

Norbert Elias: Process of Civilization and Theory of Sciences

On the Process of Civilisation (alternatively *The Civilizing Process*) is the English title of the most famous book written by the German-born sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990). In this book, Elias investigates in a non-normative way the interconnected development of manners and of social structures in Europe from the end of the Middle Age. The ‘process-sociology’ (alternatively ‘figurational sociology’) that his work inspired is characterized by a long-term historical approach, interested in the multiple aspects of the social life. Crossing disciplinary borders, the study of social processes is also based on cross-cultural comparisons. Process-sociology consequently challenges all forms of reification, notably the fictive methodological opposition between the society and the individual that is at the foundation of individualist and holist approaches. The theory of knowledge advocated by Elias and his followers finally poses questions about the development of the social sciences.

The book

Über den Prozess der Zivilisation was first published in German in Basel in 1939, when its author was in exile in London. Based on European writings on manners, the first volume examines the changes in the behaviour of the upper classes in the West through the centuries, for example at table. Elias demonstrates that disgust and reserve are nothing innate or invariant. Behaviour and sensibility have been continuously shaped according to what was socially expected, till a point where modelling became

unconscious for the individuals. The second volume links the long-term social process towards civilisation with the dynamics of state-formation in Europe.

The Western civilising process thus involves at the same time psychogenesis and sociogenesis. The influence of Sigmund Freud is evident, but Elias is more interested in showing the socio-historical nature of any superego formation process, by inquiring into how social constraint progressively mutes towards self-constraint. For instance, the end of the age of feudal warriors and the progressive establishment of the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence consolidated the constraints imposed on the aggressive drives, along with the greater development of economic interdependencies.

Unnoticed in 1939, Elias's book and the idea of a 'blind' and unplanned but directional process was later subject to many criticisms, aggravated by the context of the Second World War and the consequent contestation of the very possibility of talking about 'civilisation'. Nevertheless, Elias's enquiry had little to do with ethnocentric and unilinear progress theories that marked the emerging social sciences in the nineteenth century, even though he recognized Comte and Marx in particular as pioneers of process theories. But the Eliasian approach has even less in common with the radical right-wing antidemocratic and pessimistic visions that flourished in the early twentieth century, such as Oswald Spengler's thesis of *The Decline of the West*.

Process sociology

Not only did Elias never suggest that there was only one, European, process of civilisation, but he invited to challenge his model by comparing the Western process to others, such as those that took place in Asian court societies. Moreover he pointed out that civilisation has to be considered as a process that is neither good nor bad. For example, civilisation does not mean the disappearance of violence from the social life, but rather a shift towards state military institutions, and into an inner struggle that takes place *inside* highly self-controlled individuals. Elias also showed that state formation unleashed increased violence in the relations *between* states.

Civilising processes are plural, reversible, and often go hand in hand with ‘de-civilising’ processes. This idea is central in the essays Elias devoted to Germany and to the Nazi period. In his *Studies on the Germans*, he tried so to advance a valid explanation of what he called ‘the breakdown of civilisation’, without giving up the principles of the processes sociology.

Norbert Elias’s sociology often depicts itself as ‘reality congruent’. It implies first of all an interest in how the societies change to become what they actually are. It also forces the recognition that one society, or ‘figuration’, is always a society ‘of individuals’. It means that there is no society existing apart from networks of interconnected individuals. At the same time, there is no *homo clausus* or isolated individual pre-existing social life, as people are irreducible to ‘thinking statues’ depicted by the classical philosophy from Descartes to Kant. Individuals ‘depend’ on each other in the various aspects of their life and inherit their institutions, ideas, manners, behaviour, mode of thinking and feeling from precedent generations, although they continuously transform them. It entails a certain eclecticism regarding subjects of investigation, and

justifies a global perspective. The different fields of moving social reality, from politics to sport or emotions, are indeed linked through individuals, instead of being separated as they seem to be for the hyper-specialisation that occurred in the social sciences and that Elias denounced, as well as ‘the retreat of sociologists into the present’.

Reality congruence thus imposes a great inter-disciplinary openness, and a long-term historical approach, as some of the features of societies are transformed on the scale of centuries. Process sociology is far from according with a certain vision of figurations as stable or harmoniously evolving systems. While avoiding any kind of determinism, it rather seeks in the changing balances of power between groups the ways figurations are potentially changing in their various aspects.

Avoiding structuralism and functionalism that dominated sociology in the second half of the twentieth century, Norbert Elias did not really found a unified school of thought. Yet his work became particularly influential in the Netherlands, and eventually in Britain, two countries where he taught and lived. In France his sociology has renewed interest in a diachronic sociological approach, notably because of certain proximity with the historians of the *Annales* School and with Michel Foucault’s themes. Pierre Bourdieu contributed too to popularize the concept of ‘*habitus*’, which Elias used much earlier to describe embodied social knowledge.

The theory of knowledge

Elias was quite suspicious of any form of idealism. He first gained a doctorate in philosophy, but he had a major dispute with his teacher, the Neo-Kantian Richard

Hönigswald, about the Kantian idea that some *a priori* elements of thought exist that do not derive from experience but are permanent and universal. Process sociology is particularly concerned about balancing empirical observations against theory. In Elias's view, *what* sociology unveils, discovery, in a sense prevails over *how* it does it. Elias totally disagreed with Karl R. Popper. First, the sociologist contested the pre-eminence of methodology in itself. Second, his writings are very critical of the predominance of the methods imported from physics and natural sciences. Given their historical character, processes that constitute social reality are in fact too complex to be comprehended by mean of the only quantitative and analytic tools, observation and measurements. Eliasian process sociology on that point inherits questions raised by German epistemology, which, from Wilhelm Dilthey to Max Weber, feed a fundamental distinction between *Kulturwissenschaft* and *Naturwissenschaft*, as expressed by Heinrich Rickert in 1899.

Nevertheless, the process approach tries to avoid all reifying oppositions of that kind. Sociology is a particular standpoint focused on people together, while psychology interests itself in people as individuals. And a human being also is, or has, a body, which is within the scope of biology. In other words, sciences are linked to each other through their common human subject. Not only do the humanities and social sciences depend on natural sciences and physics, but the latter are also social products that historically vary – which made them subjects of investigation by the first.

This perspective of continua rather than dichotomies remains present in Elias's reflections on the dynamics of 'involvement and detachment'. The main issue here is that of the situation of the researcher, and it is irreducible to the problem of objectivity. The social scientist in particular is evidently part of the social life. Elias seeks to ask how this

involvement varies and to what extent it is necessary to perform his role or, at the opposite, the extent to which it may blind him to certain observations. He thus enlarges Max Weber's question about the usefulness of a social scientist's commitment to certain social or political beliefs. Process sociology also proposes a reflection on how a certain self-detachment can be reached. Finally, it re-opens the debate on the conditions on which sociologists may, or should, face the problems of their times.

Florence Delmotte

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