



## REFIGURING FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY: NORBERT ELIAS AND COMMUNICATIVE CONSTRUCTIVISM

### Refigurisanje figuracione sociologije: Norbert Eljas i komunikativni konstruktivizam

**ABSTRACT:** *This article brings figurational sociology into systematic dialogue with communicative constructivism, most prominently associated with Hubert Knoblauch. While Elias' framework powerfully captures processuality, relationality, and the co-evolution of subjectivity and social structures, it remains comparatively underdetermined regarding the mediational and material conditions of communication in late modernity. A comparison between these theories becomes particularly dynamic at the level of subjectivity and identity formation. While Elias conceives subjectivity through the long-term intertwining of psychogenesis and sociogenesis, emphasising the historical formation of self-restraint, affect control, and reflexive individuality within changing figurations, communicative constructivism reformulates these processes in explicitly communicative and relational terms. Knoblauch argues that the subject should no longer be understood as a substantial or pre-social entity, but rather as an emergent property of communicative action itself. Communicative constructivism radicalises Elias' processual understanding of the self by relocating the formation of subjectivity from processes of habitus formation to communicative, performative, and mediatised practices.*

*Further argued here is that Elias' concept of figurations – dynamic networks of interdependence constituted through ongoing processes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis – can be productively re-specified in light of contemporary transformations of societies. Communicative constructivism addresses this gap by foregrounding the embodied, objectified, and technologically mediated character of communication. It demonstrates how processes such as mediatization, translocalization, and polycontexturalization transform the very texture of interdependencies, producing configurations that are no longer territorially bounded or institutionally stabilised in classical ways. In this perspective, figurations are not merely evolving but are refigured through the multiplication and overlap of*

*communicative contexts, resulting in heightened tensions, asymmetries, and novel forms of power.*

**KEYWORDS:** *figurational sociology, communicative constructivism, subjectivity, refiguration, refigured modernity*

**APSTRAKT:** *U ovom članku figuraciona sociologija razmatra se u sistematskom odnosu sa komunikativnim konstruktivizmom, teorijskim pristupom koji se najčešće povezuje sa Hubertom Knoblauchom. Iako Eliasov teorijski okvir pruža izuzetno snažan oslonac za razumevanje procesualnosti, relacionalnosti i koevolucije subjektivnosti i društvenih struktura, on ostaje relativno nedovoljno razrađen kada je reč o medijskim i materijalnim uslovima komunikacije u poznoj modernosti. Poređenje ovih teorija posebno je plodno na nivou subjektivnosti i formiranja identiteta. Dok Elias subjektivnost razume kroz dugoročno sadejstvo psihogeneze i sociogeneze, naglašavajući istorijsko oblikovanje samokontrole, kontrole afekata i refleksivne individualnosti unutar promenljivih figuracija, komunikativni konstruktivizam ove procese reformuliše u izričito komunikativnim i relacionim pojmovima. Knoblauch tvrdi da subjekt više ne bi trebalo shvatati kao supstancijalni ili pred-društveni entitet, već kao momenat/poziciju koji nastaje u samom komunikativnom delanju. Komunikativni konstruktivizam radikalizuje Eliasovo procesualno razumevanje sopstva time što formiranje subjektivnosti premešta iz procesa oblikovanja habitusa u komunikativne, performativne i medijatizovane prakse.*

*Dalje se tvrdi da Eliasov pojam figuracija (dinamičnih mreža međuzavisnosti koje se oblikuju kroz trajne procese sociogeneze i psihogeneze) može biti produktivno preformulisan u svetlu savremenih društvenih transformacija. Upravo u tom pogledu komunikativni konstruktivizam nudi teorijsku nadogradnju, stavljajući u prvi plan otelovljeni, objektivizovan i tehnološki posredovani karakter komunikacije. On pokazuje kako procesi poput medijatizacije, translokalizacije i polikonteksturalizacije preobražavaju samu teksturu međuzavisnosti, proizvodeći konfiguracije koje više nisu teritorijalno omeđene niti institucionalno stabilizovane na nekadašnji način. Tako posmatrano, figuracije se ne razvijaju samo evolutivno, već bivaju refigurisane kroz umnožavanje i preklapanje komunikativnih konteksta, što dovodi do izraženijih napetosti, asimetrija i novih oblika moći.*

**KLJUČNE REČI:** *figuraciona sociologija, komunikativni konstruktivizam, subjektivnost, refiguracija, refigurisana modernost*

## Introduction

In *Capitalist Revolution*, when acknowledging his intellectual debt to Max Weber, Peter Berger writes: "At least in science, one shows the greatest respect for an author by leaving him behind" (1986: 7). This, however, does not imply that the greatest tribute to a scholar is paid by consigning their work to oblivion. A more plausible interpretation of Berger's remark is that the highest form of recognition a scientist can aspire to is the enduring relevance of the questions

they have posed and the continued acknowledgement of their significance by subsequent generations of scholars.

Few sociologists exemplify this condition more clearly than Norbert Elias. Over the course of the twentieth century, many of the problems that occupied his work gradually became integral to mainstream sociological inquiry. Questions concerning the historical formation of individuality, the relationship between agency and social constraint, the interdependence of actors, the dynamics of power balances, the long-term transformation of social orders, and the co-development of personality structures and societal institutions have become central concerns across a wide range of theoretical traditions. Although Elias himself often occupied a somewhat marginal position within the disciplinary landscape during much of his career, the themes he explored have proven remarkably resilient. Indeed, they continue to influence and even shape contemporary debates about subjectivity, social change, globalisation, mediatization, and the transformation of modern societies.

This intellectual legacy is visible in numerous contemporary research programmes that, whether explicitly or implicitly, build upon Eliasian insights. Among these, communicative constructivism occupies a particularly interesting position. Developed primarily by Hubert Knoblauch and his collaborators, communicative constructivism draws on the sociology of knowledge tradition associated with Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann while also incorporating insights from phenomenology, pragmatism, interactionism, media studies, and contemporary communication research. Despite these different genealogical origins, communicative constructivism shares several fundamental affinities with figurational/process sociology<sup>2</sup>. Both perspectives reject substantialist conceptions of society and conceive social reality as fundamentally processual and relational. Both emphasise the emergence of social order through ongoing practices rather than through the operation of external structures. Both understand human beings not as isolated entities but as socially constituted actors whose identities and capacities arise within networks of interdependence. Moreover, both approaches display a pronounced sensitivity to historical transformation and seek to overcome rigid dichotomies between the individual and society, agency and structure, and the micro and macro levels of analysis.

The present article argues that communicative constructivism can be read as a productive extension of several core Eliasian insights. This argument is developed through two analytical entry points that, broadly speaking, correspond to the levels of subjectivity and social structure. The first concerns the problem

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2 “The concept of social process is more fundamental to Elias’s thinking than ‘figuration’, a term that he introduced only in the 1960s. In the last years of his life Elias expressed dissatisfaction with the label ‘figurational sociology’, which had become attached to his work in the late 1970s. Elias came to feel that ‘figurational sociology’ was far from self-explanatory, and tried to introduce the term ‘process sociology’ (...). ‘Process sociology’ has not, however, caught on” (Kilminster & Mennell, 2009, p. x). For a brief and concise discussion of the concept of “social processes”, see Elias (1986/2009b).

of subjectivation.<sup>3</sup> Elias' account of psychogenesis and sociogenesis remains one of sociology's most sophisticated attempts to explain how individuals become capable of self-regulation, reflexivity, and identity formation within historically evolving configurations of social relations. The individual, in Elias' framework, is neither a natural given nor an autonomous consciousness but the outcome of long-term civilising processes that shape emotional dispositions and cognitive orientations. Communicative constructivism retains this fundamentally relational and processual understanding of the self while reformulating it. Instead of locating subject formation primarily within processes of habitus<sup>4</sup> formation and affect regulation, it emphasises the constitutive role of communicative action, embodied performance, and mediated interaction. Subjectivity thus appears less as an internalised social structure than as an ongoing communicative accomplishment that emerges through communicative acts.

The second point of comparison concerns the concept of refiguration. If Elias' notion of figuration(s) provides a powerful framework for understanding networks of interdependence and constitution of social order, contemporary transformations raise the question of whether these figurations themselves are undergoing qualitative change. Processes of mediatization<sup>5</sup>, digitalisation, transnationalization, and increasing communicative connectivity have profoundly altered the conditions under which social relations are organised and reproduced. Communicative constructivism addresses these developments through the concept of refiguration, which seeks to capture the growing plurality, simultaneity, and overlap of communicative spaces and social contexts. From this perspective, contemporary societies are characterised by

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- 3 "This question about the subject is very topical because we encounter more and more 'intelligent' objects and technologies that act 'autonomously'. Of course, the question of the subject of action also arises when dealing with animals: Whether and to what extent animals (and which animals) can act and have an identity. Finally, it should be remembered that the question of the subject of action has always been a religious question as well. In addition to the intervention of spirits or occult forces in our agency, there has always been the question of whether and in what way we ourselves are subject to other subjects in our innermost being" (Knoblauch, 2023b, 38). For a more extensive and fine-grained treatment of subjectivity from the perspective of communicative constructivism, particularly as developed at the intersection of interpretive sociology and discourse analysis, consult the works of the late Saša Bosančić (2019; 2022; 2025).
  - 4 Although the concept of habitus in sociology is most often associated with Pierre Bourdieu, who did more than perhaps any other sociologist to elaborate and popularise it, Elias – like Weber before him – had already used it as a theoretical tool. In the present article, the concept is used in Elias' sense, as a way of referring to the socially formed and historically sedimented dispositions of persons within changing figurations. For a concise reconstruction of the philosophical origins of the concept, its early use in Bourdieu's work, and a clarification of recurrent misunderstandings surrounding it, see Wacquant (2016).
  - 5 "A development that Elias could hardly reflect, though he had some presentiment of it (Elias, 1991: 163), is that today many figurations are made up by the use of media. This is one possible driving force of their transformation: the figurations of individuals, collectivities (families, peer groups, communities, etc.) and organizations (media companies, churches, schools, etc.) change with their media ensembles. In addition, deep mediatization makes new figurations possible, such as online gatherings in chatrooms, on platforms or through apps" (Hepp & Hasebrink, 2018: 29).

the reorganisation of the very communicative infrastructures through which figurations are constituted.

The affinities between figurational sociology and communicative constructivism are not exhausted by these two themes. Significant parallels can also be identified in their shared opposition to the reduction of social phenomena to static states or conditions (*Zustandsreduktion*), relational understanding of social order, emphasis on embodiment and practical action, concern with the social production of knowledge, and sensitivity to changing configurations of power. Nevertheless, subjectivation and refiguration appear fruitful as focal points for comparison because together they encompass the two dimensions that have traditionally structured sociological theory: the formation of agents/actors and the constitution of social order.

Before undertaking this comparison, it is necessary to outline the theoretical premises of communicative constructivism. The following section introduces the principal concepts and intellectual foundations of this research programme and situates it within the broader development of the sociology of knowledge in Germany.

## Communicative Constructivism in Outline

Over the last two decades, the social centrality of communication has become increasingly difficult to ignore. Everyday life, institutional coordination, political conflict, knowledge circulation, and digitally mediated interaction are now so thoroughly entangled that any social theory treating communication as peripheral appears increasingly outdated. Sociology has not always responded to this transformation with concepts adequate to its scale. Among the more systematic attempts to do so is communicative constructivism, a theoretically ambitious and empirically oriented approach that emerged in German-speaking sociology and that should be situated within what has been called “the new sociology of knowledge” (Schnettler, Knoblauch & Raab, 2017). Its explicit point of departure is the enduring legacy of Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality*, a work whose influence across the social sciences has been both foundational and wide-ranging (Jovanović, 2021: 519–520). Communicative constructivism seeks to revise and extend this heritage under conditions shaped by mediatization<sup>6</sup>, digitisation, visual culture (Couldry & Hepp, 2022), and new forms of material objectification(s).

6 In Habermas’ theory, the *mediatization of the lifeworld* refers to the penetration of symbolically generalised steering media, above all money and power, into domains of social life that depend on communicative reproduction. By contrast, in mediatization research and in communicative constructivism, the concept refers primarily to the historically changing role of media, technologies, signs, objects, and infrastructures in the transformation of social reality: “Mediatization refers to an everyday experience characterized by the saturation by (predominantly digital) media into each and every social domain, which, in the process of doing so, contributes to their transformation. More specifically, it refers to the relationship between the transformation of media and communication on the one hand and culture and society on the other. (...) Hubert Knoblauch, in the social constructivist tradition of

The approach proposes more than a modest adjustment to social-constructivist vocabulary. Its central wager is that sociology should move analytically from “social action” to “communicative action”.<sup>7</sup> It implies a move from a predominantly subject-centred model of meaning to a relational model in which sociality arises through reciprocal, materially mediated processes among subjects and (their) objectivation(s) (Knoblauch, 2020b; 2023a). Recent English-language formulations present communicative constructivism not simply as a niche of German sociological discourse<sup>8</sup> but as a general social-theoretical framework capable of integrating interpretive sociological paradigm, media theory, discourse analysis, pragmatist and interactionist insights, and newer debates on materiality and technology. This expansion is especially visible in efforts to make the tradition more accessible beyond German-language scholarship.<sup>9</sup> In that respect, communicative constructivism is both a theoretical

mediatization, has contributed to the anchoring of mediatization in social phenomenology as well as broadening the current perspective of (deep) mediatization to include references to social science research on space and place. (...) [T]he *social-constructivist* tradition emphasizes the role media play in the communicative construction of social and cultural reality and predominantly explores mediatization from the perspective of everyday actors (...) Researchers in this tradition question how our cultural and societal practices are altered when they are entangled with media” (Hepp, 2019: 301, 303, 304).

- 7 The reference to *communicative action* inevitably recalls Habermas’ theory, and an early formulation of communicative constructivism explicitly acknowledges this connection (Knoblauch & Schnettler, 2004). However, communicative constructivism does not simply reproduce Habermas’ model. Whereas Habermas’ theory is centred on communicative rationality, linguistic understanding, validity claims, and the distinction between communicative and instrumental or strategic action, communicative constructivism broadens communicative action to include embodied, multimodal, material, and technologically mediated forms of action. Its primary aim is therefore less to ground a normative theory of critique than to analyse how social realities are produced in observable communicative processes under historically changing conditions (Knoblauch, 2013a).
- 8 For a comprehensive overview of books and edited volumes in German developed within the framework of communicative constructivism and the contemporary sociology of knowledge, readers may consult the Springer VS book series: *Wissen, Kommunikation und Gesellschaft – Schriften zur Wissenssoziologie* (*Knowledge, Communication and Society – Writings on the Sociology of Knowledge*). The series is dedicated to exploring the interrelations between society, knowledge, and communication, while advancing the sociology of knowledge through conceptual analyses, empirical case studies, historical reconstructions, and investigations of contemporary forms of social construction of reality (see: <https://link.springer.com/series/12130>).
- 9 A concrete step in this direction is the Routledge book series: *Knowledge, Communication and Society: Contributions to the New Sociology of Knowledge* which “seeks to revive the academic collaboration and debates between European and Anglo-Saxon currents of thought in the social sciences that characterised the middle of the last century, and provide a forum for the development of a new sociology of knowledge. A space for transatlantic discussion, it includes original works and translations of central works by contemporary European social scientists and is committed to an empirically grounded programme of developing social theory” (see: <https://www.routledge.com/Knowledge-Communication-and-Society/book-series/KCS>). See also two open-access volumes that are part of another Routledge book series *The Refiguration of Space*: Gabriela B. Christmann, Hubert Knoblauch & Martina Löw (Eds.) *Communicative Constructions and the Refiguration of Spaces: Theoretical Approaches and Empirical Studies* (2022) and Hubert Knoblauch, Vivien Sommer & Barbara Pfetsch (Eds.) *Spatial Conflicts and Conflictual Spaces: The Dynamics of Refiguration* (2025).

reconstruction/rearticulation of an older social constructivist paradigm (Pfadenhauer & Knoblauch, 2019) and an attempt to provide a contemporary language for the empirical study of a communication-saturated society characterised by the “mediated construction of reality” (Couldry & Hepp, 2017; Reichertz & Bettmann, 2018).

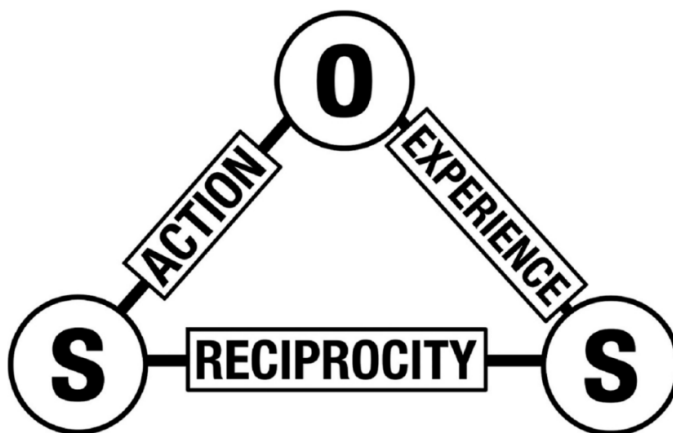
Theoretical roots of communicative constructivism are multiple. A first line of descent runs from Weber’s interpretive sociology through Schütz’s phenomenologically based sociology and on to Berger and Luckmann’s sociology of knowledge. A second runs through Thomas Luckmann’s long-standing concern with the communicative construction of reality (Luckmann, 2006), including his insistence that social realities are produced in communicative processes and that the most reliable sociological access to those realities lies in reconstructing such processes in their unfolding sequence (Luckmann, 2013). A third line derives from the empirical “communicative turn” in German sociology, where communication became not just a philosophical theme but an object of systematic qualitative inquiry, aided by the spread of audio and video recording and by the growth of sequential analysis, genre analysis, ethnography, and video-based research (Knoblauch, 2019).

Broadly speaking, one may distinguish three major strands within communicative constructivism: the sociology-of-knowledge approach to discourse (SKAD) associated with Reiner Keller (2024), the theory of the communicative construction of reality developed by Hubert Knoblauch (2020a), and Jo Reichertz’s focus on communicative power (*Kommunikationsmacht*; 2010; 2024). However, given the scope and aims of the present paper, a more detailed examination of the theoretical differences and internal developments of these strands must remain beyond its purview.

The “communicative” in communicative constructivism does not refer only to speech, discourse, or sign exchange in a narrow linguistic sense. Communication is understood as embodied action that becomes accessible to others through objectivations.<sup>10</sup> In this framework, social action is communicative insofar as it enters a shared world of experience and can therefore affect co-actors, observers, and, later, institutions. Objectivations are the empirical forms through which action becomes intersubjectively available, whether as words, gestures, sounds, gazes, documents, interfaces, digital traces, media artefacts, or built arrangements (Pfadenhauer, 2023; Grenz, Pfadenhauer & Kirschner, 2018). The approach therefore develops a triadic social ontology: at a minimum, sociality involves subjects related to one another through objectivations.<sup>11</sup>

10 A brief comparison with Luhmann is useful here. For Luhmann, *communication* is not grounded in action, intention, or subjective meaning, but in the autopoiesis of communication itself. It is classically defined as the synthesis of three selections: information, utterance/announcement (*Mitteilung*), and understanding (Luhmann, 1997/2012: 36–37, 45–46, 57–58, 113–114). Knoblauch explicitly distances Communicative constructivism from this position. In order to avoid reducing communication to a self-referential sequence of meaning-selections, and in order to retain the role of subjectivity, embodiment, objectivation, and materiality, he proposes the concept of *communicative action* (Knoblauch, 2020a: 54–55, 76, 126, 139–140).

11 “Objectivation is the missing analytical link which allows one to turn social into communicative action” (Knoblauch, 2013b, p. 302). Silke Steets illustrates the triadic structure

**Figure 1.** *Triadic relation of communicative action*

Source: Christmann, Knoblauch & Löw (2022: 24).

This significantly broadens earlier constructionist emphases on language and meaning by foregrounding materiality, sensuality, corporeality, and affectivity. The communicating body is the site through which the social is enacted and reciprocally shaped (Knoblauch, 2005a; Keller & Meuser, 2011).

Several basic assumptions follow from this move. First, meaning is never merely private if it is to become sociologically relevant; it must be objectified and thus made available within a shared field of experience. Second, subjectivity is not denied but decentered. Communicative constructivism resists both atomistic individualism and anti-subjective reductions of actors to effects of discourse, systems, or networks. Third, materiality is constitutive rather than external. Technologies, media, documents, spaces, and artefacts are not passive containers of communication but operative participants in the construction of reality. Fourth, communicative processes sediment into more durable patterns, such as communicative forms and communicative genres. These are stabilised ways of solving recurrent communicative problems and linking situations to institutions. Fifth, the approach is explicitly open to historical change. It argues that the contemporary expansion of digital media, interfaces, and infrastructures has transformed not just the conditions of communication but the very morphology of society, which Knoblauch diagnoses as a “communication society” (*Kommunikationsgesellschaft*; 2016; 2018; 2020a: 233–267) characterized by “deep mediatization” (Couldry, 2020; Hepp, 2020) and, more specifically, by “communicatization” – a historical process in which communication becomes an increasingly important organizing principle of social life.

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of communicative action by analysing the one-two pass in football, while simultaneously connecting this theoretical framework to Elias’s sociology of sport. “While social diagnosis via soccer analysis is already a widely used genre in cultural theory, journalism, and popular culture, the perspective proposed here aims to *ground it in social theory*. Linking communicative constructivism to Elias’ sociology of figuration does just that, and this combination, of course, can be used far beyond soccer analysis” (Steets, 2026: 43).

Communicatization turns technology into a communication technique and any workings of technologies turn into communication. The reason for this is digitalization and the associated coupling of signs, technologies, and things. On the other hand, communicatization is characterized by the interactivity of digitalized technology. For the people involved, it results in a transformation of more and more work into communication work. (Knoblauch, 2020a: 242)

Communicative constructivism is close to classical social constructivism, but it departs from it in at least four respects: it is more relational than subjectivist (Knoblauch 2020b); it greatly expands the concept of objectivation beyond language (Knoblauch, 2013b: 302–303); it foregrounds body, performance, affect, and materiality (Knoblauch, 2020a: 115–122); and it treats empirical research not as illustrative afterthought but as indispensable to theory formation (Knoblauch, 2025a). In short, it seeks to answer not only whether reality is socially constructed, but how such construction proceeds in observable communicative processes. This is one reason why a growing corpus of empirical work has become central to the approach rather than ancillary to it (Reichertz & Tuma, 2017).

These theoretical commitments have direct methodological consequences. If reality is communicatively constructed, then research must attend to the actual forms through which communication unfolds. This shifts emphasis toward methods capable of capturing situated processes, multimodality, temporal sequence, embodiment, and material environments. Accordingly, communicative constructivism has been associated with communicative genre analysis (Günthner & Knoblauch, 1995), videography (Knoblauch, Tuma & Schnettler, 2015), focused ethnography (Knoblauch, 2005b), life-world ethnography (Honer & Hitzler, 2015), social-scientific hermeneutics (Reichertz, 2009; Hitzler, Reichertz & Schröer, 1999/2017: 17–67), and discourse analysis (Keller, 2024). Video analysis is especially important because it allows researchers to study action as it happens rather than only through retrospective narration (Singh, Meier zu Verl & Tuma, 2025). Reflexive methodology also requires researchers to recognise that data are themselves objectivations produced through communicative processes and that sociological analysis must therefore examine not only its objects but its own modes of construction (Knoblauch, 2021a).

One of the strongest arguments for the usefulness of communicative constructivism is the breadth of empirical domains in which it has proved illuminating. Classical work on PowerPoint presentations treated a ubiquitous presentation technology as a communicative form constitutive of knowledge work rather than as a neutral tool (Knoblauch, 2012). Subsequent and current research extends that sensibility across a wide range of domains: public events and collective affect, chamber music and embodied coordination, religion and spirituality, social movements, the communicative constitution of violence, communication with people diagnosed with dementia, the role of unspoken rules on TikTok and Facebook, public science communication, digital planning and infrastructuring, the communicative role of AI, and the communicative

reconstruction of spaces in urban and translocal settings (see: Knoblauch *et al.*, 2026; Christmann, Knoblauch & Löw, 2022).

## Subjectivity, Subjectification and Identity: From Sociogenesis to Communicative Action

Among many possible points of contact between figurational sociology and communicative constructivism, problems of subjectivity and identity occupy a privileged position, although these problems are addressed through different conceptual vocabularies and under different historical conditions.<sup>12</sup> Whereas Elias developed a processual sociology of identity<sup>13</sup> centred on the intertwined dynamics of psychogenesis and sociogenesis, communicative constructivism reformulates the emergence of subjectivity in terms of communicative action and subjectification.

Brief terminological clarification is necessary before proceeding. In the present argument, the concepts of *subject* and *subjectivity*, *person*, and *identity* should not be used interchangeably. *Subjectivity* may be understood as a condition or property of action, *personhood* as socially and biographically stabilised individuality, and *identity* as reflexive and symbolic self-location. This distinction is close to Knoblauch's own attempt to establish a "division of labour" between the philosophical concept of the subject and the sociological concept of identity. As he argues, even if subjectivity is taken as a basic conceptual category, empirical social life always confronts us with subjects, selves, and identities; these, however, are not prior substances but are derived from communicative action through processes of subjectification (Knoblauch, 2023b: 39–40). In the present analysis, the *subject* should therefore be treated as the most abstract and theoretically problematic category. It refers to the capacity or position from which action, experience, intentionality, and self-relation become possible. The *person*, by contrast, designates a more empirical and biographical category: not the abstract subject of action, nor yet the reflexive answer to the question "who am I?", but the socially recognisable and temporally continuous human being who passes through a life-course.<sup>14</sup> *Identity*, finally, should be reserved for the reflexive and symbolic dimension of self- and other-ascription, that is,

12 Communicative constructivism enjoys the benefits of further historical development of social & sociological theory, and thus encompasses and integrates results of various theoretical "turns" – "spatial", "performative", "body", "sensory" and "affective turn" (Eberle, 2023: 167), and before those: "linguistic", "interpretive", "cultural", "postmodern", "textual", "postcolonial", "reflexive", "discursive", "iconic" or "pictorial", "transnational", and "material turn" (Eberle, 2023: 156).

13 It is important to note that Elias mentions one process "no less important than the others": "process in which each person is entangled with himself or herself and which, ultimately, is that person. That the human being is a process is certainly one of the most fundamental of people's experiences, but is usually suppressed from thinking because of the overwhelming tendency of thought to reduce processes to static conditions" (Elias, 1980/2009d: 41).

14 For an overview of Luckmann's take on the problem of personal identity, see: Jovanović (2019b).

for the ways in which persons become intelligible to themselves and to others as particular kinds of selves.

One of Elias' most important contributions consists in his rejection of the image of the isolated individual. His critique of *homo clausus* challenged the deeply rooted assumption that individuals exist as self-contained entities prior to their social relations.<sup>15</sup> Instead, Elias argued that human beings can only be understood as participants in figurations,<sup>16</sup> that is, dynamic networks of interdependence through which personality structures and social structures are continuously co-constituted (Elias, 1970/2012a: 123–128). Psychogenesis and sociogenesis are therefore not separate processes but two aspects of a single developmental movement: personality structures emerge within historically specific configurations of social relations, while those same relations are reproduced and transformed through the conduct of interdependent actors.

This processual conception also informs Elias' understanding of identity. Identity is neither a fixed possession nor an inner essence hidden beneath social roles. Rather, it represents a historically variable equilibrium between what Elias calls "I-identity" and "We-identity." Individual selfhood develops through participation in collective figurations and through incorporation of the social habitus that characterises particular groups. The individual is therefore never reducible either to a sovereign self or to a passive bearer of social norms. Identity emerges through ongoing negotiations between personal distinctiveness and collective belonging. Because figurations themselves change historically, the balance between "I-" and "We-identities" also shifts, producing different forms of individuality and self-understanding across periods (Elias, 1987/1991: 153–237; see also Mennell, 1994).

What is essential to Elias' concept of identity is its temporal dimension and its character as a historically unfolding process<sup>17</sup>; this justifies the inclusion

15 Elias has "always been an opponent of phenomenology" (Kilminster & Mennell, 2009, p. xiv; see also: Elias, 1978/2009c), precisely because he saw it (amongst other traditions of thinking) responsible for the conception of the *homo clausus* ("closed man" or "closed personality"). "It is the conception of the person (in the singular) as the 'subject' of knowledge; a single thinking mind inside a sealed container, from which each one looks out and struggles to fish for knowledge of the 'objects' outside in the 'external world'. Among those 'objects' are *other* minds, equally locked inside their own sealed containers, and one of the most difficult problems epistemologists (and sociologists influenced by them) pose for themselves is the question of how one thinking 'subject' inside its own container can ever know anything of what is being thought and what is known by those 'objects' – those other 'subjects' – thinking away inside their own containers in turn" (Mennell, 1992: 188–189).

16 "The concept of figuration (...) serves as a simple conceptual tool to loosen this social constraint to speak and think as if 'the individual' and 'society' were distinct as well as antagonistic" (Elias, 1970/2012a: 125). For Elias' "most distilled definition of the concept of 'figuration'" (Kilminster & Mennell, 2009: x), see his homonymous entry written for the "German textbook intended to explain basic concepts in sociology to students" (*Grundbegriffe der Soziologie*): Elias (1986/2009a).

17 It would be worthwhile to explore the parallel that may be drawn between Elias' "historically unfolding process" and the concept of "sequentiality" (Knoblauch, 2022) in communicative constructivism. However, the limited scope of the present article does not allow for a systematic consideration of this issue.

of two relatively extended passages in order to preserve the precision of his formulation:

It may be helpful to explain why I am using (...) the term ‘continuum of changes’. The reason is, briefly, that in many processes of change the unity of the process is due, not to any substance which remains unchanged throughout the process, but to the continuity with which one change emerges from another in an unbroken sequence. (...) Take a human being: Hume once confessed that he could not understand in what sense the grown-up person he was now was ‘the same’ as the little child he used to be. (...) There are many other examples. In all these cases it is the continuity of changes which links a later stage to earlier stages. (Elias, 1987/1992: 202)

For the developing individual face of a person plays a central part, perhaps the most central part, in his or her identity as this particular person. (...) And it is the face which shows most clearly to what extent I-identity is bound up with the continuity of development from childhood to extreme old age. Indeed, the development process a person’s face undergoes from childhood to old age can serve as a prototypical example of a certain type of this process. It changes, but from a certain age on it takes on peculiarities which make it possible to identify a human face as always the same face, a person as always the same person, despite all the changes of ageing. The old logic possibly gives rise to the expectation that something absolutely immutable forms the hard core of all changes, the unchanging, undeveloping core of all development. The example of the development of a person, particularly the face, may perhaps make it easier to understand the fact that in the course of such a process there need not be anything that stands still and is absolutely unchangeable. The identity of the developing person rests above all on the fact that each later phase emerges in an unbroken sequence from an earlier phase. (Elias, 1987/1991: 189)

Underlying conception of individuality is Elias’ notion of habitus, which constitutes the sedimented product of social experience – the fate of a group, over time, “sediments” in the habitus of its members (Jovanović, 2019a: 70). It is socially generated “second nature” through which collective patterns become embodied within individual personalities. Importantly, habitus is neither purely individual nor purely collective. It represents the point at which social history becomes incorporated into the person. Through long-term civilising processes, external constraints are gradually transformed into self-restraint and reflexive self-control. Habitus differs from the ordinary inclination in its stability and permanence. The modern subject emerges as the outcome of historical transformations that increasingly require individuals to monitor and anticipate others’ reactions, and regulate their conduct accordingly. Identity is inseparable from the development of specific forms of social interdependence (Elias, 1939/2012b).

Communicative constructivism, however, argues that the problem of subjectivity requires a different conceptual starting point. According to Knoblauch, the classical sociology of knowledge inherited from Berger and Luckmann still contains remnants of a pre-social conception of the subject. Although *The Social Construction of Reality* demonstrates how social worlds emerge through externalisation, objectivation and internalisation, the model begins with an acting consciousness that appears prior to the construction process itself. The result is a circular argument in which the subject simultaneously precedes and emerges from social construction (Knoblauch, 2023b: 40–42).

The theoretical innovation of communicative constructivism consists in abandoning the notion of the subject as an original substance. Instead, Knoblauch proposes a shift from “the subject” to “subjectivity.” Subjectivity is not a thing, an entity or an inner essence. Subjects do not stand behind communicative processes as their autonomous originators; they emerge within and through communicative relations – as a “moment in communicative action” (Knoblauch, 2023b: 43). Consequently, subjectivity should be understood not as a precondition of communication but as one of its constitutive properties. Communication is impossible without subjectivity, yet subjectivity exists only within communicative action.

Knoblauch develops this argument through an analysis of finger pointing (Knoblauch, 2023a). Such elementary communicative act reveals that communication is inherently relational. Pointing does not originate from a self-sufficient subject who simply directs attention toward an object. Rather, it presupposes orientation toward others. The person who points anticipates another participant’s perspective and adjusts their bodily conduct accordingly. Subjectivity emerges through this relational positioning rather than preceding it. What communicative action requires is not an autonomous subject but positionality within a communicative relation – subject is not the source of communication, but an effect of communicative positioning.<sup>18</sup>

From an Eliasian perspective, this move can be interpreted as radicalisation of process sociology. Elias had already demonstrated that individuality is socially constituted through networks of interdependence. Communicative

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18 “For pointing not only presupposes the ability to anticipate the other’s standpoint; in order to be able to do so, it necessarily implies one’s own standpoint. This is, then, the first trait of subjectivity: *positionality*. (...) The position of the subject, then, is a point of reference, but not the only one. In its orientation toward a third, namely the finger and its reference, pointing has in fact two reference points. In this way we can acknowledge the importance of the relationality of pointing by demonstrating that the interchangeability of standpoints takes into account the other position in a way Mead calls ‘perspectivity’. Being relational, it is not just one ‘perspective’ on something, but rather two perspectives in which one’s own position figures as well. Pointing, thus, takes into account the location of others in the action, by way of the interchangeability of standpoints. It is also necessary that one’s own position is accounted for in order to successfully point: where the subject is posited is relevant for where and how the subject points. This is what we call positionality. It is a feature of subjectivity (...) which remains formal and does not require an ‘inner substance’ a priori” (Knoblauch, 2020a: 80–83).

constructivism extends this insight by asking how these interdependencies are enacted in concrete communicative processes.<sup>19</sup>

For Elias, identity formation largely proceeds through the internalisation of socially generated constraints and the gradual development of self-regulation. Identity emerges as individuals acquire dispositions corresponding to the figurations within which they participate. Communicative Constructivism, by contrast, conceptualises subjectification as the outcome of participation in communicative action. Consciousness itself is not treated as an original starting point but as something constituted through communicative relations. “By virtue of subjectivity, a difference in reciprocal perspective is established so that subjects can be formed. We refer to this as subjectification” (Knoblauch, 2023b: 46). Drawing on Mead, Knoblauch argues that thinking, selfhood and reflexivity emerge through internalised forms of communication. What appears as an inner dialogue is in fact the sedimentation of communicative relations within the self. “We can then use the concept of identity to refer to such forms of subjectification that aim to unify the various ‘voices’ or ‘roles’ in communicative action” (Knoblauch, 2023b: 48).

The decisive difference lies in the mechanism through which subject formation is explained. Communicative constructivism foregrounds communicative action as the primary site in which subjectivity is constituted. This reformulation becomes more significant under contemporary conditions of mediatization. Elias developed his theory in relation to face-to-face figurations, state formation and long-term civilising processes. Communicative constructivism addresses a social world increasingly structured by digital communication and mediated interaction. Under such conditions, subjectification becomes inseparable from communicative infrastructures that extend way beyond immediate interaction. The formation of selves increasingly depends upon participation in technologically mediated networks in which reflexive self-presentation acquires unprecedented significance. All this prompts Knoblauch to write of “double subjectification”:

On the one hand, the subject becomes public through communicativization. On the other hand, there is an increased internalization of action in what I will call *Veraktung*<sup>20</sup>. [The subject] is identified and made

19 “[B]ecause Elias’ approach does not explain what these interdependencies consist of, we want to understand them as communicative actions: they are relations consisting of processes in which affectivity, spatiality, and objects play a much more decisive role than they do in Elias’ concept of ‘interdependencies’” (Knoblauch, 2020a: 274).

20 Although *Veraktung* (Knoblauch, 2017: 377) is translated as “en-actment” (Knoblauch, 2020a: 264), perhaps a more suitable translation would be “actification”, meaning: the turning of action into an internalized act-structure, or the way of relocating communicative action “inward” which, then, becomes part of subjectification: “For although double subjectivization remains attached to the pattern of plurality so typical of postmodernity, it contradicts an open ‘proteic identity’, i.e. a model of a subject that can continually present itself in different ways and exhibits an insubstantial arbitrariness. As opposed to this postmodern concept of unstable identity in a state of flux, the process of communicativization analyzed stabilizes identities, for example by ‘en-actment’, which constantly demands making discreet decisions.

identifiable, because the communicative action is highly oriented towards the individual subject. (...) Subjectification is carried out in publics that do not know a clear boundary to a private sphere in communicative terms. (...) any subject can make himself or herself the central subject of communication through communicativization. (...) The present communicativization leads to a more intense activation of the subjects, which finds its expression in the aforementioned “self-representation”. It is not merely casual and situationally ephemeral, but becomes a media performance. (Knoblauch, 2023b: 49–51; cf. Knoblauch, 2020a: 264–266)

Subjectivity remains relational, as Elias insisted, but the communicative forms through which relationality is organised undergo profound transformation. Communicative constructivism develops one of Elias’ central intuitions under new conditions, those of contemporary, “late”, or refigured modernity.

### **Refiguration and Refigured Modernity: Conceptual Adjustment to Societal Changes**

The present section shifts the comparison of Elias and communicative constructivism to the level of social order. Here the central question is whether Elias’ concept of figuration can be productively respecified in light of the transformations that characterise contemporary societies.

Figuration, as processual and relational, remains indispensable because it offers a way of thinking social order without reifying it, since it conceptualises it as a dynamic set of networks of interdependence constituted by changing power balances, institutional arrangements, embodied dispositions, and processes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis. As such, the concept invites further development. Contemporary societies, whose temporal and spatial order is dramatically changing (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 263–264), are increasingly shaped by forms of communication, mediatization, infrastructural connectivity, and dispersion of space that cannot be fully grasped by referring only to territorial, institutional, or national figurations (like Elias did).

Knoblauch and Löw explicitly build on Elias’ concept of figuration, and use it as a starting point for diagnosing qualitative changes in the organisation of social relations, i.e. their “expansion, extension, and intensification” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2025: 704).

With the concept of refiguration we want to avoid a mere juxtaposition and emphasize that we are not concerned with a new epoch, an epochal boundary, or even a threshold. Communication society is not a dominant type of society, but a diagnosis in the context of an ongoing process of transformation. Refiguration describes this change. Following Elias’ term “figuration”, refiguration is conceived as a process that stresses the

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This also means that the subject must be confirmed as a continuous decision-making authority” (Knoblauch, 2020a: 268).

difference from as well as the dependence on the “grand figuration” of modernity. (Knoblauch, 2020a: 273)

Refiguration designates a set of interrelated transformations: 1) “the coexistence and conflict between modern figurations (work ethics, families, industry, nation state) and late modern figurations (hedonistic ethics, creative industry, global communities), resulting in new ‘refigured’ forms (as in the new political populism, spiritual religiosity, or sustainable post-growth economies)”, 2) “changing role of social spaces” – beyond “ongoing tendencies toward world society, world polity, and a postcolonial, neoliberal world system, it also integrates the new forms of geopolitics resulting from, reacting to, and reverting globalization”, 3) the rise of the postcolonial decentering of modern Western society and its epistemologies as well as its forms of capitalism”, and 4) “the process of digital mediatization with its worldwide infrastructures” (Knoblauch et al., 2026: 8).<sup>21</sup>

Refiguration does not simply mean social change or transformation. These concepts are either too general or too linear. Refiguration, by contrast, draws attention to the tensions and superimpositions between different social, temporal, and spatial logics.

With the idea of refiguration, we first want to stress that globalization implies a form of relatedness that goes hand in hand with numerous conflicts. In contrast to the frequent neglect of spatiality in globalization theory (...), we second use the concept of refiguration to emphasize the role of social conflicts as part of a relational concept of spatiality (...). This thesis is based on a more encompassing research question we are posing: How is it possible to understand social change beyond the juxtaposition of globalization and de-globalization, of ascent and descent? How can we develop a multiscalar concept of social change, a concept that does not only privilege the global scale? (Knoblauch & Löw, 2025: 704)<sup>22</sup>

Refiguration, with its “conflict-laden logics” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 284) designates a process in which older and newer figurations coexist, overlap, conflict, and produce new forms of interdependence.

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- 21 Knoblauch and associates further explain: “Digital mediatization is one of the major reasons for the conceptual move toward communicative action, because digitalization implies the materialization of communication, that is, the increasing amount of everyday communication expressed in data that are not only fixed in ever-growing data centers but also reused by interactive AI for further communication, for work, and for production” (Knoblauch et al., 2026: 8).
- 22 Whereas a multiscalar approach requires social change to be analysed across different socio-spatial scales without privileging the global, the notion of transscalar (as an important feature of figurations) draws attention to the ways in which these scales are themselves interconnected and traversed through concrete figurations and communicative practices. For instance, “it is the transscalar dimension of the Internet that empowers individual users to communicate with potentially anyone but also subjects them to new forms of ‘data colonialism’ by corporations, as well as by nation-states and other territorial institutions” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2025: 715). Spatial features and the infrastructure of internet are “central to understanding the process of refiguration” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2025: 711).

Refiguration can be understood as an attempt to conceptually adjust sociological theory to societal changes. Knoblauch's diagnosis of "communication society" starts from the assumption that social theory cannot remain external to the society it analyses (Knoblauch, 2020a: 12). If the social sciences are themselves part of social development, then changes in society require changes in conceptual apparatuses (Knoblauch et al., 2026: 8). Communicative constructivism is thus an attempt to understand contemporary social reality by taking seriously the extent to which communicative action has become structurally consequential. Communication is no longer only the symbolic transmission of meaning or "talk about" society; it has become a productive, material, infrastructural, and organisational force. It contributes to economic production, service work, institutional coordination, social differentiation, and the formation of new inequalities.

This shift is closely connected to mediatization.<sup>23</sup> In communicative constructivism, mediatization refers to the historical and structural transformation of communicative action through media, signs, objects, technologies, and infrastructures. It is not confined to the mass media system, for in communication society, media are no longer located in a relatively separate institutional domain responsible for representing society to itself. Digital media and infrastructures penetrate almost all sectors of social life: work, production, logistics, administration, education, urban planning, mobility, intimacy, leisure, and politics. Mediatization changes how society is described or represented, but also how social action is coordinated, objectified, stabilised, and made effective.

Digitalisation<sup>24</sup> intensifies this process by coupling material processes with sign systems. Technical processes become communicatively relevant and can be linked to human action through interfaces, displays, feedback loops, sensors, platforms, and algorithmic systems (Knoblauch, 2020a: 243–244). Digital infrastructures are not external machines that simply impose effects upon passive actors. They are themselves institutionalised, maintained, repaired, interpreted, governed, and used through communicative action. They are materialised social structures that continue to exist only insofar as they are enacted and re-enacted in use. Knoblauch's processual concept of "infrastructuring" (2020a: 251–254) refers to the fact that infrastructures are not built once and then passively available; they are continually (re)produced and transformed through coordinated action.

Mediation by technological objectifications and digital infrastructures does not abolish face-to-face interaction. Communicative constructivism insists on

23 "Mediatization means that new media and technologies, such as computers, mobile phones, and cars, are included in communicative actions. In this way (...) not only the structure of action is transformed, but also the nature of the relationships created by action and the spaces generated by it. As a characteristic of communicative action, mediatization is also linked to subjective experiences, emotions, and imaginations, which represent what is meant by absence and presence in a new way and enable an intensification of local experiences" (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 278–279).

24 For an explicitly Eliasian treatment of digitalisation, see Bianco (2021), whose chapter develops Elias' reflections on technology and the civilising process and applies his categories to contemporary technological innovations, particularly digitalisation.

the embodied and situated character of communicative action. What is changed is the relation between embodiment and mediation. Bodies remain located, but communicative action can now be coordinated across spatial distance in continuous and materially consequential ways. The result is the reorganisation of embodied action through technologically mediated representations.

This reorganisation is captured by the concept of translocalization (Knoblauch, 2020a: 258–262). It refers to a qualitative change in the spatiality of communicative action. Through digital media, actors can participate in communicative relations across the primary zone of bodily action. Presence and distance no longer function as they did in classical face-to-face interaction. Social relations among friends, families, work teams, companies, religious communities, political groups, and diasporic collectivities can be maintained through regular, sometimes continuous mediated communication. These relations are not merely imagined or symbolic; they can have immediate material consequences. Financial transactions, medical interventions, logistical operations, surveillance practices, military actions, and industrial production can be coordinated across distance through digital representations and “response presence”.

The notion of “response presence” (Knoblauch, 2020a: 212–213) avoids a simple opposition between presence and absence. In translocal communicative action, the other body need not be physically present for the communicative act to be reciprocally oriented and sequentially coordinated. Signs, voices, images, interfaces, and data do not represent absent actors/objects, but they become part of the action itself. The “synthetic situation,” discussed by Knoblauch and Löw (2020: 281) through Knorr-Cetina, is exemplary in this regard. It links spatially distributed actors through digital representations in such a way that they can act upon shared objects. Translocalization therefore modifies the basic spatial conditions under which interdependence is produced and experienced.

A second major dimension of refiguration is polycontextualization.<sup>25</sup> If translocalization refers to the spatial extension and redistribution of communicative action, polycontextualization refers to the simultaneous

25 Niklas Luhmann introduced polycontextuality in his magnum opus *Die Gesellschaft der Gesellschaft* in the context of modern society's self-description and observation of itself, particularly in Chapter 5 (“Self-Descriptions”) in Vol. 2 (2013), although he gives a brief description of the concept at the beginning of Vol. 1: “modern society (...) is a polycontextual system admitting a plurality of descriptions of its complexity” (Luhmann, 1997/2012: 11). This notion was suggested/adapted for sociology by Luhmann “to counter the argument that modern societies cannot be described in terms of neat and clear-cut functional differentiation. To the extent that functional requirements lose their uniqueness, communication is polyvalent and simultaneously follows different codes. For this reason, polycontextuality refers to the fact that communications can simultaneously have a multitude of references. For Luhmann (...), however, polycontextuality refers only to meaning, so that different sense relations are simultaneously established on different functional systems levels like economy, politics, science, religion, etc.” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 279–280). “The conventional view holds that differentiation is gradually increasing in modernity; to Luhmann, however, the notion of polycontextuality indicates something of a countertendency: Communication increasingly needs to address different codes at the same time. That is to say, it increasingly demands that communication refer to different systems. It is this *multireferentiality* which constitutes one of the basic meanings of polycontextuality” (Knoblauch, 2021b).

embedding of actors, relations, and practices in multiple spatial contexts and scales. The point is that different spatial logics and material contexts (with different institutional orders) become coupled in concrete action situations. A seemingly local action may at the same time be part of a global economy, a transnational network, an urban infrastructure, a digital platform, a legal regime, and an affective community. Communicative action unfolds in situations that are no longer adequately described as simply local, national, institutional, or interactional.

Polycontexturalization is especially important because it prevents us from reducing refiguration to network society or globalisation. Refigured modernity (Knoblauch, 2020a: 274–277) is not simply the victory of networks, flows and mobility over territories, places, and stability.<sup>26</sup> Rather, it is marked by the simultaneity and tension between spatial figures: territories, networks, trajectories, and places (Knoblauch & Löw, 2025: 711). Territorial logics continue to matter, often with renewed intensity. Borders, national identities, local attachments, zones, camps, and bounded spaces are not disappearing. At the same time, they are overlaid and challenged by networked relations, transnational flows, digital infrastructures, mobile actors, and communicative circulations. Refiguration names the (unstable) order produced by these tensions.

This is also why refigured modernity should not be equated with postmodernity or with a simple stage after modernity. Knoblauch and Löw define refigured modernity as “that late phase of modernity in which the tension and simultaneity of conflicting forces and logics is characteristic” (2020: 268). Modern forms of structuration, differentiation, formal organisation, territoriality, and centralisation remain present, but are increasingly intersected by processes that move away from classical modern arrangements: networked cooperation, deterritorialization, transnationalization, digital mediati(zati)on, and the multiplication of spatial contexts.

The decisive point is that refiguration develops Elias’ concept of figuration without abandoning its core insights.<sup>27</sup> It asks how interdependencies are transformed when communicative action becomes technically mediated, materially objectified, infrastructurally extended, and spatially dispersed. In this perspective, figurations are increasingly refigured through mediatization, translocalization, and polycontexturalization.

26 “The current development towards a refigured modernity can be explained, clearly, by the increase in mobility, the densification of the circulation of goods, knowledge, and information, and, as a consequence, a general acceleration that is essentially based on developments in digital mediatization. In various waves (...) we see new forms of social situations, new spatial linkages, and hierarchies emerging, as well as translocal interactions that go hand in hand with new significances of places” (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 282).

27 “We prefer the notion of figuration coined by Elias (...) over structure because it underlines the processual character of social constructions and accounts for the role of subjectivity, agency, and affectivity in its relation to the whole structure of society, thus avoiding the schematic distinction between different vertical levels of social structures, such as micro, meso, and macro” (Knoblauch, 2025b: 188 n2).

The concept of refiguration diagnoses a structural problem that Elias could not have addressed in its contemporary form. The issue is no longer only how individuals and groups become bound to one another in increasingly complex chains of interdependence, but how these chains are communicatively mediated, spatially (re)distributed, technologically (de)stabilised, and institutionally (re)organised.

Refiguration therefore not only describes the tense, spatial, multiscalar changes of society that we empirically investigate, but can also be considered as an essential feature of what comes to be a refigured arising out of the tensions between these different figurations. (Knoblauch & Löw, 2020: 285)

Communicative constructivism does not replace figurational sociology, but extends its imagination into a social world in which interdependencies are increasingly produced through overlapping contexts. The result is a refigured understanding of figuration itself.

## Conclusion

This article has argued that the dialogue between Norbert Elias' figurational sociology and communicative constructivism is most productive when it is not framed as a choice between two competing theoretical languages, but as a possible line of theoretical development.

Communicative constructivism, as any theoretical endeavour, should not be accepted without reservation. Its conceptual ambition is also its main vulnerability. The proposal to treat communicative action as the basic form of social action "is likely to be perceived as an overreach, regardless of explanation, legitimation, and justification" (vom Lehn & Kusenbach, 2023, par. 15), especially to sociologists concerned primarily with power, inequality, domination, suffering and/or (institutional) violence. Critics are right to warn that actions such as exclusion, punishment, hatred, administrative denial or coercion cannot be sociologically exhausted by describing them as communicative. Their concern is that within communicative-constructionist research:

(...) much analytic effort is typically devoted to uncovering the patterns and structures of the situated communication itself, rather than evaluating the social, cultural, or political contexts; or the causes, effects, and functions of this "communicative" work in and for the lives of participants and affected groups. (...) [R]esearch questions and results in many key works within CoCo [Communicative Constructivism] differ from those typically asked by sociologists who study work, institutions, technology, and related topics elsewhere. This has led some disappointed reviewers to doubt that CoCo's topics are suitable as "objects of sociological inquiry" and to conclude that works in this tradition are not "sociologically interesting". (vom Lehn & Kusenbach, 2023, par. 18)

In light of this critique, Elias might become useful again. His work reminds us that sociological concepts should be judged by their capacity to grasp the structure of the processes in which people are entangled. In Eliasian terms, the question is whether a theoretical vocabulary increases the “reality-congruence” of sociological knowledge. Reality-congruence does not mean final truth or neutral representation. It refers to the degree to which concepts allow us to understand real interdependencies, long-term processes, power balances, affects, dangers and unintended consequences more adequately (Elias, 1983/1987: vii–xxx, *et passim*). From this perspective, bringing Elias and communicative constructivism together is an attempt to make sociology more adequate to a world in which interdependencies are increasingly communicatively mediated, materially objectified, technologically infrastructured and spatially refigured.

If, as Hepp and Couldry suggest, the “quality of theory development is measured by the extent to which it provides us with tools for critically questioning the material transformations we all struggle with in our everyday lives” (2023: 148), then the dialogue proposed here should be understood as a contribution to that task. It seeks to retain Elias’ relational and processual imagination while extending it towards the temporality, spatiality, materiality, corporeality, sensuality and subjectivity of contemporary social reality. In this sense, the theoretical value of communicative constructivism may lie precisely in its capacity to render visible those new conditions under which figurations are formed, maintained, contested and transformed today.

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