

SPECIAL ISSUE EDITORIAL

SOCIETY AS A PROCESS: CONTEMPORARY READINGS OF NORBERT ELIAS

Norbert Elias belongs to a group of sociologists whose work cannot easily be situated within the context of theoretical schools, paradigms, and sociological conceptual language. His sociology is based on a synthesis of German, American, French, and British scholarship of the twentieth century, and is primarily a historical sociology that integrates different disciplinary perspectives with the aim of creating a coherent science.

Elias's relevance lies not only in the fact that *The Civilizing Process* has become a classic of sociological theory, nor in the breadth of the areas in which his work has left its mark: from the history of emotions, identity, family, culture, violence, and sport to the study of the body, state formation, knowledge, as well as the relations between the established and the outsiders. Above all, it stems from his attempt to redefine the question of what society is and to develop a kind of "science of mankind" (*Menschenwissenschaft*).

He did not view society as a relatively stable structure composed of individuals, institutions, and groups, but insisted on the social as a process: on changing networks of interdependence, power relations, long-term transformations of behavior and emotions, as well as on the mutual shaping of social structures and personality structures. Hence, processuality for him was more than the study of social change. It represented an attempt to overcome the dichotomies between the individual and society, micro- and macro-levels of analysis, idealism and materialism, nature and culture, form and content, subject and object, consciousness and being. Elias's body of work therefore has more the character of an open theoretical perspective than that of a closed system of concepts.

Throughout his life, he developed the concepts of figurational (or process) sociology, testing and adapting them, often in response to criticism and discussions with other authors. Nevertheless, he sometimes used certain concepts without sufficiently explicitly addressing changes in their meanings. Accordingly, his theories are often characterized by tensions and contradictions, and it is precisely the exploration and negotiation of these tensions that makes Elias's work interesting and important, and particularly stimulating for contemporary sociology.

His analytical framework makes it possible to view changes in societies not as isolated phenomena, but as integral parts of long-term processes in which social figurations and the ways in which people regulate their own behavior and emotions change simultaneously. Although his name is now inextricably linked

to *The Civilizing Process*, his sociological career spans almost the entire twentieth century, from his early works and research during the Weimar Republic, through decades of emigration and work in Great Britain and Ghana, to his late international recognition and intensive work during the final decades of his life. In other words, Elias's theoretical perspective emerged and changed in response to a social world that was itself changing before his eyes.

For this reason, contemporary readings of Elias are not simply a derivative of his central theses. Their scope and limits are reassessed through empirical testing and theoretical development. If process is the subject of Elias's sociology, then its contemporary readings must also remain processual.

The concept of informalization is one of the most significant examples of a new reading of figurational sociology. It demonstrates how Elias's theory continued to develop through the work of sociologists who adopted, questioned, and extended it. When Cas Wouters began analyzing changes in social norms, behavior, and emotional codes in Western societies in the mid-1970s, he tried to explain why the rules of conduct in many areas of life were becoming less strict, less formal, and less determined by status. Did this mean that the civilizing process had changed direction, or was a different form of self-control concealed behind the apparent relaxation of norms?

Wouters's answer was theoretically important precisely because he rejected the equation of greater informality with a lack of self-control. The process of informalization denotes the expansion of the repertoire of acceptable behaviors and emotions, greater flexibility in social relations, and the weakening of certain traditional formal rules, but at the same time also growing demands for self-regulation. A society in which people are allowed to behave in a more "relaxed" manner does not therefore have to be a society with less control; it may be a society in which control has become more flexible, less visible, and more internalized. Wouters later developed this perspective through research on changing patterns of behavior and emotions, including relations between the sexes and generations, changes in class relations, as well as specific changes in attitudes toward sexuality and death.

Wouters should therefore be viewed neither as a mere follower nor as an author who simply "applied" Elias's theory. His contribution is important precisely because he showed that figurational sociology can be used to analyze changes that Elias himself had not systematically addressed. This opened up the possibility of extending the processual perspective to later stages of social development and raising the question of how, after a long historical period of the formalization of behavior, the very forms of self-control change.

For this reason, at the beginning of this special issue, we are publishing, in Serbian translation, Wouters's 1977 text on informalization. The significance of this work lies not only in the fact that it represents one of the early formulations of a concept that Wouters would later develop into an extensive research program. The text also occupies a special place in the intellectual history of the Elasian circle, as it emerged in direct dialogue with Elias. This circumstance deserves a somewhat more precise explanation. According to Wouters's account, Elias was involved in

shaping the English version of the paper and accepted the basic idea that changes in the social codes of the twentieth century could be understood as a distinct phase of the long-term civilizing process. More importantly, Elias later himself referred to Wouters as the author who introduced the concept of informalization. Informalization should therefore not be understood merely as a reinterpretation of Elias's work developed by his followers, but also as a concept that emerged in direct dialogue with Elias and with his approval of its central argument.

This translation therefore has a twofold significance. On the one hand, it is an important document in the history of the development of Eliasian sociology; on the other, it is a paradigmatic example of how the figurational theoretical perspective can be reread and reinterpreted. Publishing the text in Serbian thus represents both a contribution to making an important work from the history of contemporary sociological theory more accessible and an attempt to make one part of the development of Eliasian sociology directly available to readers. Although Elias's sociology is present in the Serbian sociological milieu, the theory of informalization and its relationship to Elias's work have so far not received adequate attention in Serbian.

With this in mind, Adrian Jitschin's commentary on Wouters's work, which we are publishing and which was written specifically for this issue, should also be read. Jitschin offers a broader intellectual and biographical context, tracing the relationship between Wouters and Elias, as well as Wouters's intellectual trajectory and the circumstances in which the idea of informalization emerged. In this way, we are also offered an insight into how sociological concepts come into being: certainly not outside history and relationships between people, but within concrete intellectual communities, through conversations and mutual influences.

Jitschin is particularly well positioned for such an undertaking. A sociologist and social historian by training, a member of the board of the Norbert Elias Foundation, and the author of the biography *Das Leben des jungen Norbert Elias*, he brings together Elias's life, historical context, intellectual trajectories, and the emergence of sociological ideas, drawing also on archival materials. His book, published in 2021, reconstructs Elias's life and intellectual development up to 1940 and shows how his work can be understood when theoretical ideas are placed back within the concrete historical, social, and biographical circumstances from which they emerged. The commentary published in this issue is part of Jitschin's broader effort to examine Elias's life and work in their historical and intellectual entirety. We look forward with great interest to the future results of this undertaking.

Finally, it is worth noting that the texts opening this issue are also connected by a particular approach to the writing of sociology. Elias's sociology was not directed at a narrow circle of professional sociologists: he sought to make large-scale social processes intelligible through historical materials, empirical examples, and the analysis of concrete relationships between people. We find a similar approach in Wouters, who develops theoretical arguments through examples from everyday life, and in Jitschin, who, through biographical and archival sources, places sociological insights back within their concrete historical

and social circumstances. In this sense, their work confirms one of the key characteristics of Elias's sociology – the attempt to understand the social world through processes and interrelations, and to view people as *homines aperti*.

These introductory texts also bring together different generations of Eliasian sociology. Wouters's work takes us back to the moment when one of the important reinterpretations of the civilizing process was only beginning to take shape, while Jitschin's commentary allows us to view that moment from today's perspective, as well as through the relationships and intellectual circumstances in which the idea of informalization emerged. Together, they, to paraphrase Jitschin's comment on Wouters, "in many respects embody the spirit of what an Eliasian sociological inquiry ought to look like more faithfully than Elias himself".

The articles collected in this special issue differ in their subjects, approaches, and research problems, but share an interest in Elias's legacy as an open theoretical space. Their aim is not to further consolidate Elias's work within the canon of the history of sociology, but to highlight its theoretical productivity and the possibilities that his concepts and perspectives open up when confronting various contemporary empirical and theoretical problems.

Some of them engage directly with the conceptual foundations of figurational sociology, revisiting its understanding of power, state formation, communication, the forming of generations and the nature of figurations. Stefan Mandić reconstructs and critically examines Elias's approach to power and state formation, while also proposing a hierarchical classification of figurations and introducing the concept of "fundamental figurations" to designate relations of interdependence that decisively shape the basic characteristics of a society and the trajectories of historical change.

Along similar lines, Miloš Jovanović's article brings Elias's figurational sociology into dialogue with communicative constructivism, examining both the ways in which the latter builds upon the figurational paradigm and the theoretical differences between the two. In doing so, the article shows how communicative constructivism further develops the relational and processual character of figurational sociology and extends its analytical scope to late modernity.

Milica Vlajić highlights Norbert Elias's significant contribution to the development of the sociology of generations. Her paper focuses on how Elias builds on Mannheim's approach to generations and how he further develops the generational perspective by analysing the historical process of generational formation.

Other contributions take Elias's theoretical perspective into specific substantive fields. Aleksej Kišjuhas traces classical and contemporary contributions to the history and sociology of emotions, from the pioneers of the field, Johan Huizinga and Lucien Febvre, to contemporary theoretical frameworks such as emotionology and the theory of emotional communities. Particular attention is devoted to the role of Norbert Elias and his concept of the civilizing process in the development of the historical sociology of emotions.

Milena Kojić and Pavle Milenković turn to the problem of time, comparing the understandings of Norbert Elias and Fernand Braudel. They argue that

Braudel's conception of multiple historical rhythms and Elias's concept of processual figurations represent complementary attempts to overcome the epistemological limitations of presentism. Their discussion of the history of mentalities, imagination, and utopian thought also highlights the significance of Elias's psychohistorical perspective for understanding post-Braudelian developments within the Annales School and contemporary debates on social temporality.

The figurational perspective is also brought to bear on questions of stigma, exclusion, and power. Andrej Kubiček draws on the theoretical framework of Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson to examine deeply rooted prejudices directed against Roma communities. Using concepts such as the "established" and the "outsiders," he traces the genesis of stereotypes about Roma and interprets their stigmatization not merely as a psychological process, but also as a consequence of situational microsociological relations and a long-term macrosociological process grounded in relations of power.

A different extension of figurational sociology is offered by Stefan Janković, bringing Elias's process sociology into connection with the problem of the nuclear bomb and considers the ecological implications of figurational sociology. By placing figurational sociology in dialogue with the multiple temporalities of the Earth, the article problematizes Elias's theory of levels and questions its implicit anthropocentrism. The nuclear bomb serves here as an example through which to consider whether technological objects, as constituents of figurations, can influence relations within networks of interdependence.

Taken together, these contributions do more than demonstrate the variety of fields in which Elias's figurational sociology can be applied. They show that the concepts and theories underlying figurational sociology remain flexible, open to revision, and in constant development, and that processuality is not merely a subject of figurational sociology but also a characteristic of its own theoretical evolution. By expanding and developing its conceptual vocabulary, this theoretical perspective retains considerable analytical potential for understanding complex, long-term, and changing social processes.

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