

Norbert Elias: A proposed intellectual portrait for the 20th anniversary of his passing (1990-2010)

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Translated from Catalan by the author

Abstract

In the summer of 1990, one of the most eminent sociologists of the 20th century, the German Norbert Elias, died in Amsterdam. His profoundly interwoven life and work are a reflection of the complexity – the light and shade – of the past century. With this proposed intellectual portrait on the 20th anniversary of his death, we are attempting offer a snapshot a figure and a body of work which, because of its magnitude and originality, undoubtedly deserves to be considered among the most important in sociology. As the thread running through this portrait, we propose a combination of the physical and symbolic places, spaces and people, events and connections that marked a long life and academic career which was little known and largely unrecognised until his later years. It is a career which unquestionably constitutes one of the most outstanding and attractive legacies that the sociology of the past century has passed on to new generations of social science researchers.

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1. Breslau

If there was an author connected to the social sciences throughout the 20th century whose life seemed to have been destined for ostracism it was Norbert Elias. Elias was born in Breslau (at that time in Germany, now Wrocław, Poland) on the 22nd of June 1897 into a bourgeois German Jewish family, and death came to him on Wednesday, the 1st of August 1990 in Amsterdam, at age 93. As the author later recalled, "My father was very German, very Prussian" (Elias, 1991:15). Hermann Elias was the owner of a small industrial textile firm and Norbert's mother, Sophi, a woman who fit within the traditional model of the "harmonious difference" (Elias, 1991:17) in gender roles, was in charge of running the household and social relations. Elias drew the strength and tenacity which would be tested to the limit throughout his life from his parents, to whom he dedicated his best-known work "The Civilising Process" (Elias, 1987a), and from the seamlessly stable environment and social situation of his youth, typical of the old system. As he said (1991:23-24):

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“It is this great feeling of security that I experienced in my childhood that explains my later perseverance in the period when I was writing books and no-one was taking any notice of me (...) I had the intuition that it would all come out right in the end and I attribute that intuition to the great feeling of security that I enjoyed as an only child, thanks to the love of my parents.”

As a member of a Jewish family in Germany in the early 20th century, Elias was often asked about discrimination, racism and insecurity. He responded with a reflection that he also included in his work about the reinterpretation of the past (1991:22-23):

“When I think that I lived through the growing wave of anti-Semitism from the beginning of the 20th century it seems incredible to me. At that time, we said to ourselves that this (racism and discrimination against Jews) could not happen in Germany. I felt completely safe, although from today's point of view that may seem incredible.”

These statements are impressive ones knowing how history developed, and still more so considering that his mother died in the Auschwitz concentration camp in about 1941. To understand the point to which social representations have power over people's actions, Elias emotionally recalled (Elias, 1991:69) that on a visit his parents made to London a year before their deaths, they were still asking Norbert why on earth he had to stay in England if he did not know anyone and why they needed to be afraid of the Nazis if they had never done anything wrong. Elias incorporated all this experience and these memories into his theory when he said that past ages cannot be simplistically analysed using modern criteria. As he said (Elias, 1991:69), the belief that German Jews at that time had a collective awareness of the threat to them is no more than an *"a posteriori* projection".

Elias' military service and participation in World War I as a soldier – a soldier who experienced the war not as his own but as something imposed on him (Elias, 1991:41) - did away with the ontological security shown in his childhood and early youth. The social world had changed and so had he. As the German author recalls (1991:38-39):

“It was a considerable break with the past. Everything had changed for me and I had changed, too. And this subject reminds me of the central role change has occupied in my thought, which could be linked to this experience.”

It is curious that this experience of World War I as a destroyer of the old system's vast ontological security should also have been a key turning point in the life and work of another great 20th century sociologist, Alfred Schütz. The existential and academic parallels between these two authors still have to be studied in depth, but we will briefly mention them here. While Elias describes his feeling of being an outsider and his return home from the war based on the concept of change, Schütz classifies the experience of a similar return to his native Vienna after the armistice of the 11th of

November 1918 also based on the concept of the outsider. In his texts “The Outsider” and “The Return Home”¹ he explains in sociological terms his experience of uprootedness, of feeling like a stranger or an outsider, on his return to what felt like the different city of a different person. Based on this experience, he would later elaborate the concept of alternation. Another notable result of this political, social and ontological break with the past is R. Musil's unfinished work "The Man without Qualities". In this work, the author, who had also been strongly affected by the failure and decline of a modernity which he considered from then on to be finished and failed, shows literary astonishment at a new social situation, which he perceives as both objectively and subjectively alien.

Concerning Elias' academic career, it is interesting to highlight first that he was taught at home by a governess until he was six years old, when he went to school. There, as a good pupil, he took an interest in French and philosophy and, over the years, he came to form part of the Anonymous Philosophy Society, which was heavily influenced by Kant. Within this group, Elias decided to study philosophy and medicine, which was the pathway marked out for him. As Blomert (2002) says, the influence of this society on the study of philosophy may have been very important in providing him with an alternative view of Kant to the one that would later be imposed on him by his thesis advisor, R. Höningwald. Such an alternative view would allow him to disagree with the director's positions up to up to a point and was supported by the neo-Kantianism of E. Cassirer.

After the end of the war, between 1918 and 1924, Elias combined his studies of philosophy and medicine at Breslau: medicine out of his family's desire and philosophy through his own vocation. As Elias often made clear, his medical training had enormous influence on his thinking, and he was always very critical of the radical distinctions between ‘nature and culture’ and of sociology's reluctance to work from a perspective in which the biological aspects of people were an integral part of the basis for their social development. As mentioned in the introduction to one of his books (Elias, 1994b:20), Elias is very critical of the dualisms that often structure theoretical and methodological debates in sociology (1994b:20):

“Elias transcends the traditional nature/culture and structure/culture dualisms, submerging them in the current of continuity in the evolution of the human species through the development of human societies with a level of integration in their own right.”

However, he only remained in medicine until he had his diploma, and after that he concentrated on philosophy. While still in Breslau, he spent a term in Heidelberg to listen to K. Jaspers (1919) and another at Freiburg to go to a seminar on Goethe by E. Husserl (1920). He then began a dissertation with his thesis advisor, R. Höningwald, which would become his doctoral thesis (1924): *“Idea and Individual. A Critical Study of the Concept of History”*. What interested Elias was the place and role of the individual in history, starting from the suspicion aroused in him by the idea of the ‘isolated man’ as a traditional subject of knowledge. The questions and debates with Höningwald included (Korte, 2002): how do ideas emerge in the course of history?

¹ Chapters “El forastero” (Pag. 95-107) and “La vuelta al hogar” (Pag. 108-119) in Schütz (1974).

What are the reasons why the Greeks saw and felt nature differently from the Romantics? Why does a 'primitive' person consider a tree a spiritual being while we do not? This type of question would accompany him all his life, and seeing them unanswered drove him to find a response in what would become his great book "The Civilising Process".

As mentioned above, even at this early stage, despite the confrontation with his advisor (or perhaps because of it), his thesis contains one of the central themes running through his entire oeuvre: the critique he would call *homo clausus*, springing from doubt about the authenticity of the transcendent subject. This doubt, in the neo-Kantian context in which Elias moved, emerged *de facto* from the critique of the *a priori* (the transcendental conditions making experience possible) that the Königsberg philosopher proposed in his "Critique of Pure Reason"² and was the basis of the epistemology in use at that time in Breslau and half of Europe. As Elias himself said (1991:114):

"It was already impossible for me to ignore everything Kant saw as timeless and as given, before any experience, whether it was the idea of a causal nexus, like that of time, or natural or moral laws. I believed that these things had to be learned from other people together with the corresponding words so that they would be available in the consciousness of individuals."

So, in his argument with his thesis advisor R. Höningswald, to whom he eventually gave way because he realised that his tutor was more powerful than he was, Elias was already sketching out another core theme in his life's work: the question of why one person and his/her group feel the obligation to behave in certain ways and why other human groups feel the obligation to behave in different ways. To put it in modern terms, Elias was wondering about different social normativities, both at different moments in history and among different social classes and estates or countries, and how this normativity is conditioned by different habits of perception, behaviour and appreciation. Elias had found "the theme of his life" (Korte, 2002).

Before it took definitive shape in the book "The Civilising Process", this second central theme of his work accompanying the critique of the individual knowing subject and transcending Kantian epistemological postulates was more specifically and simply pre-formulated in a 1921 article for the magazine of a Jewish youth group called the "Blau-Weiss" movement (Korte, 2002; Blomert, 2002). This group of 'aware' Jews prepared young people who wanted to go to live in Palestine, where there were already Jewish communities. For example, his colleague and the leader of the group, Martin Bandam, would end up in Palestine some years later, while over time Elias gradually abandoned his extreme Zionist positions.

In the article "*On the View in Nature*", Elias was already raising the question of human behaviour and its patterns from a historicist perspective: social, factual (as against aprioristic) and long-term. If patterns of knowledge, behaviour and understanding realities are different throughout history, the way such habits of perception, behaviour and appreciation develop must be studied in order to understand the conditions of knowledge. His interest in two of the main directions in which

² It is curious that a critique of Kant similar to that made by Elias should be the way in which P. Bourdieu began his famous post-scriptum "Distinction" (Bourdieu, 1980).

sociology developed during the 20th century must be seen based on this line of thought. On the one hand is his interest in and focus on the sociology of knowledge, in Berger and Luckman's (1988) sense of analysing what is conceived, experienced and practised as knowledge in each historical period and why. On the other hand, in a development that also runs parallel to that of A. Schütz, is his work on the world of everyday life, minor habitual, insignificant things, and of language (genealogy and evolution in the uses, nuances and meanings of concepts) as key tools for understanding social realities, their development, their changes and their meanings. At the same time, in this article Elias was already giving glimpses of two elements of his point of view that would be constant features of his work: methodologically, a more functional and less substantive view and use of concepts, and, theoretically, attention to the relationships between individuals and social contexts.

2. Heidelberg

Between 1923 and 1924, just as he was finishing his studies, his parents began to suffer financial hardships which prevented them funding his studies. Because of this, for those two years, Elias worked in a factory as a bookkeeper. It was a time which taught him many practical things about economics, in line with his spirit of making positive use of life experiences (Elias, 1991:44). He finally earned his PhD from Breslau, and considering his differences with the thesis advisor and the impossibility of forging an academic career there, he moved to the University of Heidelberg in 1925. It was a university where memories of M. Weber and G. Simmel were still alive, and with the presence of three figures who would mark his stay there: Alfred Weber, Karl Mannheim and Marianne Weber. He attended the two sociologists' seminars, and he was also invited to the scientific/literary meetings that M. Weber's widow organised in the 'salon' she hosted at her home.

At Marianne Weber's 'salon' Elias was, via Mannheim, invited to write a dissertation, and he chose to come up with a "sociology of Gothic architecture" (Varela, 1994). In it, he proposed a materialist explanation of the types of Gothic construction detached from the cliché of human aspiration and focusing instead on the competition between mediaeval cities to make the tallest, most beautiful church. At this point, a distinction emerged which would prove crucial in "The Civilising Process", which encompasses the distinct evolution of French and German societies from the 16th to the 18th centuries based on relations between the court, the bourgeoisie and the people, and how that was also reflected in the architecture of their cathedrals.

Concerning Alfred Weber, at that time he was studying the specific nature of culture and its development as the core of all human society. According to Alfred, and following the debate with Marxism ushered in by his brother Max, culture cannot be exclusively interpreted based on economic processes, as the nature of culture is different and it evolves in a specific way. Weber's book "History of Culture" (1941) emerged from this interest and research. Elias suggested to A. Weber the role of Florentine society and culture in the birth of modern science as a subject for the work he needed to write in order to qualify in sociology. With this end in mind, Elias travelled to Florence with the question of why, in the specific context of late Middle Ages Florence, did the step he described as mythological to scientific thinking begin, taking the example of Galileo. But the project did not come to fruition for various reasons: the demands of A. Weber, the time he was being asked to wait to become a *Privatdozent*, and K. Mannheim's offer move to Frankfurt as professor to accompany him as his assistant.

Elias had known Mannheim since he had arrived in Heidelberg, and they were more or less the same age. He got on better on a personal and political level with Mannheim than he did with A. Weber, and he began to act as an unofficial *Privatdozent* for him, although in fact Mannheim still held that position. So, although Elias took his interest in the conditions of possibility, change and interpretation of culture and the role of daily life from A. Weber, Mannheim had a powerful influence on him in the entire field of the sociology of knowledge. The rivalry between A. Weber and K. Mannheim was a reflection of an increasingly divided society. In the end, it exploded at the Assembly of Germanic Sociologists held in Zurich in 1928. The debate over the different epistemological positions discussed there was brilliantly explained by Elias (Varela, 1994:15): how could knowledge be freed from the anathema that the relativists (Mannheim), the economicist sociologists (Marx and Lukacs) and the nominalist philosophers had cast on it? In fact, Elias' work can be understood as an answer to that question based on a model that seeks to contextualise the search for objectivity based not on theoretical reflection but on the historical contextualisation of the development of social processes, attempting not to fall into either the blind individualism of the actionalists or social structuralist determinism, as Elias would once more try to make clear in "Involvement and Detachment" (Elias, 1983:47).

3. Frankfurt

As we can see, the years spent in Heidelberg were the time when Elias profiled the what and the how of his oeuvre, an oeuvre which took the figure of Mannheim and the debates with him based on the sociology of knowledge as the third pillar on which Elias would construct his point of view, and would also show the clear influences of S. Freud and M. Weber. As we have said, in 1929 Mannheim received an invitation to occupy a professorial chair in sociology at Frankfurt and he suggested that Elias should be his assistant. Elias accepted, seeing this collaboration as a shortcut to qualifying as a tenured lecturer and thus skipping a waiting list of at least ten years with A. Weber. So, in the spring of 1930, Mannheim and Elias began their sociology seminar on the first floor of the Institute for Social Research, run by Max Horkheimer and with the presence, among other prestigious researchers, of T. W. Adorno (fifty years later Elias would receive the award bearing his name for his great book), W. Benjamin, E. Fromm and H. Marcuse. But there was little cooperation between the two leaders, Horkheimer and Mannheim, as the latter was politically too far to the left and the former too far to the right. Despite these disagreements, their two assistants, L. Löwenthal and N. Elias, acted as intermediaries and their relationship was a cordial one.

Elias, who had a good touch with students, was the one who effectively ran the sociology seminar and the relations with and attention to undergraduates. As for the study to earn his tenure, Mannheim wanted Elias to research French liberalism, as he was studying the subject at the time. But when Elias began work on the subject he came across the 18th century and began to take an interest in 'courtly man', opting instead to study this subject. Thirty years later, this research would be published for the first time under the title "The Man of the Court" (Elias, 1982b). It sought to understand how the warrior and landowning nobility ended up becoming the elite of the absolutist French state in a process of increasing mutual dependency between them and the absolute monarch. Already in this research we find the embryo of his great work "The Civilising Process" in terms of both perspective (link between the sociogenesis and psychogenesis of civilisation processes, ambivalence and the non-teleological intentionality of social and historical processes and their results, interdependences between groups, classes and

estates) and concepts (civilisation, interdependency, human behaviour, affective economics).

In 1933, after three interesting, intense years in a highly intellectually stimulating atmosphere in Frankfurt - as Elias himself said when receiving the Adorno award, "those years were the richest and most exciting in my life"³ - Elias completed his qualifying work and began the procedure to claim his new status. In fact, after receiving the *Venia Legendi*, it only remained for him to give his inaugural address and he would have been qualified, but ill fortune intervened and Elias' real difficulties now began. The German political and social context descended into a spiral that would end with the rise of Nazism and World War II. After Hitler's electoral defeat to Hindenburg in 1932, the leader of National Socialism promoted a crescendo of uprising and street violence aimed weakening and bringing down the legitimate government; it was a revolt that would culminate in his rise to power on the 30th of January 1933, when he was proclaimed German chancellor. Hitler called new elections in May 1933 in a very overexcited atmosphere and won them, albeit without a majority, beginning his pathway to accumulating all the positions of power in the country in order to become *Reichsführer*.

In this political and social context, the universities were among the first places to be subjected to Fascist violence, particularly a place like the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which was nicknamed 'the House of Marx'. Elias had the foresight to destroy lists of 'red students' and other 'compromising' documents and books, and, after a few days, the Nazi SS went looking for him at home to force him to give them the keys to the Institute. As he explained, because he knew they would not find anything compromising, he behaved haughtily with the Nazi police, who, after interrogating him and searching the Institute in his presence, allowed him to go home. It was time to put into practice the plan for flight that Elias had been preparing since the beginning of 1933. He was first taken to by car to Switzerland, where he asked for aid and asylum but was given nothing. He then returned to Germany to flee to Paris, where he would stay for two years, while his parents, as mentioned above, remained in Nazi Germany perceiving no imminent danger, despite the crude reality.

4. Paris

Elias greatly admired France, its language, history and culture (Elias, 1991:67). He had studied French since he was young and he had been keenly interested in the culture of the neighbouring country. But even though his memoirs recall those two years - 1933-1935 - as "very stimulating despite the fact that I was utterly alone and could not rely on help from other people" (Elias, 1991:66), they were tough times. He sought contact the universities of Paris by all possible means to obtain a lecturing post, but his attempts were in vain. His living conditions were tough, despite some money from his parents, and he set up a little toymaking workshop with two partners. As the months went by, it began to bring in enough money so that he could live modestly. At the same time, and as an example of the tenacity which he claimed was the result of basic confidence going back to his childhood, he managed to keep the academic flame alive and wrote an article for Klaus Mann, an exiled publisher, about "the kitsch style" (Elias, 1998d) and

³ Speech upon receiving the T.W. Adorno Prize in Frankfurt, entitled "The Authority of the Past: In Memory of Theodor W. Adorno".

received a small grant from a Dutch foundation to write about "The Expulsion of the Huguenots from France".

Despite these minor articles and his ability to keep the workshop going and sell toys, Elias his life in Paris was fraught with hardship. He told how, in Montparnasse, where he lived for those two years, more than once he had to go and ask people to buy him a cup of coffee and a sandwich because he had no money. Given this situation he ended up leaving France, yet without resentment, because he saw no future there and no path he could pursue in academia. When the Glucksmanns – Jewish friends from Breslau – invited him to England, he agreed, although he did not know much English and was sorry to leave France. So, in 1935 he passed through Germany to say goodbye to his parents (a fully Nazi Germany but at the same time a place "where order reigned and where the rule of law could be perceived" [Elias, 1991:68]), and they bought him a portable typewriter on which he would write "The Civilising Process". Finally, he arrived in England as an exile, thanks to the letter of invitation from Alfred Glucksmann.

5. England

Elias arrived in London in 1935 with the desire to revisit the theme of his qualification thesis on the "Man of the Court". He negotiated with a committee of Jewish refugees for aid to write a book as a possible entryway into England's academic world. But his poor English skills and the scale of his idea prevented him from doing this and, in the end, they agreed to give him a little money as maintenance so he could keep up minimum living conditions. With this aid, and installed in a modest room in London, Elias discovered the British Museum library, the same one where Karl Marx had written "Das Kapital", among other works. For the sociologist from Breslau, the library became the centre of his life. The exiled German, a poor outsider,⁴ found an escape from the personal and family drama of the previous years in constant, daily intellectual work, never completely losing the feeling that what he was doing was useful and worthwhile, even though at the times it seemed to interest almost no-one.

It was there, in the British Museum library, where Elias accidentally discovered books on courtly behaviour and treatises on etiquette (it seems that the discovery began with De Courtin's "Nouveau traité de civilité"), writings which showed the diversity of the social norms applicable at different times and in different places. Based on this material, Elias began to delve into greater depth in his comparative study of countries and to analyse their evolution: his work on "The Civilising Process" had begun⁵ and would last three years. This work was established based on the perspective posited in "Courtly Society", his unpublished qualifying thesis, although, like all intellectual works, it was also constructed against other perspectives, ideas and theories. As Elias himself explained, the work on the civilising process also sought to contradict fashionable psychological (but not psychoanalytical) theories (Elias 1991: 71-72)

⁴ It is curious that, years later, Elias should have taken up this 'feeling' once again to write one of his most interesting books. Elias, N.; Scotson, J.L. (1964) *The Established and the Outsiders: A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*. SAGE. London.

⁵ As in other cases, the issue of translation is problematic. The original title, "Über den Prozess der Zivilisation" has been translated into French as "Le procès de civilisation" and in Spanish as "El proceso de la civilización". So, it seems that it is not clear whether the definite article should be there or not and whether it refers to "The Civilising Process" (the English translation of the title) or the process of civilisation.

“that firmly believed it was necessary to assess people's mentalities based on formulae or other quantitative methods in order to be able to say something irrefutable. Using this method, backed by the results of tests performed on people nowadays, they believed themselves capable of talking about human beings in general. For me it was clear that this was just an attempt to apply to people the methods of physics and biology, but in doing so excluding the entire process of human evolution.”

For three years (1935 -1938), which were not free of incredulity from the committee of refugees that provided him with just enough money to live on, Elias worked tirelessly on his great work. The publication of "The Civilising Process" became yet another odyssey. As Korte explains (1998:53), the author's parents financed the printing of the proofs of the first volume of the work, "The History of Manners", which was published in 1937 by a small German publisher in Gräfenhainichen. Elias sent this first volume to various friends and well-known authors with the twofold aim of publicising the work and preparing the publication of the second volume, "State Formation and Civilisation", which was due to come out in Prague in 1938. But the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia led the printing originals to be secretly spirited away to Switzerland, where the work "The Civilising Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations" was finally published in 1939 by the Haus zum Falken publishing house in Basel. The print run was small, and the work was published in a social and political context that led to a very negative reception. In fact, of prominent authors, only Thomas Mann declared that "it is an interesting book". From this period, Elias highlighted (Varela, 1994:18) that he was becoming increasingly aware of the differences in behaviour between German and English societies just at the point when his view based on differences in 'mentality' was being constructed. He believed from his own experience that 'national mentalities' needed to be studied systematically and, above all, comparatively, in order to understand them better.

After ultimately not qualifying to be a lecturer in Frankfurt, with exile in London and his work "The Civilising Process" having almost no impact, in 1940 Elias received a research grant from the London School of Economics. But he could only begin to use it when he returned from the eight-month internment on the Isle of Man to which he and other Germans were sentenced. On returning to England, he gradually began to enter academic circles; he set up the Group Analytic Society with Melanie Klein, and he worked with Foulkes, a psychoanalytical psychiatrist, on what they called 'group psychoanalysis'. Finally, in 1954, he received offers from the Universities of Leicester and Leeds to teach classes there. He decided on Leicester, where the Sociology Department was being set up, and there he met Neustand, another exiled German who, in fact, had suggested him for the post. He was also not too far from London and the British Museum. He had achieved his first stable academic post at the age of 57.

Students like E. Dunning (with whom he would work on the sociology of sport as a space for symbolically civilising violence between groups or states [Elias and Dunning, 1992]), A. Giddens, J. Goldthorpe ... and the department achieved considerable prestige at the English universities. Despite this, his views had little impact and little influence either in the university or among its students. For many years he was considered a second- or third-rate theoretician with no interesting contributions to make.

As we shall see, academic recognition did not really come to him until the 1970s, when he was already retired.

As Béjar says (1991:63), we can entertain at least three reasons for his lack of theoretical influence over so many years. First, as Featherstone says (1987), his great book was published in the wrong place (Switzerland), at the wrong time (the beginning of World War II) and in the wrong language (German). Secondly, despite the possible superficial reading of "The Civilising Process" as a book of curious, entertaining little stories about refinement at meals, how and when to spit or affairs of the bedchamber, it does require a certain theoretical background in order to be fully understood in the context of its theoretical and epistemological project, which is quite ambitious. Finally, understanding why it was forgotten for decades is easier if Elias' position of 'marginalised pride' confronting the two dominant sociological paradigms during much of the 20th century - Marxism and structural functionalism - can also be understood. On several occasions, Elias' notable anti-Parsonianism was seen more as personal resentment against one of the key figures in understanding the sociology of the 20th century (who, curiously, had also spent time in Heidelberg from 1920 to 1930) rather than impersonal theoretical criticism, and there was probably something in this. In 1978, L. Coser went in hard against Elias, who had just published "What is Sociology" (Coser 1978: 182):

"While 'The Civilising Process', although written in the thirties, reads as if it had been written in the seventies, this book, written in the seventies, seems to have been written in the thirties."

Coser's barbed comments probably contain some truth, although it is also true that the works written after "Process of Civilisation" help gain an understanding of the scope, theoretical project, perspective and programme of Elias' research. A final episode reinforced his status as an outsider before the recognition from academia that came in the 1970s. In 1962, with Elias already in his sixties, his colleague Neustand suggested that he should occupy a professorial chair in sociology in Ghana for a couple of years. There are two versions of why he accepted. On the one hand, his own (Elias: 1991:86) account suggests the hypothesis of curiosity about the unknown and a desire to discover other cultures as decisive factors in accepting the job. Meanwhile, other authors (Béjar, 1991:56) do not doubt that financial motives drove him to live in Africa for two years, where he was treated like a prince and chauffeur-driven everywhere. Considering an episode like this, it is natural to wonder about his personal life. When Elias was asked about his feelings, partners and family plans, he answered (1991:86):

"I realised straightaway that the two things – achieving what I wanted to do and being married – were incompatible. There is always a rivalry between the two paths, but things turned out as they did; it was not a considered decision."

Upon his return, he co-authored with John L. Scotson the 1964 publication "The Established and the Outsiders", an interesting study about the way different power resources (the power differential) and self-confidence are the key elements in

understanding central and peripheral positions on a specific playing field and the way a game develops based on the relationships of knowledge, recognition and mutual dependence among the different individuals and groups involved. This work contains a considerable amount of autobiography as, for example, Elias puts forward the case of the Jews who were unable to work in certain professions in 20th century Germany simply because of who they were. It is also a work in which Elias subtly recounts his own experiences in English academia, where he always felt like, and was treated as, an outsider. The German author did not leave behind this deep-seated feeling of marginalisation until he left England in 1975. It was a country whose nationality he held but where he never felt he belonged until, at the end of his life, the recognition he had been denied for decades finally came.

6. Germany, Holland and the end of his life

The re-publication and, with it, (re)discovery of his opus magnum in 1969; invitations to give seminars, particularly in Holland and Germany; the publication of new books throughout the 1970s and 1980s (“What is Sociology?”, 1970; “The Loneliness of the Dying”, 1982; “Involvement and Detachment”, 1983; “Time: An Essay”, 1984; “The Human Condition”, 1985; “The Society of Individuals”, 1987), and the Adorno prize for “The Civilising Process” in 1977 all served to restore the reputation and oeuvre of a marginalised figure who, for many years would dream of picking up the telephone excitedly hoping to hear someone and end up shouting desperately, "Can't anyone hear me?" (Elias, 1991). Finally, in 1975, Elias left England and established himself in Bielefeld, where he would later be honoured with an honorary doctoral degree, and where he would live almost until his passing, combining this return to Germany with periods abroad (for example, R. Sennett invited him to the University of New York), above all in Holland, where he died and where one of the most important Elisian groups, called the "Amsterdam School", remains to this day.

Elias probably would not have been able to cope with his tortuous life with the positive spirit that he seems to have maintained had he not enjoyed that basic security we mentioned at the beginning of the article. However, this security had a flip side throughout his life; it was another face that showed itself in at least three different ways. First, we have already mentioned the ‘marginalised pride’ with which he waged bitter disputes with the dominant theoretical paradigms. Beyond the fact that Elias can often be considered to be right in many of his criticisms, these were disputes in which he displays the rather resentful tone of someone who knows that he has something very interesting to offer but, because of the context of power relationships, is being almost completely ignored by everyone. Secondly, the other side of Elias' coin is shown in his enormous difficulty recognising the theoretical influences he received over the years, which, as with all authors, were manifold and very important. Thirdly and finally, Elias' security, aplomb and strength had a great deal to do with a conception of the role of sociology (Béjar, 1994) (and of himself as a sociologist) as almost a ‘redeemer’, a tool for salvation, a discipline with a mission (Elias, 1991:50):

"What I was really trying to do was to lift the veil of the mythologies that conceal our view of society so that people could behave better and more reasonably".

It is a mission for sociology which ultimately meant working in the context of a civilising process that is neither closed nor determined in order to achieve happiness for people in the context of a freer, more aware scenarios. Despite his lucidity on civilising social processes, Elias' attitude toward them was not pessimistic like Freud and Weber. As he reminds us in the last sentence of the last edition of "The Civilising Process", the mission of sociologists is to work (Elias, 1987a:552)

"So that every man can find the best possible balance in his soul which we so often conjure up with big words like happiness and freedom; a lasting equilibrium or even consonance between his social duties as part the set of requirements of his social existence, on one hand, and his inclinations and personal needs on the other."

7. Brief conclusions

I believe two conclusions can be derived from this intellectual portrait. The first, which encompasses the conceptual, methodological and analytical tools constructed by Elias, is a major inheritance for 21st century sociology and social sciences, in which Norbert Elias is (or may be) one of their greatest leading figures. But, for this to happen, his legacy must be included in university studies and his perspective brought into in social research. A good way to begin a move in this direction is to take into account his brilliant contributions to crucial debate today, such as those on individualisation, the process of modernisation, power relationships and the construction of the other. The second conclusion has a clear ethical and political dimension and is the invitation that Norbert Elias extended by example for everyone researching in social sciences to carry out an exercise in self-socioanalysis. In fact, the intellectual portrait presented herewith is an example of how, without an overall (self) view of an author's life and work, his experiences and influences, his starting points and interests, it is impossible to understand his research. And the most important thing for Elias: without this self-socioanalysis exercise it is very difficult to carry out scientific research which is more honest, more lucid and also more useful and liberating at a societal level.

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