard ‘Marx, Weber, Durkheim’ model of ‘classical sociological theory 101’ is no longer a universal one. Our point here is not so much a lamentation regarding the passing of a golden age in which ‘we all knew what sociology was’. Indeed, such an age never existed, and there are in many cases good reasons for the ‘decentring’ of the discipline at this stage in its development. Rather, we wish to highlight the problem that arises because sociology, particularly relative to other social science disciplines such as psychology and economics, lacks a centralised intellectual consciousness. Partly in relation to this, there is little sense of a shared and consensual sociological enterprise, and with it, little basis for cross-paradigmatic collaboration; little intergenerational knowledge development; and few prospects for ‘advances’ in the discipline – let alone agreement upon what might constitute an ‘advance’, or even if such ‘advances’ are necessary or desirable. In suggesting this, we are not arguing that sociologists should emulate the models provided by psychology and economics in which, to oversimplify somewhat, logical positivism and empiricism are largely unquestioned as parts of a ‘standard paradigm’ for knowledge within these fields. It is nevertheless the case that, at the very least, the practitioners of these disciplines have a clearer sense of common endeavour, and have been, relative to sociology, more successful in developing institutional safeguards, professional standards, and the collaborative testing and revision of principles and models such that knowledge developed within these fields might be refined over time.⁹

Secondly, the paradigmatic disarray discussed above has also facilitated the growth of ‘factions’ within the discipline which, together with the emergence of established-outsider figurations surrounding the ‘membership’ of such groups, has compounded a tendency towards the development of

misrepresentations, sometimes caricatures, of the work of others. Perhaps partly in relation to its immense paradigmatic complexity and fragmentation, a particular characteristic of the discipline of sociology seems to be the often rapid and somewhat wholesale dismissal by some members of the discipline of entire 'schools' or approaches without careful consideration and cross-paradigm dialogue. Sociology has become a subject so vast in scope and yet so heterogeneous in focus and specialisms that to have even a basic grounding in all branches and iterations of the discipline would constitute an entire life's work. An associated trend, perhaps understandably, is that of a tendency towards theoretical pluralism and eclecticism relative to paradigmatic synthesis and consolidation. With it has come an increasing separation of theory from research as a specialism in its own right, particularly one that is treated as an undertaking which is relatively 'context-independent'.

Thirdly, in relation to the latter point, such a divorce of theory from research has greatly augmented the possibilities for the import into sociology of theoretical models, orientations, and intellectual practices from other disciplines. Taken together with the inter-related processes of fragmentation and specialisation, such tendencies have weakened sociologists relative to specialists in other subjects, making it difficult collectively to resist the intrusion into the field of the representatives of higher status subjects such as philosophy. A key example is the enthusiastic embrace by some practitioners of the discipline of some of the more radical variants of postmodernist philosophy. Whilst, as we suggested earlier, the postmodernist intellectual movement may have initially been useful as a means of problematising (though perhaps not always constructively) some of sociology's foundations, in its wake, postmodernist theorising has left an enduring current of thought which involves notions that, in some cases, verge on solipsism and extreme epistemic relativism – the shortcomings of which have been convincingly demonstrated (see, for example, Sokal and Bricmont (1998)). It is, of course, crucial for sociologists to investigate what is knowable about the social world and, indeed, for natural scientists to investigate the universe as a whole. However, the lack of any coherent 'centre' to sociology – and we use the term quite 'self-consciously' – has prevented the formation of safeguards against, as Pierre Bourdieu puts it, people being able 'to utter all kinds of nonsense about the social world' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992: 53).

Sociology and its discontents: Critical and political investments in knowledge

It is probably evident to most readers that the title of this Introductory chapter, 'Sociology and its Discontents', is modelled on a famous book by Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents* (1930) – one of the texts that influenced Elias when writing his *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939),

published in English as *The Civilising Process* (1978, 1982, 1994, 2000) and now reissued in a thoroughly revised edition in the Collected Works under the more accurate title *On The Process of Civilisation* (2012a). It is noteworthy that 'Civilisation and its Discontents', while now immediately recognisable as the title of one of Freud's key works, is rather a poor translation of the original German, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*. As Bruno Bettelheim (1985) observed, the term *Unbehagen* would have been better translated as 'discomfort' or 'malaise'. 'Discontents' has decidedly rational connotations, whereas Freud used *Unbehagen* precisely to designate a set of *feelings* (Bettelheim 1985: 98ff; Kilminster 2007: 168). A series of connotations in the original German are essentially lost in translation, notably Freud's central idea that 'discomforts' are integral to culture – that they are its inevitable and inescapable consequences. Moreover, as Elias discusses in the opening sections of *On the Process of Civilisation*, the term *Kultur* in the original German usage had a highly specific set of meanings, notably 'valued cultural accomplishments', and was in many ways antithetical to *Zivilisation*, which in German implies rather more superficial material and technical developments.¹⁰

Elias, too, faced problems with the translation of his work by others. However, notwithstanding such issues, there is much in this play on a mistranslated title that encapsulates a key aspect of our argument thus far: namely that within sociology there is currently considerable 'discontent', and for that matter, 'malaise' and 'discomfort'. And by further extension of the comparison with Freud's notion, such 'discontents' are inter-related with more general successive 'crises' that have come to characterise the 'human lot'. As we have argued, among a number of other defining problems currently faced by practitioners of the subject is the idea that there is at present little agreement on the very purpose or direction of sociology as an intellectual enterprise, let alone upon the meaning of key concepts and terminology. And yet, at the same time, within many sociological circles it has become something of an unspoken yet requisite credential to classify as 'critical' the approach to be adopted in almost any piece of academic writing, particularly one which deals centrally with the work of an important sociological writer. It is necessary to maintain 'critical distance', and at all costs to avoid the charge of 'uncritical' writing or analysis. It would seem that, whilst sociology as a discipline does not currently have a centralised intellectual consciousness, it does, nonetheless, have a relatively well-defined and widely disseminated, if on the whole unstated, set of scholarly mores and expectations for how serious practitioners of the discipline should conduct themselves intellectually, particularly in relation to what should *not* be said or done. Indeed, self-proclaimed 'critical sociologists' often implicitly, and in some cases explicitly, denounce as 'uncritical' others who choose not to announce themselves with this label. However, the term 'critical' – and its derivatives, 'criticism', 'critique' and 'critiquing' – are words that are themselves rarely defined, much less 'critically' scrutinised, and which are often taken for

granted. It is worth exploring these in some detail since they raise important questions about the role of sociological knowledge in forming the basis, firstly for interventions in the social world, and secondly, for the relationships between political investments and sociological practice and the 'twin crises' discussed above, all of which represent important concerns for Elias's work. Moreover, they are central to our arguments in this book as a whole.

In his paper entitled Norbert Elias's Post-Philosophical Sociology: From 'Critique' to Relative Detachment', Richard Kilminster (2011) has arguably gone further than most in teasing out the different layers of meaning of the terms 'criticism' and 'critical'. Kilminster starts with four everyday meanings, *viz*: one state about to change into another as in 'critical mass' in physics; decisive, crucial; estimating the qualities of literature, involving careful judgement, exact; and, currently most predominant, fault-finding, censorious, carping, passing judgement. It is this last set of meanings, or approximations to them, that come closest to the usage of the term by some contemporary sociologists who call themselves 'critical'. Critical sociologists in this vein write in opposition to a once-dominant Weberian orthodoxy in sociology, and in doing so are implicitly announcing their intention of passing 'critical' judgements on, for example, the capitalist mode of production, gender relations, colonial or neo-colonial¹¹ ethnic relations, etc. Thus, at the risk of some over-simplification, we might accordingly draw a distinction between normative judgements which stress how the world *should* be; empirical judgements which seek to stress how the world *actually is*; and critical judgements which stress, in particular, how the world *should not* be.

According to Kilminster, there have so far been three main technical uses of the term 'critical' in philosophy and sociology: the Kantian, where it means the demonstration of presuppositions through positing universal *a priori* logical concepts such as 'time', 'space', 'cause', 'morality' etc.; the Hegelian, where it refers to comparing particular phenomena with their ideal universal forms;¹² and the Marxian, in which 'practical-critical', that is, (in some cases) revolutionary, activity is said to involve re-fashioning the real world to make it become what it could ideally be. Most importantly, however, all three – and all their numerous variations – involve(d) utilising various forms of transcendental reasoning.

During the twentieth century, as the utopian ideals of the eighteenth and nineteenth century German philosophers (and their French and British counterparts) came increasingly to grief on the rocks of a complex, fluid, ever-changing and, in many respects, violent and unanticipated social reality, so philosophers and sociologists who continued to maintain the idea of themselves as 'critical' increasingly abandoned the conception of an historical *telos* ('end' or 'goal'). Examples of what was abandoned include the notion that history is marching inexorably towards socialism/communism, the disappearance of classes, the withering away of the state, and so forth. In their place, they opted for a deconstruction of 'grand theory' *per se* (as in the case of the

poststructuralist movement in the wake of the systemic uprisings of the late 1960s). Alternatively, they erected equally transcendent, generally more abstract and metaphysical concepts and arguments such as Adorno's 'utopian moment of the object', or Habermas's 'ideal speech situation' as universal yardsticks with which to compare present-day society; and Bauman and Levinas's ideas of 'pre-social moral awareness' and that 'being for the other' is pre-social and thus universal.

It was largely this descent of some branches of philosophy into metaphysics that led Elias to claim that it is a subject which has outlived its usefulness (Kilminster 1998; 2007). In its place, as we shall see, he offered the theoretical-empirical idea of 'detours *via* detachment' followed by 'secondary involvement' as the only secure way of augmenting the stock of reliable knowledge, the existence of which is a vital precondition for human survival and comfort. This is not to suggest that Elias claimed his work to be 'neutral', 'value-free', or 'objective'. Rather, Elias advocated 'detours *via* detachment' as means of collaboratively and inter-generationally adding to a disciplinary stock of knowledge pertaining to the sphere of human figurations. What the metaphor of a 'detour' means is that, like other social scientists, sociologists have specific interests to defend emotionally involved positions but should strive to learn, at first, to distance themselves from and control them, and then return to them *via* a process of 'secondary involvement'. A useful example of what Elias meant in this connection comes from one of his earliest pieces of solo writing in the sociology of sport. In the extract that follows, his starting point was the Holocaust and its place in and significance for the 'civilising' of the West. He went on to discuss the issue of how best to instil civilising self-controls into children, and suggested that, in approaching the study of such concerns, sociologists should crucially seek, through the exercise of self-distanciation and self-control, to get beyond the level of 'popular', 'folk' beliefs and their own and other people's ideals and values, and to penetrate what occurs in socialisation processes and what the consequences of particular socialising practices actually are. Elias wrote:

The Nazi episode served as a kind of warning; it was a reminder that the restraints against violence are not symptoms of the superiority of the *nature* of 'civilized nations', not eternal characteristics of their social or ethnic make-up, but aspects of a specific type of social development which has resulted in more differentiated and stable social control of the means of violence and in a corresponding conscience-formation. Evidently, this type of social development could be reversed... This does not necessarily imply that there are no grounds for evaluating the results of this development ... as 'better' than the corresponding manifestations of earlier developmental stages. Wider understanding of the nexus of facts provides indeed the only secure basis for value judgements of this type. Without it, we cannot know, for example, whether our manner of building up individual self-controls against physical violence is not associated with psychological malformations which themselves might appear highly barbaric to a more civilized age than ours (Elias and Dunning 1986: 143–44; 2008: 124–5)

In short, assuming that one does not get lost along the way, undertaking a detour *via* detachment can lay the foundations for a process of 'secondary involvement', for returning to a more 'involved' position in which – if the detour has been successful – armed with potentially *more* reliable, *more* 'reality-congruent' or *more* 'object-adequate' knowledge, subsequent generations of sociologists will have the potential to intervene in the social world in a manner that has more intended relative to unintended consequences than would have been possible hitherto. So, Elias and those who have taken up the mantle of his work, share with 'critical' sociologists, a desire to act, to 'make a difference' in the world (Giddens 1984), and in particular to change specific forms of social relations if they can be shown to embody constraints greater than are necessary, or which are inherently exploitative, dehumanising, or in other ways unsatisfactory. However, as will be seen in later sections of this book, particularly Chapters 4 and 5, the *ratio* between involvement and detachment (Elias 1987a; 2007a) – for it is arguably always a question of 'blends', 'balances', and 'alloys', and rarely if ever one of complete involvement or detachment – is in Elias's work envisaged in a diachronically structured manner with a considerable emphasis placed upon the importance of the 'detour' in order to avoid a collapse into either 'subjectivism' or 'idealism'. It is in some ways paradoxical that the very undertaking of writing papers and books on, or which utilise, sociology, including of course those of 'critical sociology', exemplifies a characteristic human 'detour behaviour': you cannot directly eat or drink what you think and write.

Where Elias parts company with the critical sociological tradition is that, while he felt with some degree of confidence that it is possible to make societies 'better', he considered 'utopias' – although they perform important functions for people – as in the end nothing more than dreams (Elias 1983b). Indeed, the original Greek derivatives of the term utopia, '*ou*', 'not' and '*topos*', 'place', mean 'non-existing place', and not 'ideal place' (the latter set of connotations appears to date back to Thomas Moore's (1516) fictional epic, *Utopia*) (OED 2005). In fact, although he did not use that term, Elias in his later work distinguished 'dystopias' or 'fear-dream utopias' from 'utopias' of a solely positive kind. As he expressed it:

In a number of fields, scientists have succeeded in raising the curtain of fantasies characteristic of the more spontaneous wishes and urges of humans which concealed from their eyes the real nexus of events. But the more realistic picture of the world revealed by scientists was often far from pleasant. Not only Darwin's theory of evolution, but many other scientific discoveries, too, replaced an emotionally far more satisfying fantasy picture with a more realistic but emotionally far less satisfying picture of the world in general and of humanity in particular. Copernicus' and Galileo's fight against the egocentric conception of the universe started the sequence of traumatic emotional disappointments that went hand in hand with many great scientific advances. To regard the earth and thus humanity as the centre of the universe was emotionally highly satisfying.

It flattered people's ego; it was at the same time for humans a meaningful arrangement of world affairs. To think of the earth as a petty satellite of the sun was disappointing as well as devoid of meaning.

Further advances in scientific cosmology have heightened again and again the sense of the grim and desolate meaninglessness of the physical universe. So far, human beings have entirely failed to draw conclusions from the fall of the illusions brought about by the blind social automatism of scientific advance, and from the more realistic picture of the universe on all its levels emerging from that advance. They have not yet come to terms with the fact that human beings themselves and, as far as we know, solely humans in the world, are the makers of meaning. Their fear-dream utopias reflect the slowly awakening disillusionment with the world as it is. So far they can only complain, as if someone owed them a better, more meaningful world. The traumatic shock, the mourning for lost illusions still blocks the realisation that no one can make this world better and more meaningful (other than) they, human beings, themselves. (Elias 2009c: 273)

Reading this passage in isolation might well lead one to conclude that Elias was bound to be deeply pessimistic. However, this was not the case. He was what one might call an 'optimistic realist' as emerges from the following extract from an essay he wrote which was published in 1991:

Cosmologists inform us that the sun is ... at the middle of its foreseeable lifespan ... and that they expect [it] to continue its role as a life-supporting star for several thousand millions of years. If humankind does not destroy itself, if it is not destroyed by a meteor or another cosmic collision – which are certainly ... real possibilities – the natural conditions of its existence will give humans the opportunity to tackle the problems of their life together on earth, or wherever, for a ... long time to come. A future of 4,000 million years should give humans the opportunity to muddle their way out of several blind alleys and to learn how to make their life together more pleasant more meaningful and worthwhile. (2011: 173)

As we have already stated, according to Elias a crucial precondition for contributing to and, above all, for gaining a degree of control over such a betterment of the human lot is the creation of a greater fund of reliable knowledge than has currently been attained, not only about the world at large in its physical, chemical, and biological aspects, but above all about ourselves and the societies we form. Where Elias was perhaps rather more pessimistic was in his assessment of the capacity for sociology, at least as the discipline has developed thus far, to rise to this challenge. In his view, and in ours, sociology was and is a subject in crisis, and one that without a fundamental shift of emphasis and direction, can never form the basis for the social 'fund' of knowledge required to address the recurrent human crises out of which the subject itself was born.

In the chapters that follow, we wish to show how Elias aimed to address such problems through the development of his own sociological orientation, and how he sought ultimately to provide ways of constructively dealing with aspects of the sociological and human crises. In Chapter 1, we shall explore

how he came to develop his distinctive sociological approach, firstly by providing a brief biographical sketch of Elias's life and work, and secondly, through exploring the interweaving of biography and history in the formation of the central tenets of what he wrote. In Chapter 2, we examine some – but by no means all – of the key concepts of figurational sociology. Chapter 3 is devoted to a discussion of Elias's principal contribution to sociology, the theory of 'civilising processes'. This discussion focuses on describing the theory and its empirical base. It also involves reviewing some of the chief critiques of Elias's work, an undertaking to which we return later in the book. In Chapters 4 and 5, we engage with Elias's contributions to the sociology of knowledge and seek to distil the 'epistemological', 'ontological' and 'methodological' components of his distinctive sociological practice. In Chapter 6, we locate Elias's work within sociology more generally through a focus upon both the critical reception of his work by his contemporaries, and *via* an in-depth comparison with key figures in contemporary sociology, notably Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. Finally, in the Conclusion, we explore the implications of Elias's work for the future of sociology and consider the prospects for a possible 'relational turn' within the discipline.