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# Elias and Organization: Preface

elias and organization

Tim Newton

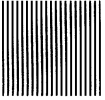
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Norbert Elias wrote his most influential work, *The Civilizing Process* (Elias, 1994a), shortly before the Second World War in that refuge for the intellectual immigrant known as the British Museum. More than 50 years later we are now publishing the first English-language symposium on Norbert Elias and organization studies. Why the long wait? One simple answer is that although Elias had some experience of business,<sup>1</sup> he did not focus on either organization theory or analysis. However, this explanation is only part of the story. To put it into context, we need to address both Elias's biography and developments in the social sciences.

Elias came to London in 1935, having worked in his native Germany between 1930 and 1933 as an unpaid assistant with his friend, Karl Mannheim (working in the same building as members of the Frankfurt School), and then trying, and failing, to get an academic position in Paris—where, as Robert van Krieken notes, 'being Jewish as well as a foreigner would have been an almost insurmountable barrier' (1998: 22). He spent nearly four decades in Britain, which as Dennis Smith observes, 'were a time of almost complete obscurity' (2000: 12). He did not obtain a full-time academic post until he was 57 when he was appointed to a lectureship in the sociology department at Leicester University.<sup>2</sup> Only after his official retirement from Leicester in 1962 did he begin to develop international recognition. As Smith also records, publications taking Elias as a central theme accelerated from the early 1980s with a sharp 'upward trajectory' since 1997 (2000: 13). Van Krieken notes some of the praise and recognition that Elias latterly received. For instance, Anthony

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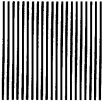
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Giddens described his work as 'an extraordinary achievement, anticipating issues which came to be generally explored in social theory only at a much later date' (1992: 389). Zygmunt Bauman (1979: 123) noted that Elias was 'indeed a great sociologist', while Lewis Coser (1980: 194) stressed that he was 'one of the most significant sociological thinkers of our day'. Yet in spite of such growing acclaim<sup>3</sup> it is only now that Elias is gaining global recognition.

So why was Elias ignored for so long, and why has there been a burgeoning of interest and a late recognition that he was a major social thinker? In part, international acclaim was constrained by the four decades that passed before *The Civilizing Process* was finally published in English (the first volume in 1978, and the second in 1982). There were also constraints on his accessibility in other major European languages. For example, *The Civilizing Process* was not published in a German paperback edition until 1976. Similarly, though Michel Foucault translated Elias's *The Loneliness of Dying* into French, this translation was never published (van Krieken, 1998). However, it is not just linguistic accessibility which explains Elias's relatively recent acclaim. It is also due to changes in sociology and the social sciences over the past three decades, not just the waning of functionalist spirit but also the slow attrition of former disciplinary divisions, such as that between sociology and history or sociology and biology (see Benton, 1991). Elias's argument remains relevant to such erosion because of the way in which he frequently traversed disciplinary boundaries.

In part, recent attention to Elias can be seen as situated within the increasing interest in the relationship between social processes and subjectivity, most notably witnessed in the work of Foucault. In this context, Elias's work has particular appeal because it continually addresses the interconnections between large-scale social processes and the psychological make-up of individuals and collectivities, the way they think *and* feel. His studies inform our understanding of our emotion, our persona and our habitus while situating them within a societal and global context. At the same time, Elias has certain similarities with Foucault (Smith, 1999) yet does not suffer from quite the same question marks about human agency that are witnessed in Foucault (Burkitt, 1993; Newton, 1998a).

In addition, Elias's perspective has notable similarities with actor-network theory. Both contain argument that resists neat epistemological categorization through labels such as modernist/postmodernist (Latour, 1993, 1999; Law, 1994; van Krieken, 1998; Newton, 1999). With both, there is an emphasis that agency and change are best viewed from the perspective of interdependency networks. At the heart of both is a critique of the 'person closed in on himself—*homo clausus*, to use Elias' expression' (Callon, 1999: 185, original emphasis). They project a 'networked agency', an image of 'people in the plural . . . each of them relatively open, interdependent processes' (Elias, 1970: 121).



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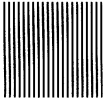
Elias's work also touches on a range of global issues such as the greening of organizations and society (Newton, 2001), globalization, the state, and the individual (Roudometof and Robertson, 1995), how we understand time and temporality (as Barbara Adam notes, Elias 'transcends the dualisms of . . . natural-social time': Adam, 1990: 18), and how we reconcile 'nature' and 'society'—as John Urry observes, Elias shows how 'nature, society and individuals are embedded in each other and are interdependent' (Elias, 1992: 16, quoted in Urry, 2000: 119). In addition, Elias's studies (e.g. Elias, 1991a) directly address issues of the body (Hassard et al., 2000), the relationship between sociology, biology and Darwinian evolution (Burkitt, 1999), and the centrality of emotion to social process (Newton, 1998b).

In sum, the rapid 'emergence' of Elias decades after his key studies relates to a mixture of accessibility, theoretical development and a relevance to global issues. Fortunately for Elias, he 'never lost my belief in myself' (1994b: 67). Recognition came first in mainland Europe, most notably in Germany, The Netherlands and France. In 1977, he was awarded the Theodor Adorno prize by the city of Frankfurt, and the University of Frankfurt made him an Emeritus Professor. He received frequent invitations to give guest lectures and seminars in Germany and The Netherlands, and generated a particular interest among staff and students at the University of Amsterdam. In 1985, he was invited by Pierre Bourdieu to give lectures at the Collège de France and the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. Shortly before his death on 1 August 1990, he received the Premio Europeo Amalfi prize for *The Society of Individuals* (Elias, 1991b) and the Italian Nonio Prize (van Krieken, 1998).

In addition to the constraints noted above, there may also be other, less obvious, explanations for Elias's lengthy period 'in the wilderness' before such acclaim. First, Elias steadfastly avoided an ideological position since he equated ideology with mythology and he saw sociologists as destroyers of myths (Elias, 1970: 52; 1994b, 39–40). Secondly, though he created devotees among his students, he embraced none of the traditional trappings of the intellectual, as witnessed, say, in the iconic appeal of Einstein or the woolly-bearded Marx. Instead, as Smith observes, 'Elias looked like a middle manager in a metal goods factory' (2000: 11, a position not unlike one he once held). The contrast with his students could be rather striking. As Pieter Spierenburg observes of his time at Amsterdam in the early 1970s:

Occasionally, we would continue a discussion with Norbert [Elias] at some place over a beer or so. I remember us sitting outside at Hoppe's: an old man and four or five longhaired youths. It struck me as an unusual event at the time, but to Norbert it seemed quite normal. (1997: 4)

It is impossible not to emphasize two other aspects of Elias's identity. First, he was a 'German Jew' (1994b: 79) who 'loved Germany very much'



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and who 'identified very much with German classicism' (1994b: 18). The extent to which he was ever able to reconcile the two categories, German and Jew, has been the subject of some debate (Smith, 2000), in part as a consequence of his seeming reluctance to directly address them. As Smith notes, Elias did not address 'the question of Germany' until the early 1960s (Smith, 2000: 52) while an extended treatment had to wait until the publication of *The Germans* (Elias, 1996). Yet their influence on his life seems unmistakable. His mother died in Auschwitz, the image of which, Elias stated, 'even after forty years, I cannot get over' (1994b: 79). Second, like Marx, Elias grew up in a German bourgeois habitus from which he felt some alienation, which he later described as 'too bourgeois for me' (Elias, 1994b: 6). It is an open question as to how much either of these experiences informed his work, such as his interest in Freud or in 'outsiders', or in the redemptive possibilities of a longer-term direction to human history, or in the way in which, as with the bourgeois attitude to 'sexuality and death', much of life lies 'completely hidden behind the scenes' (1994b: 15), a 'characteristic of this whole process which we call civilization' (1994a: 99, added emphasis).

In what follows in this symposium, we will examine the relevance of Elias to organization theory and analysis. As noted above, in spite of Elias's business experience, this remains a relatively unexplored area within Elias's own work. Furthermore, until recently, work relating Elias to organization studies has remained a rather isolated activity, especially outside The Netherlands and Germany. In consequence, the present set of English-language papers represents a novel departure. The authors introduce 'Eliasian' argument, explore its relevance to social/organizational theory and analysis, and consider its limitations. The emphasis which we give to each of these concerns will vary from paper to paper, with some placing a great stress on exploration, others on critique, some on organization theory, others on social theory, and so on.

In the first article, I will outline central Eliasian concepts such as that of 'figuration' and illustrate a range of Elias's argument within, *and beyond*, his best known 'court studies'. Attention will then be paid to the way in which an Eliasian perspective re-frames existing organizational theory, including Foucauldian theory, labour process theory and, especially, actor-network theory. In addition, I will consider the relevance of Elias to current fields of organizational analysis such as organizational strategy and change, violence and organizations, globalization, emotion in organizations, the management of knowledge, history and organizations, industrial relations, and organizations and the natural environment. I will also consider whether Elias represented a rather unreconstructed Freudian, and debate the adequacy of his account of interdependency and subjectivity.

The second and third papers further explore and apply Eliasian analysis. That of Ad van Iterson, Willem Mastenbroek and Joseph Soeters considers aspects of Eliasian thought, particularly the interrelation



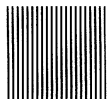
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between changes in identity and the formation of nation states. These arguments are then applied to social and organizational analysis, such as the relation of *Kultur* and *civilization* to European industrialization, the relation between industrial organization and discipline and restraint, and the significance of 'informalization' processes for organizational structuring, differentiation and integration. The third paper, by Sue Dopson, draws on her Eliasian study of the UK National Health Service. It illustrates the relevance of a number of Eliasian concepts to organizational analysis, such as the attention to interdependency and interweaving, and the use of game models as a means of exploring figurations. Dopson's paper focuses on the relevance of Elias to our thinking about processes of organizational change. She explores the significance of *unplanned* change, and, like Ad van Ijtersen et al., Smith, and myself, she stresses the need to view organizations from within a long-term social and historical context.

The fourth article, by Dennis Smith, challenges central precepts of Elias's thinking, particularly his stress upon the 'civilizing' direction of human history, especially that witnessed in the West. In referring to the 'civilizing process', Elias does not imply a value judgement such that, say, the western world is seen as more 'advanced' (Mennell, 1989), and indeed he refers to members of modern western society as 'late barbarians' (Elias, 1988: 190). Rather, he argues that there were certain processes in the West, particularly the formation of stable monarchies, which were associated with what we now perceive as 'civilized' behaviour. Smith, however, argues that we have witnessed a 'humiliation' process as much as a 'civilizing' process, illustrating his argument through reference to human rights, the salience of shame, and the retreat from older forms of bondage based on patriarchy, feudalism and colonialism toward the bureaucratization and marketization of social relationships. He introduces a typology of humiliation processes and illustrates how they operate within organizational hierarchies and networks. Smith's analysis resembles Eliasian work in its attention to power and subjectivity within a macro-historical perspective, yet its emphasis upon humiliation represents a striking departure from current Eliasian argument.

Other papers in the symposium also aim to criticize as well as illustrate Eliasian argument. We do not intend to erect Elias as the 'Great Man', the prophet who can explain the social world and its ills. In consequence, all the papers attend at least in part to limitations in Elias's work. In my own paper, I draw attention to the charge that Elias presents us with a psychological reductionism, and remains insufficiently attentive to the diversity of relationship between subjectivity and interdependency. Ad van Ijtersen et al. question the historicization and conceptualization of 'informalization' processes. Sue Dopson briefly draws attention to, yet questions, critiques presented by Derek Layder and Dick Pels, among others. Dennis Smith offers a more thorough-going critique of the entire



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direction of Eliasian theory through its questioning of Elias's emphasis upon western history as a civilizing process.

Finally, anyone approaching Elias needs to remain wary of a feature of his work. As van Krieken notes,

. . . a mistake made by both defenders and critics of Elias is to assume a simple unity to his work. In fact, it is frequently characterized by tensions and contradictions, and it is the working through of these tensions which makes his work interesting and important. (1998: 4)

In an introductory collection such as this one, there is a tendency to portray a unity in order to help the novice come to some understanding of the argument. Readers should, however, bear in mind that nothing is ever as simple as it looks, an aphorism that is particularly apposite with Elias's work.

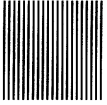
## Notes

- 1 At first for a metal goods factory owner 'who wanted an academic to work with him' (Elias, 1994b: 31), later in opening 'a small factory, for toys' where he 'lost all the money I had' (Elias, 1994b: 49). Both were related to enforced interruptions to his academic interests, and as Smith notes, the latter 'was no ordinary toy business' being composed of Elias and 'a writer and a sculptor, both communists' (Smith, 2000: 11).
- 2 He was also offered a sociology lectureship at Leeds around the same time (Elias, 1994b: 65).
- 3 Along with acclaim came critique. For instance, Giddens, Bauman and Coser also all presented critique of Elias (see Fletcher, 1997).

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