

Global Interdependencies: What's new in the human society of individuals? The political and academic relevance of Norbert Elias's work today

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Norbert Elias Conference

Short Presentation of the Conference

'Some of my readers may perhaps wish me to tell only about aspects of humankind's development that are pleasant and hopeful. But such a selection is the true meaning of the trahison des clercs. We may or may not welcome the increasing integration of humankind. What is quite certain is that, to begin with, it increases the impotence of the individual in relation to what is happening at the top level of humanity' (Norbert Elias, Changes in the We-I Balance [1987], The Society of Individuals, Collected Works 10, UCD Press, 2010: 149).

Thirty years later it seems that nothing has happened to contradict the assessment of the increasing integration of humankind as being a major trend, or more exactly that 'integration-disintegration tensions' are part and parcel of the contemporary world. However, we have more difficulties in imagining how it would be possible to see only the 'pleasant and hopeful aspects' of human development or even what they finally are. Global warming, refugee crises, the rise of populisms and finally the explosion of old and new forms of war and terrorism: Elias was right to wonder whether humankind would survive the violence of his time and ours.

The next Elias Conference in Brussels will be the opportunity to explore the

political topicality of process sociology and to learn from Norbert Elias's analysis and intuitions to think about (de-)democratisation, (dis-)Europeanisation and Brexit, (de-)civilizing processes in America in the Trump era, or facing the tragedy of migrants in Mediterranean, among other signs of civilizing breakdowns, or at least potential breakdowns or counter-processes. This conference also aims to open new fields of discussion and to consolidate and enlarge the already existing research networks among Elias's fellows and readers of all countries, disciplines and generations. In the light of today's crises, following Ghandi's famous comment - 'What do you think about Western civilization? I think it would be a good idea' - the perspectives from the Global South on Western civilization could prove to be particularly valuable.

The conference will also include a Special Session on 'Process Sociology and Processual Sociology', centred on the work of Andrew Abbot and his book *Processual Sociology* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), exploring the ways in which his thinking and that of the Elias research tradition are complementary (or otherwise). Professor Abbott has agreed in principle to take part in the conference, although it is too early to confirm that that will prove possible. With or without his actual presence, this will be an unprecedented opportunity for dialogue between different horizons of research.

The conference will be preceded by a PhD workshop on 4-5 December 2018 organised by Professors Robert van Krieken and Stephen Mennell for PhD students interested in integrating civilizing processes and historical sociology perspectives into their research. Further information about this will be widely circulated in spring 2018.

Call for Papers

The conference in Brussels will aim to question current global, regional or local political issues through examining the processes involved in historical and developmental sociological perspective: that is to say, it will aim to consider short-, mid- and long-term social processes without disconnecting the analysis of the political (polity, politics or policies) from the other aspects of the public and private human social life and their multilevel interactions.

1. Here are some of the main topics or questions that it is hoped to raise:

* **Functional Democratisation and Functional De-democratisation**

The question of whether Elias was too confident and sweeping in seeing 'functional democratisation' as a dominant trend in the modern world has been much discussed recently by, among others, Cas Wouters, Stephen Mennell, Nico Wilterdink and Behrouz Alikhani. Does this trend co-exist with a counterpoint of 'functional de-

democratisation'? This 'theoretical' question also has very practical, empirical dimensions, as can be seen in the following suggested thematic sessions:

*** *De-democratisation, Habitus (and Brexit) in the European Union and beyond***

Elias pointed out that increasing integration cannot be confused with 'progress', but he did not really answer the question of what could be the significations of 'progress'. Today, one can have the impression of many regressions, even considering a rather neutral conception of 'integration of human kind'. In this session, papers are expected to explore rise of new and old forms of nationalisms and the question of the crisis of democracy, especially in the European Union and regarding its representative forms.

*** *Uncertainty and the Rise of Populisms***

In the following, the conference will ask the question of the populisms today, which are not to be confined to the traditional extremes - if they have ever been. How can we understand and explain new growing success of extreme right, extreme left and more broadly of radical populist political parties in old and new European democracies and in Latin America? To what extent and through which ways should the mainstream quantitative and behavioural standards of political sociology be renewed? Which deep-set global trends are to be considered? How can we explore dynamics behind the success of populist parties and leaders at a micro level? And what could possibly the consequences of such successes be across different countries? It is within this context too, that reconsidering of Elias's 'drag effect of national loyalties' concept would seem particularly stimulating and appropriate.

*** *Terrorism, Violence, Anger and Fear***

Violence is a main topic for sociology of civilizing and decivilizing processes. Papers are invited to concentrate on the multiple forms and on the origins of what is properly or wrongly called terrorism today. In particular, the recent attacks in Nice (2016), London or Barcelona (2017) revealed the importance of new modus operandi that seems to signify a step back from more organised and centralised forms of attacks. How can we interpret them? How do people react to them? And how can we significantly relate these phenomena of long-trend and more recent evolutions at work in the Middle-East, Asia and Africa - and Europe? This session is particularly opened to any kind of interdisciplinary dialogue, from international relations to psychology.

*** *Borders, Migrations, Security and 'Refugee Crises'***

Irreducible to the monopolisation of violence, the state is another core concept of historical sociology. For some it has however to be overcome in its bordered and national forms by globalisation and quite recent forms of regional integration, for instance at the European level. For the two last decades border studies and critical security studies have at the same time demonstrated that far from disappearing the importance of borders and of new security issues have been revealed by the achievement of globalisation. How the concept of state as fostered by process sociology is thus affected by this apparent contradiction? How can we rethink citizenship and tensions over the value of the nation-state in such paradoxical context? In this session, papers are also invited to address the role of rights and law in process sociology, and to investigate these questions sociologically 'from below' and/or at the level of the ruling elites.

* ***The Role of Utopias***

The conference will be interested in re-exploring the roles of utopia, in politics and social sciences and in fostering the dialogue between apparently very distant approaches in philosophy and sociology. In particular, could the global utopias - from the 'perpetual peace', to the Human Rights - be a medium connecting more descriptive, comprehensive and reconstructive perspectives, on the one hand, and those that would be more prescriptive, value and action-oriented on the other hand?

* ***Open Fields***

Beside the more specific 'political' topics, the next Elias Conference in Brussels will draw special attention to the interdisciplinary dialogue and the use of mixed methods, plural temporalities and different approaches (political/macro/global ones and more micro-sociological) in usual or less usual fields in process sociology. Whatever the topic, the papers are thus also invited to reformulate in a more reflexive way a series of sociological issues traditionally considered by process and historical sociology, in matter of urban development, sport, violence, or gender studies, but also on the subjects of intimacy, celebrity, religiosity, health and care, fashion or art.

* ***Working with Elias Yesterday, Teaching (with) Elias Today: Narratives and Testimonial***

Finally, a round table will be dedicated to sharing experiences and testimonies of working with Elias and learning directly from him. Elias conferences are always rich indeed in related experiences that are often 'distilled' among *Figurati* around a dinner table or in a pub. Why not share more broadly such precious and often highly significant anecdotes in order to promote the sharing of knowledge and to foster a broader and more open research culture? In the same spirit, another round

table aims at bringing together professors and teachers-researchers working on Elias with their students today or using some of his concepts and methods in their courses.

*** *Special Session around Andrew Abbot's work and book Processual Sociology* - see above**

2. Other propositions for sessions

*** *Elias and Social Dynamics of his Time*** (a session proposed by Adrian Jitschin)

The theory of Elias developed in a specific social environment. Elias was socialised during the final stages of the German Empire and over the course of the Weimar Republic. This was a period of turmoil and competition between ideas: liberal, socialistic and nationalistic positions strove for followers. The political environment was fluctuating. Several of Elias's teachers and acquaintances were engaged in these disputes. The session is intended to illuminate some of these persons, ideas and positions. The activities of that period should be explained by papers who examine a specific aspect and its relevance for Elias: for example a concept (*Freischwebende Intelligenz*, Freemasonry, Zionism) or a person (Alfred Weber, Richard Hönigswald, Siegfried Marck). Together, the papers should give an impression of Elias's embeddedness as a European intellectual.

*** *Re-Figuration of Space*** (suggested session organizers: Nina Baur, Linda Hering, Theresa Vollmer and Gunter Weidenhaus)

Norbert Elias is usually seen as a pioneer in process sociology. Meanwhile, it is often forgotten that he also pioneered spatial sociology both on the macro-level (e.g. concerning the process of nation-building in *On the Process of Civilisation*) and on the micro-level (e.g. on the relevance of architecture for reflecting and pre-structuring social interaction in *The Court Society*). Today, owing to processes such as digitalization and mediatization, globalization and the rise of local contexts as well as migration, spatial relations that formed during modernization and have been established since then seem to be dissolving and replaced by new forms of spatial relations. In this session, papers are expected that explore these new forms of spatial relations, that explain current process of spatial re-figuration or that examine how spatial re-figuration changes society.

*** *Furthering Process-Oriented Methodology: Towards Process-Oriented Micro-Macro-Analysis*** (suggested session organizers: Nina Baur, Lilli Braunisch, Jannis Hergesell and Maria Norkus)

Many of the current sociological methodological and theoretical approaches are best suited to analysing individual behaviour. However, as methodological

discussion in the last decade has shown, research in the tradition of figurational sociology needs a process-orientated micro-macro-analysis which is comparative and typically mixes historical methods, quantitative methods (e.g. surveys) and qualitative methods (e.g. ethnography). While current social science methodology provides valuable tools for such an analysis, many methodological questions for research in the Eliasian framework remain open, and papers in this session should address one of these issues, amongst them: how to assess causality; how to define the defining the population/field of analysis (i.e. figuration); how to conduct a temporal sampling for process-orientated methodology; and how to find an equivalent for ethnography in historical research.

3. Other propositions are expected, for instance, around these broad themes:

* ***Processes and the City***

* ***Established and Outsiders and Social Inequalities Today***

* ***How to Use the Classics in the Present Day***

* ***Sociology, History, Philosophy, Law, Political Science and Psychology: Is Interdisciplinary Dialogue just a Myth?***

Further Information and Call for Papers/Sessions ([Link](#))
