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# The political implications of figurational sociology

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## abstract: By this title, I do not mean the short-term and party-political implications of figurational sociology, but something broader and longer-term in perspective. Starting in particular from the ‘Game Models’ set out in chapter 3 of Elias’s *What is Sociology?*, I want to pose the question of how little influence sociology has had on how people at large think about and understand how society works. In the main, they continue to think in psychologistic rather than sociological terms, notably by using what Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh has called ‘the attribution of blame’ as a means of orientation. What does a general deficiency in ‘joined-up’ thinking imply about the prospects of (relatively) democratic government in today’s highly joined-up world?

Back in 1962, when I was 17 or 18 years old, the headmaster of my school, Huddersfield New College, organised a dinner one evening for ‘sixth-form’ students – that is, those in their last two years at school, nearly all of whom were aiming shortly to go to university. He had invited a friend of his to be the after-dinner speaker, a professor from the University of Sheffield.. Neither I nor any of my contemporaries can remember much about what he said, except that his title was ‘The purpose of the exercise’. In short, his talk was vague waffle. The only thing I remember clearly, though, is that he dwelt on the increasing complexity of society. I remember that because, when questions were invited, I, as the resident big-mouth, asked a question to the effect that if society was becoming so complex that it became beyond the grasp of ordinary people, how would democracy continue to be possible?

Looking back from the vantage point of the world in 2018, that looks to me like a pretty prescient question for an 18-year-old. And that question was still in my mind when, about eight years later, I first encountered the ideas of Norbert Elias. As I have often recalled,[[1]](#footnote-1) I recognised his brilliance when I was translating *Was ist Soziologie?*, and specifically chapter 3, the ‘Game Models’.[[2]](#footnote-2) I was astonished to find a series of models dealing specifically with increasing complexity and the increasing difficulty that people have in making sense of the web of interdependences in which they are caught up. (It is almost beside the point that here, in a way susceptible to theoretical–empirical test, Elias also solves all the sociological problems that my earlier teacher Talcott Parsons had tried to solve through his conceptual castles in the air.)

At first glance, Elias did not, perhaps still does not, look much like a source of political inspiration. But, as he said at the beginning of the film about him made in 1975 by Bram de Swaan and Paul van den Bos for VPRO television in the Netherlands,

Our human world is still to a large extent an undiscovered world. We do not really understand ourselves. And that is the central task, as I understand it, of sociology – to gain more certain knowledge of the human level of the universe which we form with each other. Let us try – my own feeling is that we shall be able to produce more knowledge that has practical applications than we have today.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Or, as he repeatedly wrote, our task is ‘*to improve the human means of orientation*’.[[4]](#footnote-4) That, I would argue, is a very political objective – though obviously not in the ‘party-political’ sense. We tend to think of Elias and Eliasians as ‘relatively detached’, unemotional. Yet, if the style is very different, I think it can be seen that fundamentally there underlies Elias’s work an ‘emancipatory motive’, to use a term made popular by Jürgen Habermas. In his more detached way, Elias said that sociologists had to be ‘myth hunters’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Elias saw the goal of ‘process sociology’ as helping to tame the wild social forces which interdependent people inevitably generate in society, and as far as possible to harness these by-products of social interdependence for the common good. There is still much merit in Comte’s old slogan *savoir pour prévoir, prévoir pour pouvoir*, so long as that problematic last word is translated as ‘to enable’ or ‘to make possible’ rather than as ‘to control’ or ‘to have power’. (To speak of ‘democratic control’ is acceptable.) The slogan by no means points to a few simple solutions for the problems of social life. It serves instead to make us conscious of the ever-renewed agenda of problems behind which lag our social understanding and capacity for foresight. And without foresight, an effective morality in politics is not possible.

## The inspiration of the game models

The first game models involve only two players, and resemble real games like chess; as more players are introduced, team games like football are called to mind; but the last group of game models are too complex for real games and are actually based on Elias’s studies of state-formation processes.

In each group, Elias imagines first that the power ratio between players is very unequal, and then looks at what happens if the balance between them becomes relatively more equal. Even a game played by just two people yields interesting insights. When one player is much stronger than the other, the stronger has a great deal of control over the weaker, and can actually force him/her to make certain moves. Yet, at the same time, the weaker player has some degree of control over the stronger, to the extent that in planning his own moves the stronger player has at least to take the weaker’s into account. Both players must have *some* strength or there would be no game. Nevertheless, because one player’s strength or skill so considerably exceeds the other’s, the more powerful player can to a large extent control *the course of the game itself*, not only winning, but virtually dictating how he or she will win and how long it will take.

However, if, for whatever reason, their strengths in the game gradually become more equal, two things diminish: the stronger player’s ability to use his own moves to force the weaker to make particular moves, and his/her ability to determine the course of the game. The weaker player’s chances of control over the stronger increase correspondingly. But, as the disparity between the players’ strengths is reduced, the course of the game increasingly passes beyond the control of either. As Elias explains:

Both players will have correspondingly less chance to control the changing figuration of the game; and the less dependent will be the changing figuration of the game on the aims and plans for the course of the game which each player has formed by himself. The stronger, conversely, becomes the dependence of each of the two players’ overall plans and of each of their moves on the changing figuration of the game – on the game process. The more the game comes to resemble a social process, the less it comes to resemble the implementation of an individual plan. In other words, to the extent that the inequality in the strengths of the two players diminishes, there will result from the interweaving of moves of two individual people a game process *which neither of them has planned*.[[6]](#footnote-6)

‘Unintentional human interdependencies’, he writes, ‘lie at the root of every intentional interaction.’[[7]](#footnote-7) People’s ‘definitions of the situation’ do not come from nowhere: they, with the purposes people pursue on the basis of them, *and indeed the people themselves*, are shaped over time in figurations of interdependent people. The full force of how their actions interweave to produce ‘compelling trends’ which no-one has planned or intended, and which then constitute and constrain the perceptions, purposes and actions of people, can only be fully understood in developmental perspective. Or, as Joop Goudsblom wrote, ‘In the development of human societies, yesterday’s unintended social consequences are today’s unintended social conditions of “intentional human actions”.’[[8]](#footnote-8)

Elias steadily increases the number of players, through models resembling team sports, until he reaches ‘multi-person games on more than one level’, where it is difficult to think of counterparts among real-life sports. The ‘oligarchic’ and ‘increasingly democratic’ models are plainly derived from Elias’s studies of court societies and state-formation processes. Top-tier players in an oligarchic regime thought that they knew how everything worked in their courts, but in fact many more power ratios beyond their own circles were in play. In the relatively more democratic model,[[9]](#footnote-9) the top-tier players come to be more like spokesmen for their followers on the lower tiers. The course of the game becomes still less susceptible to control and direction from any quarter, and more than ever people find themselves subjected to ‘compelling social forces’. This is reflected, though not very lucidly, in people’s consciousness, in the way they think about themselves and ‘society’.

Instead of players believing that the game takes its shape from the individual moves of individual people, there is a slowly growing tendency for impersonal concepts to be developed to master their experience of the game. These impersonal concepts take into account the relative autonomy of the game process from the intentions of individual players. A long and laborious process is involved, working out communicable means of thought which will correspond to the character of the game as something not immediately controllable, even by the players themselves. Metaphors are used which oscillate constantly between the idea that the course of the game can be reduced to the actions of individual players and the other idea that it is of a supra-personal nature.[[10]](#footnote-10)

## The problem of ideologies

This takes us into the field of ideologies on the one hand and the We–I balance on the other.[[11]](#footnote-11) What followers of Elias see as the false dichotomy of ‘individual versus society’ is not just a problem in sociology – a false dichotomy that we strive to convince mainstream sociologists is nonsense. It is also a problem in practical politics and political thinking. The classic Western political ideologies of the last two centuries can fairly easily be located along a We–I continuum. The connection between the two – political ideologies and sociological theory – is hardly surprising, given that the same social thinkers of the past had a formative influence on both (as Joop Goudsblom brilliantly discussed in *Sociology in the Balance*).[[12]](#footnote-12) Figurational sociology, with its strong emphasis on the ubiquity of chains of social interdependence and the consequential ubiquity of power ratios in the relations between people and groups of people, tends to be associated with the left of centre socialist or (more usually) moderate social democratic traditions, with their concern for collective welfare and greater equality – not to mention their sympathy for less powerful *outsiders*.[[13]](#footnote-13) That is not to deny that there are affinities with the other historic ideologies. Arguably, sociology as a whole had some roots in the classic old-style conservatism of the traditional, paternalistic landowning elites, with their vision of society as an organic whole (but with a certain blindness to power relationships). Thinkers like Bonald and De Maistre used to be mentioned among the minor founding fathers of sociology. Elias pointed out that in the nineteenth century members of the landowning elites often initiated reforms for the benefit of the working class – such as curbs on child labour and the length of the working day – as part of their struggle with the rising entrepreneurial class. But this tradition now seems to be more or less extinct.

As for the hydra-headed beast known as liberalism, figurational sociologists (and sociologists in general) tend to feel sympathy with the strand known as ‘social liberalism’, which pursued general rights of citizenship and played a part in the rise of mass education, social security and welfare state provisions.[[14]](#footnote-14)

But it is difficult to feel any affinity at all with the extreme radical neo-liberalism which for the present represents the spirit of the age across the Western world. Emanating especially from the USA is a fervent belief in ‘the freedom of the individual’, whatever that means.[[15]](#footnote-15) But individuals are not the separate ‘atoms’ of society: the ‘freedom of the individual’ is a philosophical myth, because, as Elias succinctly pointed out, ‘there are always simultaneously many mutually dependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one’s scope for action’.[[16]](#footnote-16) The exercise of choice by one person or group may constrain or foreclose the choices available to others.[[17]](#footnote-17) Certainly freedom of choice is to be valued, but the social costs of providing choice have to be considered, and in the end various considerations have to be weighed in the exercise of political – that is, collective – judgement. Such a view is inevitable once one moves away from the (classical) liberal notion of ‘society’ standing over as something apart from its component atoms, separate ‘individuals’ each independently exercising a monad-like judgement unaffected by others.

The radical neo-liberal economics that was propagated especially by the Chicago school in effect denies this principle. It is epitomised by the ‘Friedman doctrine’ that corporations need only pursue the sole goal of maximising ‘shareholder value’, to the neglect of any other wider consideration of their employees, customers, social responsibility or other costs and consequences.[[18]](#footnote-18) This is an abnegation of previous and more sophisticated economics.[[19]](#footnote-19) It is also based on an extreme form of individualism, otherwise known as simply as ‘selfishness’, a denial of the need for foresight and for the rational anticipation of unintended consequences. It embodies, too, a deliberate refusal to acknowledge the operation of *power*. As the political scientist Karl Deutsch remarked, ‘Power is the ability to talk instead of listen [and] the ability to afford not to learn’.[[20]](#footnote-20) The social function of the economics profession for that last half-century has been to provide an ideology justifying social irresponsibility and unaccountability for the powerful.

Yet we must never lose sight of the fact that modern ideologies are never built exclusively out of emotionally appealing fantasy. Besides affective or value-laden orientations, they always contain a lot of empirical information. In the case of neo-liberalism, economics provides plenty of that. The factual elements are in principle testable in a theoretical–empirical way. On this rests the social scientific responsibility of ‘myth-hunting’ (and myth-busting). That is part of our pursuit of more reality-congruent knowledge. In her preface to the conference programme book, Florence Delmotte asked whether we are just being quixotic in believing it possible to achieve ‘increasingly reality-congruent knowledge’ in this age of Twitter-feeds, ‘fake news’ and ‘alternative facts’.

I, for one, am not ready to abandon that goal. But even if we stick to our guns as myth-hunters, this raises two disturbing thoughts:

1. First, is the process of theoretical-empirical research, and the more reality-congruent knowledge that it produces, enough to reduce the affective component of political beliefs? Can people even absorb ‘facts’ that run counter to their emotional impulses? The question is raised, for example, by the 2016 Brexit referendum campaign in the United Kingdom, when the cabinet minister Michael Gove proclaimed that the British people ‘have had enough of experts’.[[21]](#footnote-21) Such a remark suggests that levels of public *trust*, which sociologists such as Piotr Sztompka[[22]](#footnote-22) have shown is so fundamental to democratic politics – probably much more important than the sub-Parsonian ‘shared values’ that have become a favourite cliché among politicians. On the involvement–detachment continuum, politics will always be more involved than the social sciences. We might hope that long-term civilising processes would help to tame the wild emotional impulses that still underlie much of political life. But civilising processes are by definition largely unplanned, blind social processes that cannot be implemented by rational will – even if we may try to nudge politics a little more towards relative detachment, or in other words, to make politics become a bit more civilised. There are many forces tending in the opposite direction. We always have to remember that affective fantasies are fostered by conflict and danger. Politics, by definition, involves conflicts of opinion, and even peaceful competition can generate emotional barriers to rational thought; it has been reported that in the British Parliament, even if the opposition points out a spelling mistake or grammatical error in legislation, the government will resist changes for fear of appearing to give way to their opponents.[[23]](#footnote-23) As for *danger* – real or perceived – and the consequent *fears* experienced by those caught up in it, emotion may create an absolute barrier to rational, relatively detached thought.[[24]](#footnote-24) Whatever the long-term trends, in the short term at the present day many human beings are facing rising, not falling, dangers and fears.

2. The second thought is even more disturbing: if at least the factual components within ideologies are susceptible to theoretical–empirical testing, are not questions raised about the democratic assumption that one person’s opinions are as valid as any other’s? When one stops to think about it, that is a rather preposterous assumption. Again using Brexit as an illustration, one has only to watch the ‘vox pops’, the expressions of opinion by people in the streets on British television, to see at once the unbelievable level of profound ignorance of even the most basic facts about the European Union. Google reported that, on the day after about 34 million people had cast their votes in the referendum, the most frequent search term emanating from Britain was ‘What is the EU?’[[25]](#footnote-25) One may argue that they have been intentionally rendered ignorant by powerful vested interests[[26]](#footnote-26) – forces that may be unable to ‘monopolise the means of orientation’ like the medieval church once was, but able to some extent to manipulate public opinion. In Eliasian terms, one could speak about increasing disparities in power over the means of orientation, contradicting early aspirations towards the internet and social media promoting great equality in that respect. Yet the opinions of the ill-informed weighed as much in the referendum result as those of the well-informed. One could make the same point, *a fortiori*, about the election of Trump. Should our role as myth-busters extend to busting the foundational myth of democratic politics, that one person’s opinion is as valid as any other’s?

I raise these disturbing thoughts only because they usually remain unspoken and unspeakable.

**Conclusion**

By way of conclusion, a final question. What contribution, overall, has mainstream sociology – with its relatively involved today-centred policy orientation – made to helping humanity to understand the complexities of life today? What contribution, for that matter, has figurational or process sociology – with its claims to being relatively detached and taking long-term perspectives – made to the same task? Some years ago, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh wrote about the prevalence of ‘blame attribution’ as a means of orientation, and the social sciences as a ‘potential improvement’.[[27]](#footnote-27) The most popular reflex when people try to make sense of something unwelcome they did not foresee is to ask who is to blame for it. This is a paradigmatic example of individualistic thinking. Sometimes, of course, someone *is* to blame, especially when they are extremely powerful. But even where the power ratios are very unequal, the more powerful may benefit from the sheer complexity of society camouflaging the chain of causality, when people at large instead blame the impersonal forces of ‘the system’ (or ‘the market’). This is a clear illustration of what Elias called the constant oscillation ‘between the idea that the course of the game can be reduced to the actions of individual players and the other idea that it is of a supra-personal nature’. I think we have to recognise the failure, broadly speaking, of the social sciences to penetrate popular consciousness. The exceptions are psychology and economics – both disciplines that are extremely individualistic in their fundamental assumptions. People at large still tend to think psychologistically rather than sociologically.

1. Stephen Mennell, ‘Elias and the counter-ego’, *History of the Human Sciences*, 19 (2) 2006: 73–91, and ‘Apologia pro vita sociologica sua: social character and hiistorical process, and why I became an Eliaisan sociologist’, *Human Figurations* 6 (1) 2017 – <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0006.102/--apologia-pro-vita-sociologica-sua-social-character?rgn=main;view=fulltext> (accessed 21 November 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 5]), pp. 66–98. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ‘Norbert Elias: portret van een socioloog’, Directed by Abram de Swaan and Paul van den Bos, TV Nederland 2 (Hilversum: VPRO, duration 60 minutes), 23 April 1975. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ‘For, at present, almost all social beliefs, almost all programmes of social action – and not a few sociological theories themselves, as I have said – are geared to the notion that what happens in human societies can all be explained in terms of acts of will, of the deliberate actions and decisions of human beings as individuals and groups. Many social beliefs, a multitude of ‘isms’, are cut according to this pattern. The emotional attraction or, alternatively, the emotional revulsion and hatred they arouse can be very strong indeed. Often enough, their fantasy-content outweighs by far their reality-orientation. At this level of our societies, where dangers are very great and almost uncontrollable, social standards not only allow, but demand, a high emotional involvement, a high affectivity of thinking, a lower control of personal feelings both in social practices and in the means of orientation connected with them. Correspondingly low is the ability to control the social processes that are kept going by the intertwining of these practices with their boomerang effect on the actors themselves.’ – Nobert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]), pp. 163–4. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Elias, *What is Sociology?*, pp. 46–65. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., p. 77. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid., p. 90. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Johan Goudsblom, *Sociology in the Balance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), p. 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Elias examines the process of transition from an oligarchic to a more democratic model in Britain between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries in Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 7]), pp. 9–23. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Elias, *What is Sociology?*, pp. 86–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Norbert Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 10]), pp. 137–208. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Johan Goudsblom, *Sociology in the Balance* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), pp. 154–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 4]). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Abram de Swaan, *In Care of the State* (Cambridge: Polity, 1988). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. In my view, this has infected even American sociology, setting up what I have called an epistemological barrier to transcending the philosophoidal notion of ‘individual *versus* society’. See Stephen Mennell, ‘It’s just me in the US’, *Network: Magazine of the British Sociological Association*, Autumn 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Elias, *What is Sociology?*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Let me give one everyday example, from my days as a young politician. There were in the city of Exeter six local authority high schools, including just one for boys only and one for girls only. In the 1980s, it was proposed that the two single-sex schools be amalgamated, and there was vociferous protest from supporters of the girls’ school that this scheme would eliminate parents’ choice of single-sex education. But there was little evidence that the number of parents choosing single-sex education was sufficient to fill the two schools, and in the meantime parents who had opted for coeducation at any of the other four schools were finding their children directed, against their choice, to one or other of the single-sex schools. (I used this concrete example in a discussion of differences between social democratic and liberal ideologies during a period when I was myself active in British politics – see Mennell, *On Social Democratic Ideology*. London: Tawney Society, 1986.) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago press, 1962). [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Stephen Mennell, ‘What economists forgot, (and what Wall Street and the City never learned): a sociological perspective on the crisis in economics’, *History of the Human Sciences* 27: 3 (2014). pp. 20–37. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Quoted widely, including in the *Financial Times*, 3 June 2016. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Piotr Sztompka, *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Isabel Hardman, *Why We Get the Wrong Politicians* (London: Atlantic Books, 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Norbert Elias, ‘The fishermen in the maelstrom’, in *Involvement and Detachment*, pp. 105–78. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. <https://trends.google.com/trends/story/GB_cu_EoBj9FIBAAAj9M_en> (accessed 21 November 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Anthony Barnett, ‘Democracy and the machinations of mind control’ – *NYRB Daily*, 14 December 2017. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, ‘Attribution of blame as the past and present means of orientation: the social sciences as a potential improvement’, <http://archive.norbert-elias.com/docs/pdf/BlameAttribution.pdf> (accessed 23 November 2018). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)