

Milena Kojić¹

University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy
Department of Sociology

Pavle Milenković²

University of Novi Sad
Faculty of Philosophy
Department of Sociology

Original scientific paper

UDK 316.4.051:316.42 Elias N.

930.85-044 Braudel F.

Submitted: 24.6.2026.

Accepted: 28.8.2026.



DOI: <https://doi.org/10.2298/SOC2603357K>

WORLD TIME AND THE TIME OF HISTORY: NORBERT ELIAS AND FERNAND BRAUDEL IN A RECKONING WITH THE PRESENT

Vreme sveta i vreme istorije: Norbert Elias i Fernan Brouel u obračunu sa sadašnjicom

ABSTRACT: *This paper examines the theoretical convergence and interdisciplinary contribution of Norbert Elias and Fernand Braudel through the prism of their critique of the “short-sighted present.” Rejecting event-based history (l’histoire événementielle), both authors prioritize slow rhythms and long-term processes (longue durée). Although Braudel’s geo-historical structures do not fully coincide with Elias’s figurations and cultural habitus, the paper argues that the rhythms of long duration can be complemented by a processual character (Prozesshaftigkeit) understanding of social change at both the collective and individual levels. At the core of this theoretical affinity lies time as a fundamental dimension of social life. The paper further demonstrates that, unlike Braudel, Elias develops a more explicit theory of time as a symbolic and socially learned category. Through a discussion of the history of mentalities, imagination, and utopian thought, it highlights the significance of Elias’s psycho-historical perspective for understanding post-Braudelian developments within the Annales School and contemporary debates on social temporality. Finally, Elias’s and Braudel’s critique of the present is interpreted, on the one hand, as a methodological critique of event-based history and sociology’s orientation toward the present and, on the other, as a basis for criticizing the presentist “preoccupation with the now” deprived of a utopian horizon.*

KEYWORDS: *civilization, time, processuality, long duration, presentism, eschatology, utopia, fantasy, crisis*

1 milena.kojic@ff.uns.ac.rs; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9783-5391> (autor za korespondenciju)

2 pavle.milenkovic@ff.uns.ac.rs; <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2704-361X>

APSTRAKT: Rad istražuje teorijsko približavanje i interdisciplinarni doprinos Norberta Elijasa i Fernana Braudela kroz prizmu njihovog obračuna sa „sadašnjicom kratkoga daha”. Polazeći od otklona od događajne istorije (*l’histoire événementielle*) oba autora daju prioritet sporim ritmovima i procesima dugog trajanja (*longue durée*). Iako se Brodelove geoistorijske strukture ne poklapaju u potpunosti sa Elijasovim figuracijama i kulturnim habitusima, rad pokazuje da se ritmovi dugog trajanja mogu dopuniti procesnim (*Prozesshaftigkeit*) razumevanjem društvenih promena na kolektivnom i individualnom nivou. U središtu ove teorijske bliskosti nalazi se vreme kao ključna dimenzija društvenog života. Rad pokazuje da Elias, za razliku od Braudela, razvija eksplicitniju teoriju vremena kao simboličke i društveno naučene kategorije. Kroz razmatranje istorije mentaliteta, imaginacije i utopijskog mišljenja ukazuje se na značaj Elijasove psiho-istorijske perspektive za razumevanje postbrodelovskih pomaka unutar škole Anala i savremenih rasprava o društvenoj temporalnosti. Konačno, obračun Elijasa i Braudela sa sadašnjicom, razmatra se, s jedne strane, kao metodološka kritika događajne istorije i sociološke usmerenosti na sadašnjost, a s druge kao mogućnost kritike prezentističke opsednutosti sadašnjošću lišene utopijskog horizonta.

KLJUČNE REČI: civilizacija, vreme, procesnost, dugo trajanje, prezentizam, eshatologija, utopija, fantazija, kriza

Introduction

When Norbert Elias publishes *Über die Zeit* (Elias, 1984) and *The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present* (1987),³ Braudel’s texts *Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée* (Braudel, 1958) and *Histoire et Sociologie* (Braudel, 1969) already have, for several decades, the status of a conjunctural event. Some thirty years separate the four texts of the two authors, during which the famous figure of *long duration* (*la longue durée*) acquired its canonical place in the social sciences. The extroverted Braudel institutionalized himself rather early, already in the 1950s. He directed large projects, and skilfully managed to represent the postwar *Annales* school as much as himself. In the same period Elias was in a kind of (self-)isolation; and when, not without reason, it is said that he was a school unto himself, among those reasons one should certainly include the circumstance of his slow and, at moments, uncertain integration into the academic and intellectual circles of the English milieu in which he was, to be fair, a partial outsider almost until the very end.

And yet, the somewhat older (and longer-lived) Elias (1897–1990) shared with Braudel (1902–1985) not only the European cultural and geopolitical space⁴

3 The essay *The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present* (Elias, 1987) was published three years after the German version of the *Essay on Time* (Elias, 1984). Both texts emerged in the late phase of Elias’s intellectual career.

4 “Both of them,” as Enrique Guerra Manzo draws attention, “had some similar experiences: they observed Europe from the African continent; they lived through the trauma of world wars (Elias fought and was wounded in the First World War, and in the Second he lost his

(and thereby, indisputably, numerous connections and controversies of German-French relations during the twentieth century /Lepenes, 2001/), but also an epistemological horizon that would, in subsequent disciplinary reconfigurations, be disciplinarily enthroned under the name *historical sociology* (Smith, 1991; Delanty & Isin, 2003). Perhaps not with identical intentions, but certainly with related research and theoretical contributions – in any case, both give priority to slow rhythms, patterns of everyday life, routines, ponderous processes of cultural and structural transformation, and finally to the durability of civilizations. Looking over and beyond short time span trivialities and the current of ongoing events, both authors cast their gaze upon civilization, striving to decipher and describe it through their analytical and theoretical insights. The pictures differ not only in details, but also in the arrangement of large figures: Braudel's material structures, spatial networks and patterns of everyday life are not identical with Elias's cultural and civilizational habitus, but the cyclical rhythms of "structures that last a long time" may nevertheless be supplemented, perhaps even described, as *processual figurations*, both at the collective and at the individual level. Yet the large frame, the space between the figures, perhaps even the figures themselves, the proportions, what the pictures say – indicate that the two depicors share more than thematic affinity and complementary reciprocity. If the relation of "history and sociology" (Braudel, 1969) is reconsidered, with special reference to the "retreat of sociologists into the present" (Elias, 1987), the two pictures of civilization stereoscopically condense into one, and what connects them, or better: synchronizes them, is the phenomenon of time.

Both are critical of the growing tendency in their time for social research and theoretical works to linger too long on that which floods the present. Indeed, short time duration – namely, *short-lived events (courte durée)* (Braudel) and the transience of the ongoing present (Elias) – can be synthesized into a critique of a *short-sighted present*. At the core of this critique lies a preoccupation with the immediate present, while the "reckoning" with presentism is at least two-dimensional. On the one hand, it functions as a programmatic, theoretical, and methodological reflection on the prevailing state of historical science and sociology, from the perspective of Braudel and Elias. On the other hand, it serves as a contemporary and retrospective critique of the presentist eschatology of crisis – an obsession with a present stripped of any utopian horizon – seen through the eyes of Elias and Braudel.

Braudel's civilizational polychrony and Elias's civilizational processuality remind us that representations of time, even when they are utilitarianly unquestioned and disciplinarily dominant, are always socially mediated: time is a social fact *par excellence*. Is it not therefore unusual that, in sociology, time is still and yet again treated as a neutral, linear and universal dimension, instead of being observed as a historically produced and socially structured phenomenon? How can Braudel's critique of the fixation on short time span and Elias's critique

parents; Braudel was a prisoner of war between 1939 and 1945) and reacted against their ominous present, each writing his main work in very close periods: Elias in 1939, Braudel finished the first version that year, and in 1949 the work saw the light of day" (Guerra Manzo, 2005: 124).

of the obsession with the present be understood within our own *contemporary preoccupation with the now* – in the reduction of historical consciousness to that which is marginal and short-lived? Are the currently intrusive presentist discourses in the social sciences something that the two researchers of civilizations critically anticipated? Regardless of whether current “regimes of historicity” (*régime d'historicité* / Hartog, 2015), in their obsession with and fear of the future, lead to contractions and “acceleration of our pace” (Rosa, 2015) or to its expansion – to the “broad present” (Gumbrecht, 2014), we are confronting crisis dissonances in the comprehension of social time, which Elias, in his own time, recognized as a cognitive weakening of sociology, as an impoverishment not only of our comprehension of the present but also of our possibility of orienting ourselves in the social world (Elias, 1987). *World time* and the *time of history* are certainly not understood as universal history, that is, as a singularly experienced time; quite the opposite, they are the result of interactions in which different synchronicities participate, from psycho-historical interiorization, psychogenetic and sociogenetic figuration, to geohistorical and territorial domination. Each of these interactions takes place in complex processes of long duration. Precisely for this reason these processes are irreducible to one plane – to what takes place only in the present. Let us therefore look at what our authors have to say about this: first Braudel, then Elias.

Braudel's World Time

The texts on *la longue durée* and on the relation between sociology and history had, at the time of their emergence, an equally programmatic and theoretical character, for they redefined the relation of the *Annales* school to intellectual currents on the French scene after the Second World War. Today these texts are a series of influential statements about different durations and types of historiography and, what is especially significant, about *social time*. The research explication of Braudel's theoretical programs is well known and already well established.⁵ We shall remain here with the figure of *world time*, developed in the third volume of the extensive research on capitalism as material civilization bearing the same title. In *Le Temps du monde*, European capitalism is presented not only as a compilation of national histories, but as a globalized economic and capitalist order. Through careful research and descriptions of trade, communications, cities, markets and developmental asymmetries, Braudel offers the representation of capitalist civilization as a hierarchized, multi-layered history of the world. Immanent to this history is *world time* as the time of historical processes through which not only the capitalist economy but the entire capitalist civilization is enthroned by the complex crossing of imperial

5 *Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (1949) and *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century*. The third volume of this study in English translation is titled *The Perspective of the World* (1984), which does not reflect Braudel's basic intention in the French original, *Le temps du monde*. *World time/le temps du monde* points to the externalization of the temporality of European capitalism beyond its borders, that is, through the expansion of borders.

domination and centers of power, pulsating exchange, the development of the market and communication, globally asymmetrical directions of development, and therefore, inevitably, temporally layered *processes of capitalist civilization*. For Braudel, world time is not world time as the totality of human history, but a set of processes that, from one *world-economy* (*économie-monde*) within the history of the world, constitute a civilization that becomes globally dominant. It is necessary to repeat that these are processes unfolding over long temporal sections, each of which has its own rhythm and, what is equally important, its own geographical and symbolic scope.

For Braudel, capitalism is not only a liberal/market economy, but the totality of exchanges and circulations within the total materialist civilization of capitalism. Finally, each of these circulations has its own temporality, which leads to each having its own history. There is no universal history that would unfold within some universal time. There is no temporal totality/totality of time. This lesson may also be read in Braudel's methodological and programmatic texts on duration and time. Since Braudel's vision of social history is structural and geographical, so too the representation of civilization is dominantly spatial. Thus temporalities are of different rhythm, length and duration, and polychrony saves this conception from epistemological reduction to space alone. Moreover, this polychrony warns that binding oneself only to one dimension of duration, that is, to one experience of time, is fatal. Let us recall the decisive reckoning with event-history (*histoire événementielle*), which concerns itself only with short-term events. This reckoning, as previously stated, is as much the result of a deep conviction as it is of a polemical struggle for the position of historical science. Elias writes something similar when he criticizes the sociological obsession with the present, only in a more measured tone.

For Braudel as for Elias, time is first of all dynamics; for Braudel it is an unavoidable epistemological as well as research horizon, because events, as the basic building material of historiography, can be comprehended and narrated (*récit*) only in categories of duration, that is, of time. Elias, for his part, emphasizes that time, insofar as it is a norm, is also a social convention. Elias's conception of time, undoubtedly concordant with Braudel's descriptive typology, is nevertheless more complex and epistemologically deeper. It has already been noted that Braudel lacks a more developed theory of time which might, as a possible consequence, call into question the merely conventional and, generally speaking, socially mediated comprehension of time;⁶ and this is precisely what Elias does in his two essays on time (Elias, 1984/1992; 1987). Both conjunctural time and the time of long duration, which theoretically offers more, are also a "matter of agreement," so that Braudel's somewhat frenetic apotheosis of long duration can certainly be called into question. Braudel's formulation that civilizations "last

6 See especially Santamaria & Bailey, 1984; Tomich, 2011. It should nevertheless be recalled that Braudel's understanding of time arose as much from the powerful intuition of a born historian as from polemical discussions about temporality in historiography and sociology conducted with Georges Gurvitch, whose sociology of time is incomparably more complex (Maillard, 2005; Ranković, 1970).

for only a few seasons; others endure for several centuries; others still persist so long as to seem immutable. The appearance, of course, is illusory; for, slowly and imperceptibly, they too change and decay.” (Braudel, 1994: 27) sounds somewhat Kantian and transcendent, since, elsewhere, he equated long duration “with the point of view of the good God” (Braudel, 1972: 454). True, that is at the same time typically Braudelian metaphor. Elias nevertheless goes further when he warns that time is not an ontological but a symbolic category.

Elias's Time of History

Elias's concise criticism of the sociological obsession with the present resembles Braudel's criticism some twenty years earlier. When Braudel criticizes history of events, he takes structurally inspired sociology as his model. Reproaching historiography for its fixation on daily events – rather than engaging with what transcends the fleeting vogues of the day – Braudel offers a theoretical conceptualization, transposing evental transience into structure. When Elias recognizes that same fixation on daily events – embodied in the sociological and empiricist preoccupation with the present – as a deviation, he recommends that sociology return to temporality and emerge from its preoccupation with the present. “Not much attention has been paid to the retreat of sociologist into the present,” he says at the beginning of his essay. “This retreat, their flight from the past, became the dominant trend in the development of sociology after the Second World War” (Elias, 1987: 223). While Braudel wants to correct “bad” history with sociologized history, Elias, as will be seen below, corrects presentist sociology with historicized sociology. What condenses this “obverse and reverse”, as Braudel would say, that is, what permeates society and civilization in their long duration, is processuality, or, as Elias says, processual nature. In fact, processuality is the way in which Elias operationalizes social temporality without thereby falling into the trap of objectifying social time – and especially time as a Kantian a priori category (Theis, 2009) – constantly reminding us that what we treat as time is historically and socially learned, not a priori and universal.

Elias develops a theory in which time is observed as the result of long-term processes of social development and the transformation of knowledge. In *Time: An Essay* he claims that “what we call time is a symbolic synthesis of successive events” (Elias, 1984/1992: 82), thereby defining time as a socially produced means of orientation. This formulation receives its full meaning if considered within the development of figurational sociology during the 1970s and 1980s. During that period, Elias became an internationally recognized author; his books and papers aimed to establish a basis for scientific sociology, all sharing a clear thematic connection (Elias, 1970/2007; 1983/1987; 1987/1991; 1991/2012). *Time: An Essay* (1984/1992) is a continuation of the effort to develop a processual (figurational) epistemology, and the text represents an attempt to transform this abstract philosophical problem into an empirical-sociological research program.

Time: An Essay begins with an apparently simple, but theoretically radical question: how is it possible for time to be experienced as something objective, although it is entirely dependent on social practices of measurement and coordination? The answer does not lead toward a philosophy of consciousness or toward conceptions close to the natural sciences, but toward the sociogenesis of temporal standards, formed through long-lasting processes of social differentiation and the growing interdependence of people (Elias, 1984/1992; 1939/2000). The critique of the understanding of time as a universal and unchanging category, as something “objective” or a constituent part of the human mind or consciousness (Elias, 1984/1992), is consistent with Elias’s entire oeuvre. Throughout his entire intellectual career, he consistently highlighted the broader problem of the domination of myths, deceptions and erroneous beliefs in human thinking, considering it necessary to abandon all forms of ideology and mythology (including German philosophy as a whole), that is, philosophy in general (Kilminster, 2007). Elias also does not spare physicists and mathematicians who, by dealing with time, enter the field of the social sciences and attempt to “measure” and “quantify” something that is entirely of social origin (Elias, 1984/1992).⁷ Physicists are mistaken when they transfer methods for studying simpler, less integrated phenomena to complex processes that belong to the social level. Speaking of “measuring time,” they implicitly assume that time exists as an entity that can be isolated and quantified; therefore, he states: “(P)hysicists and philosophers lost sight early on, in their specialized reflections, of the connection between their knowledge and its native soil of developing human society. In addition, the structure of this development was devalued through being misunderstood as structureless ‘history’, as something ‘mere historical’. Sociologists, for their part, concerned themselves little with ‘time’. So ‘time’ remained a mystery” (Elias, 1984/1992: 105).

In *The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present* (1987), Elias warns that the problem of contemporary sociology is the ahistorical approach to social phenomena, problematizing the fragmentation of knowledge and excessive specialization that contribute to the loss of a broader processual perspective. Sociology thereby abandons its key analytical advantage – the understanding of long chains of social development – reducing itself to the description of current states, without an explanation of their origin. Such a “return to the present” leads to theoretical short-sightedness and to the development of inadequate explanations (Elias, 1987), such as, here, the creation of the “myth of time” (Elias, 1984/1992: 43), and the assumption of the existence of a difference between “natural” and “social” time. However, as he says, “The very term ‘natural time’ compared with that of ‘social time’, conveys the idea that the former is ‘real’, the latter an arbitrary convention. The difficulty is that ‘time’ does not fit into the conceptual schema

7 This critique is based on the idea that different scientific disciplines can be arranged along a continuum according to the degree of complexity and integration of their objects of research. Moving through the mentioned continuum, through organic chemistry, the natural sciences and finally anthropology and sociology, an increasing complexity of the field of research is presupposed. None of these levels can be reduced to the previous one, nor can analytical procedures from one field be used in others (Elias, 1983/1987).

of this dualism" (Elias, 1984/1992: 117). Thus, Elias rejects the ontological understanding of time as a natural and universal category. Instead, he develops an understanding of time as a socially produced category, whose "objectivity" is not based on natural laws but on the long-lasting institutionalization of social practices. Time, according to Elias, does not exist "in itself," but only in relation to social processes of coordination and synchronization of activities. "Time," as he says, "is not something which exists in the same way as physical objects; it is a means of orientation" (Elias, 1984/1992: 84).⁸ What is experienced in everyday experience as objective and self-evident, e.g. "exact time," "historical period," "epoch," is in fact the product of long-lasting processes in which certain forms of temporal organization impose themselves as dominant. Conceived in this way, time appears as a social institution and not as a neutral framework, thereby opening space for its sociological analysis.

In figurations, time also appears as a mechanism of social power that does not operate through direct coercion but through stabilized patterns of coordination, expectation and self-regulation. Such an understanding enables the analysis of time as a specific form of social control, whose efficiency lies precisely in its unobtrusiveness. In the contemporary context, punctuality, respect for deadlines and the capacity for planning are positively valued traits, while lateness or temporal unpredictability are sanctioned. Time thus operates as a normative framework that shapes the behavior of individuals even in the absence of formal control. Elias's analysis shows that the power of temporal norms is not based on external coercion but on their internalization (Elias, 1939/2000). Individuals learn to "govern themselves in time," adapting their own impulses and activities to socially prescribed temporal rhythms.

This process has a clear historical dimension. Control over time in earlier societies is connected with religious authorities, while in modern societies it is transferred to state and administrative structures: "setting of time, like coining of money became one of the monopolies of the state" (Elias, 1984/1992: 53). Depending on the degree of development of a society, church and state are "holders of the monopoly of timing" (Elias, 1984/1992: 54), and the process of internalization of temporal discipline is closely connected with the development of the state, the market and bureaucracy. Nevertheless, it cannot be reduced to their formal mechanisms: time functions as a diffuse form of power that acts through habits, expectations and the "self-evident" norms of everyday life. Such a historical dimension, from a figurational perspective, implies that changes in relations of power, patterns of behavior and emotional regulation occur gradually, often without clear discontinuities. A key aspect of these theories is reflected in the rejection of the idea of sudden and radical social changes as the basic model of explanation. In Elias, even deep transformations of behavior, such as the increase of self-control or the change in the relation toward violence, unfold

8 Thus, neither clocks, calendars nor standardized temporal units are neutral technical means, but materialized forms of social relations. Their "objectivity" derives from the fact that they are socially obligatory, and not from an alleged natural necessity. Elias insists that time cannot be understood without the analysis of figurations, that is, dynamic networks of interdependencies that produce the need for temporal coordination (Elias, 1970/2007).

through long-lasting processes of civilization. What is important to understand is that the civilizing process takes place at the level of the entire society, but also at the level of the individual (Elias, 1939/2000).

The similarity with Braudel is recognizable in the understanding of temporalities as slow, developmental articulations of cultural, political and economic patterns during long duration that is at the same time processual, that is, of a processual nature. The emphases are thematically different, but epistemologically similar, if not almost the same. Society cannot be understood outside its processual temporality, outside multidimensional temporality, reduced only to one dimension: to the short time span (*temps court*) of short-lived events (*courte durée*), that is, by deciphering only what the present offers. What Elias analytically and astutely observes, and what is absent in Braudel, is psycho-history, to which a branch of the *Annales* school, close to the themes of mentalities and ideologies, would devote special attention.

Psycho-History, Fantasy and Utopia

In reflections on Elias's presence in French intellectual life, two circumstances are most often mentioned: the translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* at the beginning of the 1970s, and the attention that Elias's work, after acquaintance with the mentioned book, gained from historians close to the *Annales* school. André Burguière suggests that the French translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, under the title *La civilisation des mœurs* in 1973, was a turning-point event in the discovery of Elias not only in France but also in the Anglo-American context. It seems that the *orbital Annalists* – François Furet and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie – by their affirmative reviews of the French edition of Elias's book won over Anglo-American publishers as well.⁹ Perhaps this claim is too strong and subjective, but it is also supported by unusual similarities between *Annalist* and Eliasian themes. Elias's psycho-history immediately won over Le Roy Ladurie and Furet, as well as the initially reserved Le Goff. The affinity with Elias's investigations of court customs, rituals, etiquettes and historically variable regimes of (self-)control is recognizable in Phillipe Ariès, Jacques Le Goff, Michel Vovelle, especially in the field of the history of mentalities and sensibilities, but

9 "Through their contacts within the American academia these historians, all associated with the *Annales* school, enabled the translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* into English, which Norbert Elias himself, although he had taught in Great Britain for forty years, had still not obtained" (Burguière, 2009). Something similar would be repeated with the *Essay on Time* – there is a temporal discrepancy between the emergence of the text, its publication and later editorial interventions. Although the essay was written in the mid-1970s, it was first published only in 1984 in German under the title *Über die Zeit*, edited by Michael Schröter (Elias, 1984). The text was translated into German from an unpublished English original, which further indicates its complex textual genesis. The first English edition, under the title *Time: An Essay*, was published in 1992 and was partly translated from the German, whereby this work became more accessible to the international academic public and acquired a significant role in the dissemination of Elias's theory of time. Michael Schröter, Elias's long-time collaborator and editor of many of his works and unpublished manuscripts, including *Engagement und Distanzierung* (1983/1987), had a key role in this.

also of the history of corporeality, affects and behavior.¹⁰ French historians close to this current returned, after a longer hiatus, to the themes of politics and the political, by studying value orientations and mental and collective representations in the domain of politics and ideology, and Elias's psycho-history at least indirectly contributed to this return (Burguière 2009). The *Annalists* tried to develop their own version of psycho-history (*psycho-histoire*). Similarities were perhaps sometimes overemphasized with the intention of changing the dynamics within the *Annales* school after oversaturation with Braudelian geohistory and structural historiography, but Elias's literary and theoretical influence in this respect is not in question (Chartier, 2010).

Here, under the wing of the French Braudelian and post-Braudelian "new history," one recognizes the theoretical capacity of Elias's works that goes beyond convenient symmetries with Braudel and the common basis in *longue durée*. Long duration is, after all, not abandoned when the focus is shifted from geohistorical structures to mentalities and, even more, to the *imaginary* (*l'imaginaire*) with which Jacques Le Goff and Georges Duby operate in their analyses of ideologies and regimes of hierarchization of medieval societies. With the necessary limitations, that is, terminological precisions, it is legitimate to bring Elias's analyses of fantasy, fantasizing and utopian thinking into relation with categories of the medieval imaginary in the field of religious representations, corporeality and sexuality, which, in analyses of the articulation of these regimes in the domain of mentalities but also of practices – especially in Le Goff and Duby – comes significantly close to Elias's figurational and processual models of explanation. Moreover, *fantasy-thinking* is constitutive both for practical and for scientific knowledge, and for *utopian thinking*, which, as will soon be seen, is one of the weak points of the presentist worldview. In Duby and Le Goff the imaginary is a structured, ideologically consistent fantasy of order and orderedness and is, to that extent, filled with the promise of merits in the future. *L'imaginaire* is undoubtedly permeated by the phantasm of utopia, just as utopia is permeated by the fantasy of desires and expectations. Both correlate with Elias's consideration of fantasy-thinking.

In *Time: An Essay*, fantasy-thinking appears in the analysis of early representations of time. Elias shows that in many societies temporal flows were explained through relations with spirits, deities or cosmic forces, without a clear boundary between perception and imagination (Elias, 1984/1992). Cyclical representations of time were often connected with rituals and magical practices that "governed" natural processes. Time was therefore not an abstract dimension, but part of a symbolic universe in which fantasy and experience were intertwined. The development of standardized time does not mean the disappearance of fantasy, but its transition into a different form: into abstract, socially stabilized symbols that enable the coordination of complex societies.

10 Burguière particularly emphasizes the similarities between Elias and Phillip Ariès: "Certain passages from *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'Ancien Régime* seem to paraphrase Elias's text, for example when Ariès analyzes the new ways in which sexuality is mentioned before children, or rather kept silent about." (Burguière, 2009).

It may be said that early representations of time were dominantly fantastic in the sense of a high degree of involvement, while contemporary representations tend toward greater detachment (Elias, 1983/1987). Elias's analysis suggests that fantasy does not disappear, but changes form. Contemporary representations of time, even when they are scientifically grounded, contain elements of fantasy, especially if time is reified as an independent "thing" or when the present is experienced as autonomous from the past and the future. Accordingly, following Elias, it could be argued that presentism represents a kind of fantasy about time, but about a time that is compressed, filled with anxiety, risk and fear. It is possible to establish an analogy between past and contemporary fantasies: "Especially in urban societies they make and use clocks in a manner reminiscent of the making and using of masks in many pre-urban societies: one knows they are made by people but they are experienced as if they represented an extra-human experience. Masks appear as embodiments of spirits. Clocks appear as embodiments of 'time'" (Elias, 1984/1992: 118).

The fantasies of the contemporary age have a different character from earlier magical representations, but they are equally rooted in social structures. The development of complex societies and a high level of interdependence have led to a strong regulation of drives, which is the central place of Elias's theory of the civilizing process (Elias, 1939/2000). With the increase of self-control, a need emerges for compensatory forms of fantasy that enable the symbolic expression of emotions (Kojić, 2023). These fantasies are not directed toward the supernatural, but toward experiences of intensity, excitement and immediacy, which take place "here and now."

In that process a specific image of the individual as *homo clausus* is also formed, analyzed in detail in *The Society of Individuals* (Elias, 1987/1991). This representation develops from the early modern period and presupposes the experience of oneself as a closed, autonomous being separated from the world. Such a mode of self-understanding also contributes to a specific relation toward time: the present is experienced as a personal experience, separated from the social processes that shaped it. Accordingly, "The assumption of this quasi-spatial divide between an 'inner world' and an 'external world' is an individual and collective fantasy" (Elias, 1984/1992: 124). When we speak of the *homo clausus* fantasy of the contemporary age, it is important to understand that this is a romantically idealized image of the metaphysical freedom of the human being, which creates fictive antitheses between "freedom" and "determinism" (Elias, 1970/2007: 143).

Processes of excitement, which Elias and Dunning analyze, additionally illuminate this phenomenon. The actors of the present – the heroes of our age, as Lermontov would say – confronted with a high level of control, develop a strong need for experiences of intensity that are often connected with the impulse of the "here and now." The civilizing process led to learning the postponement of reactions, that is, to the suppression and limitation of immediate drive impulses. The change of which the authors speak is the change from the immediate and strong "affective discharge" that existed in the Middle Ages toward the restraint of

drives in an unexciting civilized society in which they become “depersonalized” and acquire their special “temporal and spatial enclaves” (Elias & Dunning, 1986). The term “unexciting” is used by the two authors ironically, since contemporary societies offer a broad repertoire in the search for and finding of pleasures. In this context, Elias also writes about the development of romanticized view of the past, which implies a longing for uncontrolled emotions as a shortcut to freedom and creativity (Elias, 1960/2018).

This orientation toward immediate experience can be understood as a form of fantasy that compensates for the long-term demands of social life. At the same time, it contributes to the shortening of temporal horizons and the weakening of consciousness about long-term processes. Finally, these processes can be interpreted as a contemporary “utopia of the present,” in which the present moment is experienced as the central and self-sufficient dimension of experience. Thus, this is not only a methodological problem, but a form of fantasy-thinking. This presentist fantasy is centered around the impatient subject and the urgency of satisfying “needs.” And if, in Elias, utopia and utopian thinking are functional and purposive in maintaining social balance, that is, in reducing risk, then the presentist world-historical stuckness in the present is highly risky. If presentist hedonism, ultimatums of urgency and speed, anxiety about tomorrow and a certain social passivization are joined at one point, they could be articulated as a kind of *eschatology of crisis* whose *imaginary* (*l’imaginaire*) may be called the *utopia of the present* (Milenković, 2025). The key consequence of this state, which also has its processual, that is, developmental side, is the narrowing of historical consciousness, as well as the impossibility of imagining a future different from what the present offers. The processual side of current presentism, meanwhile, lies in the tension between systemic control and the channeling of conflicts, the production of crisis and the consumer matrix of capitalism which, through commodification, encompasses every segment of the order (Hartog, 2015; Lošonc, Milenković & Losoncz, 2022). Crisis thus generates fear of tomorrow, while presentism compensates for the human need for fantasy and fantasizing that does not reach beyond the current present.

How are we to understand the circumstance that presentism is unfavourable to utopian thinking, that is, to everything that goes together with Elias’s “fantasizing” in relation to time and thereby, certainly, in relation to the future? Did Elias in fact thereby mark presentism as a utopically unimaginative project, incapable of fantasy – fantasizing? One possible interpretation, following Elias, lies in civilizational progress in “risk management,” that is, in Weberian rationality: through the development of science and the increase in the degree of detachment, one arrives at a gradual reduction of uncertainty and greater control over the environment, but also at the transformation of the very forms of danger. Presentist ideology would thus be the logical consequence of a shift of emphasis in the recognition and processing of these risks, with the important note that risks connected with uncertainty and anxiety are placed in the future; therefore, by collapsing the past and the current moment into the present, as Hartog showed in his analysis of regimes of historicity, the neuroticism connected with the uncertain future is displaced into the hysterical present.

Presentist world time is different from Braudel's, since the global moment that lasts, the eternal present, is at the same time a fear of time as something that slips away and dramatically warns of transience: "I have no time" is a typical diagnosis of the state of crisis of contemporaneity, which is in fact the inevitable consequence of the socially constructed compression of temporal planes and the shortening of past and future toward the "now." The struggle against time, waged through the negation and neglect of both the utopian horizon and historical consciousness, fails to alleviate anxiety; instead, it only exacerbates frustration. At the same time, the neurosis of the "risk society" (Beck) merely changes its objects. In Elias's analysis, instead of immediate threats, more complex and mediated risks appear, which require long-term planning and abstract thinking (Elias, 1983/1987). It is neglected that time, as a symbolic system of orientation, emerges precisely in this process: it enables the connection of past experiences with expectations of the future and thereby contributes to the reduction of insecurity. However, this capacity is not given in advance, but develops through history, together with growing levels of integration of knowledge and social relations. By altering the rhythms of these temporalities, clouding historical consciousness, and demystifying and anesthetizing utopian thought (out of fear of its potential subversiveness and capacity for resistance), the community is effectively disarmed, and the crucial resources for its survival – knowledge and reflexivity – are severely undermined.

Presentism as the End of Utopia

In the text *Spontaneity and Self-Consciousness*, Elias conducts an interesting thought experiment in which he considers what the "citizen of tomorrow" might look like, especially in the sphere of leisure. Starting from long-term processes of civilization and increasing self-control, Elias assumes that future individuals might develop the capacity to use free time in a way that simultaneously enables spontaneous expression and reflective awareness of their own emotions. In that imagined scenario, leisure would no longer be limited by "temporal and spatial enclaves" that serve for the mere "discharge" of drives or escape from everyday obligations, but would be a field in which a careful balance is struck between excitement and self-control. Even when he enters into thinking about the future, Elias does not offer a normative vision of progress, but carefully balances between analytical insight and the conscious projection of a "utopian scenario." His image of the future individual, who in leisure succeeds in harmonizing spontaneous impulses with developed self-consciousness, does not represent the final state of development, but a hypothetical extension of existing processes of rationalization and regulation of drives. Precisely for this reason this vision is marked by uncertainty: increased rationality and control of emotions do not guarantee a "better" life, but only a different organization of experience, in which the tension between drives and their social regulation remains permanently present.

Thus Elias's reflection on the future can be read as a controlled use of fantasy within a scientific framework. While in earlier societies fantasies serve

the explanation of the world, here they become a means of thinking through possible directions of development, but without the illusion of the final resolution of contradictions. His "citizen of tomorrow" is not freed from drives, nor is he a fully rationalized subject, but a being who learns to govern his own impulses in more complex social conditions. Thereby time too appears as an open horizon, and not as linear progress toward a goal given in advance: the future remains uncertain, while theoretical models serve as points of orientation rather than as predictions.

It is precisely the future that presentism shrinks from – as Braudel's and Elias's critiques indirectly intimate. The reckoning with presentism here runs in two directions: first, as a polemical observation about the state of sociology and historiography at the time when Elias and Braudel formulated their critical statements; but also as an epistemologically generalized diagnosis of the spirit of the age *after* our two authors, one articulated – as will be seen – in the voices of various critics and commentators. In Braudel and Elias it is couched as a general diagnosis, yet not without individual actors. Elias's critique of the reduction of processes to states (*Zustandsreduktion* / process-reduction) was advanced already in *What Is Sociology* (1970/2007), where he takes aim at Parsons as „the leading sociological theorist,“ and at his structural functionalism as the theoretical matrix of that reduction. A similar critique, albeit in a different context, had been advanced some ten years earlier by C. Wright Mills in his well-known book of essays *The Sociological Imagination* (Mills, 1961). One might object to Elias that a single author – however influential a representative – does not stand for an entire community within a science or a discipline. Yet, as Helga Nowotny reports, drawing on Hermínio Martins's observations from the 1970s: „None of the post-functionalist schools, movements and cult figures competing for a share or even the monopoly of the sociological imagination, he scolds, have translated the concern with 'becoming, process, diachrony, historicity' which was found lacking in functionalism, into their own theoretical programmes“ (Nowotny, 1992: 424). Mills's sharp critique of Parsons's abstracted empiricism disguised as grand theory is, in Elias, muted by generalization: Elias no longer sees Parsons alone, but an entire current. An echo of both critiques is implicitly present in Hartog, who is concerned neither with individual cases nor with a sociological current, but with a diagnosis of the epoch as a flight from the future into an extended present. Presentist regimes of historicity entail not merely the neglect or the forgetting of the past, but its displacement from collective memory into spatial commemoration. Pierre Nora recognizes this as a shift from environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*) to sites of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1989) – a marginalization of historical consciousness through spatialization and enclosure within a memorial park. Jerome Basche critically proclaims the tyranny of presentism, that is, of the present. He radicalizes this observation by tying presentism to capitalism, so that both are articulated as the ideology of neoliberalism and of capitalism as a temporal regime of the urgent, the market-driven and the competitive. Fukuyama's figure of the „end of history“ functions as an ideological form of presentism (Basche, 2018).

These diagnoses of the spirit of the age after Braudel and Elias lose something of their polemical edge and of their confrontational charge, because presentism has gained the upper hand; hence the bitter observation that “when historical consciousness is weak, as it is now in British sociology, contemporary society’s self-understandings are not challenged but uncritically reproduced” (Inglis, 2014: 103). Inglis’s diagnosis of 2014, advanced with respect to the state of sociology in Great Britain, can be read as a variation on Seidman’s more general critique directed at historiography in the 1980s: “A presentist historiography reconstructs the history of science as a progressive movement toward the present, marked by occasional detours, brilliant anticipations, but in the main consisting of piecemeal contributions to current systematic knowledge”, he writes (Seidman, 1983: 80). The crisis of historical consciousness and its epistemological simplification — widely noted as the reductionism of episodic history and as the reduction of processuality to a (current) state — are recognized anew in particular scholarly milieus as an abandonment of history: “Rather than being characterized by a condition where profound historical knowledge fundamentally underpins the sociological gaze, in sociology today presentism rules. Such presentism involves the unintended and unremarked privileging of contemporary concerns and dispositions within specific modes of analysis” (Inglis, 2014: 100). Fredric Jameson’s striking slogan “Always historicize!”, formulated in his critique of postmodernism, precedes Hartog’s critique of presentism, while Jameson himself, in a later retrospect, registers the end of temporality and the liquidation of the future: “This situation has been characterized as a dramatic and alarming shrinkage of existential time and the reduction to a present that hardly qualifies as such any longer, given the virtual effacement of that past and future that can alone define a present in the first place” (Jameson, 2003: 708). There are further examples of this kind, so that one might well agree with Helga Nowotny about the notable liveliness of the debates surrounding the reawakened interest in the temporal dimension of sociological theories.

If, by way of a summary of sorts, one were to seek out the basic types of presentism — following Braudel and Elias as well as their later critics — there would be several. *Event-history*, or *episodic*, presentism: a preoccupation with short-lived events and a neglect of the synchronic–diachronic dimension of social life, to which the members of the *Annales* school, with Braudel at their head, frequently drew attention. Next, *sociological* presentism: the retreat of sociologists into the present, without sufficient study and understanding of the genesis of institutions and actors within a broader temporal framework — something Elias warned against, while at the same time affirming his own figurational sociology as an analysis of long-term civilizing processes. *Memorial* presentism: that which relocates the past out of social memory and into the memorial, as into a presentist commodification meant for viewing and for remembrance, but not for tomorrow. And *neoliberal, no-alternative* presentism: the ideological matrix of a capitalism without alternative and therefore without any utopian imagination of another, different order. Each of these presentisms — and further ones could be listed — carries within it a polemical reckoning and stock-taking with the past as much as with the future.

The reckoning with presentism is thus not only a reckoning with the presentist marginalization of the past, but also with the suppression of the future. Norbert Elias, for his part, discusses the future in *Time: An Essay*, seeing his contribution as “no more than an introductory contribution” (Elias, 1984/1992: 191) – a contribution reflected also in a heightened self-awareness which likewise carries no evaluative tone in the direction of a “better tomorrow”: “(T)he theoretical model of the development in this direction is to be understood as no more than an expression of its author’s desire for a better world. I have no interest in saying that it is better to have the time-experience of later societies. I do not know if it is better. I have simply attempted to solve a previously unsolved problem” (1984/1992: 192). Contemporary presentism, however, resolves this “unsolved problem” by a “retreat into the present” (as Elias would likewise put it), in that, put simply, some other and better world is simply no longer imagined.

The rapprochement of Elias and Braudel takes place in an interdisciplinary and antidogmatic distancing from the short time spine, in the reminder that the present cannot be understood within itself, that the understanding of social processes requires a gaze that reaches beyond what is immediately in front of us. And yet, both move in the area of long duration and the temporality of processuality and, ultimately, in the field of the epistemology of historical time mediated by social consciousness. One could say: the Durkheimian figure of collective consciousness in Braudel is transformed into the social time of the structures of the economy, everyday life, communication, exchange, as much as of climates and environment in the geo-historical sense. In Elias, still more explicitly, time is treated as a convention which, in an entirely Durkheimian manner, is institutionalized and internalized as a *social fact*.

The presentism criticized by Braudel and Elias is the obsession with the present in social research. The presentism of the present criticized by François Hartog or Jerome Baschet (Baschet, 2018) is the fear of the future that has seized the present, capillarily infusing every aspect of it. The eternal present of which Baschet speaks – the “tyranny of presentism” – reveals the deficit of imagination, that is, of phantasm in late capitalism, and corresponds to Elias’s understanding of fantasizing, but without a utopian point of support. Braudel’s world time, according to the diagnoses of Hartog and Baschet, has reached the limit of its historical imaginativeness, locking the utopian horizon into the “now.” Elias’s time of history does not unfold, in the current tyranny of presentism, within the frameworks of civilizational regulation and pacification, but through pathological temporality. Thus, contemporary presentism can be read as a crisis precisely of those long processes of temporal self-discipline that Elias describes in his works.

Is presentism, then, a crisis of historical consciousness, a symptom of theoretical insufficiency (which is already Elias’s and Braudel’s statement), an expression of current fashion (due to saturation with previous theories), or is it the consequence of a global deficit in civilizational discipline, that is, of a deficit of self-discipline? Has the Foucauldian-Deleuzian society of disciplining become, paradoxically, a society that counter-disciplinarily deviates from cultural and civilizational collective and individual interiorization and, by

introducing pseudo-transgressive presentist consumerism, in fact testifies to the disappearance of the socially constructed (significant, great) past, as well as to the disappearance of the socially constructed (promising, utopian) future? In other words, world time (globalized, totalized, totalitarianized) has overpowered the time of history (processuality, reflexivity, embeddedness, transformativity). If this is so, current presentism does not testify to a crisis of time as an ontological category (which, as we have seen, Elias dismisses), but to the crisis of one type of historically dominant/socially constructed time – the time of history, as time that is constituted and constructed on historical consciousness, which is displaced by (globalized, presentist, counter-Braudelian) “world time”. This would, in other words, mean that presentism reveals the crisis of historical time but not of world time, with an important and rather unsettling statement: this is a world without a vision of its own future.

References

- Baschet, J. (2018). *Défaire la tyrannie du présent: Temporalités émergentes et futurs inédits*. Paris: La Découverte.
- Braudel, F. (1972). Personal Testimony. *The Journal of Modern History* 44(4): 448–467.
- Braudel, F. (1958). Histoire et Sciences sociales: La longue durée. *Annales: Économies, Sociétés, Civilisations* 13 (4): 725–753.
- Braudel, F. (1969). Histoire et Sociologie. In: *Écrits sur l'histoire*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Braudel, F. (1979). *Civilisation matérielle, économie et capitalisme, XVe-XVIIIe siècle, Tome 3: Le temps du monde*, Paris: Armand Colin.
- Braudel, F. (1984). *Civilization and Capitalism, 15th-18th Century. Vol. III: The Perspective of the World*. Translated by Siân Reynolds. New York: Harper & Row. [Reprint: Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.]
- Braudel, F. (1994). *A History of Civilizations*. Allen Lane/The Penguin Press.
- Burguière, A. (2009). Norbert Elias et les historiens français. Histoire d'une rencontre. *Individu & nation [Online]* 3. <https://dx.doi.org/10.58335/individuetnation.189>
- Chartier, R. (2010). Pour un usage libre et respectueux de Norbert Elias. *Vingtième Siècle. Revue d'histoire* 2(106): 37–52.
- Delanty, G., & Isin, E. F. (2003). *Handbook of historical sociology*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781848608238>
- Elias, N. (2000). *The Civilizing Process*. Oxford: Blackwell. (Original work published 1939)
- Elias, N. (2018). Spontaneity and self-consciousness. In: S. Loyal & S. Quilley (Eds.) *Excitement processes: Norbert Elias's unpublished works on sport, leisure and the body* (Collected Works Supplementary Volume). Dublin: University College Dublin Press. (Original work published 1960)
- Elias, N. (2007). *What is sociology?* Dublin: University College Dublin Press. (Original work published 1970)

- Elias, N. (1987). *Involvement and detachment*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Original work published 1983)
- Elias, N. (1984). *Über die Zeit: Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Elias, N. (1992). *Time: An essay*. Oxford: Blackwell. (Original work published 1984)
- Elias, N. (2004). *Über die Zeit*. In *Gesammelte Schriften* (Vol. 6). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. (Original work published 1984)
- Elias, N. (2007). *An Essay on Time*. In: S. Mennell & R. Kilminster (Eds.), *Collected works of Norbert Elias* (Vol. 9). Dublin: University College Dublin Press. (Original work published 1984)
- Elias, N., & Dunning, E. (1986). *Quest for excitement: Sport and leisure in the civilizing process*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Elias, N. (1987). The retreat of sociologists into the present. *Theory, Culture and Society* 4(2–3): 223–249.
- Elias, N. (1991). *The society of individuals*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Original work published 1987)
- Elias, N. (2012). *The symbol theory*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press. (Original work published 1991)
- Elias, N. (1984). *Über die Zeit: Arbeiten zur Wissenssoziologie II*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp. [Engl. trans.: *Time: An Essay*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1992.]
- Garrigou, A., & Lacroix, B. (1997). Introduction. Norbert Elias: le travail d'une œuvre. In: Garrigou, Lacroix. *Norbert Elias, politique et l'histoire* (pp. 7–27). Éditions La Découverte.
- Guerra Manzo, E. (2005). Norbert Elias y Fernand Braudel: dos miradas sobre el tiempo. *Argumentos* (48–49): 123–148.
- Gumbrecht, H. U. (2014). *Our broad present: time and contemporary culture*. Columbia University Press.
- Hartog, F. (2015). *Regimes of historicity: presentism and experiences of time*, Columbia University Press.
- Inglis, D. (2014). What is Worth Defending in Sociology Today? Presentism, Historical Vision and the Uses of Sociology. *Cultural Sociology* 8(1): 99 –118.
- Jameson, F. (2003). The End of Temporality. *Critical Inquiry* 29(4): 695–718.
- Kilminster, R. (2007). *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology*. London: Routledge.
- Kojić, M. (2023). Humor and social order: Towards the perspective of figurational sociology. *Sociologija* 65(3): 390–408.
- Lepenies, W. (2001). Culture, politics and the European intelligentsia. *European Review* 9(2): 147–158.
- Lošonc, A., Milenković, P., & Losoncz, M. (2022). Return to Structural Criticism: Is the Synthesis of Criticism and Crisis Possible again in 'Late' Capitalism? *Philosophy and Society* 33(4): 961–981.
- Maillard, A. (2005). Les temps de l'historien et du sociologue. Retour sur la dispute Braudel-Gurvitch. *Cahiers internationaux de sociologie* 119(2): 197–222.

- Milenković, P. (2025). Eshatologija krize i utopija sadašnjosti. Da li je moguće društvo bez istorije?. In: Lošonc, A. (Ed.) *Definitivan kraj kraja istorije*. Beograd: Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti.
- Mills, C. W. (1961). *Sociological Imagination*. New York: Grove Press.
- Nora, P. (1989). Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. *Representations* 26: 7–24.
- Nowotny, H. (1992). Time and social theory: Towards a social theory of time. *Time & Society* 1(3): 421–454.
- Ranković, M. (1970). *Gurvićevo shvatanje strukture i tipologije globalnih društava*, Beograd: Rad.
- Rosa, H. (2015). *Social Acceleration: A New Theory of Modernity*, Columbia University Press.
- Santamaria, U., & Bailey, A. M. (1984) A Note on Braudel's Structure as Duration. *History and Theory* 23(1): 78–83.
- Smith, D. (1991). *The Rise of Historical Sociology*. Temple University Press.
- Theis, W. (2009). Immanuel Kant's idea of time vs. Norbert Elias' critique on his conception. *Kant e-Prints* 4 (1): 109–119.
- Tomich, D. (2011). The Order of Historical Time: The *Longue Durée* and Micro-History. *Almanack* 2: 52–65.