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Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes. *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process*. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. xi + 239 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 1-78093-225-5; \$29.95 U.S. (pb). 1-78093-226-2; \$30.99 U.S. (eb). 1-78093-339-9.

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Over the last several decades there appears to be a growing interest in the sociological legacy of Norbert Elias (1897-1990), or at least a concerted effort by his former students, colleagues, and fellow-traveling “Eliasians” to spur broader attention to a theorist and researcher whose work has often been ignored or marginalized within the Anglophone social sciences. While scholars of Europe have long been familiar with his seminal historical essays *The Civilising Process*^[1] and, to a lesser extent, *The Court Society*^[2]--texts originally written in the 1930s but not widely available until the 1960s or translated into English until the 1970s or 1980s--his prolific empirical studies and broader contributions to social theory (many of which were only posthumously published) are not well known outside of a few subfields of the sociology of sport, leisure, violence, and emotions, or within delimited sociological circles primarily in the Netherlands, France, and Germany. Beginning in 2005, the Norbert Elias Foundation, in association with University College Dublin Press, has collected and re-published in eighteen volumes the entirety of his oeuvre, including re-editions of his monographs, compilations of previously un-translated essays, and even a reconstructed version of his study, *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*,^[3] taken up in the early days of the Second World War.

Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology, authored by Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, functions as a bookend to this re-publication effort, and follows on a number of other works dedicated to Elias that have appeared since the late 1990s, notably by Eliasian historical sociologists Richard Kilminster, Steven Loyal, Stephen Mennell, and Dennis Smith, all of which are drawn upon in the new volume.^[4] Dunning, an eminent sociologist of sport, is a former student, colleague, and collaborator of Elias at the University of Leicester. The two co-authored numerous essays on the history of football, a number of which are included in their ground-breaking *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*.^[5] Hughes is also a former Leicester student and current faculty member, who wrote an explicitly Eliasian study of tobacco smoking.^[6] Their new, richly researched book presents both a primer to Elias’s “figurational” (or “developmental” or “process”) sociology, as well as a sustained and ardent defense of this approach from its detractors, going as far as proposing it as a potential cure to what the authors see, via Alvin Gouldner writing in 1970,^[7] as the current “crisis” within modern sociology.

Throughout the book, Dunning and Hughes connect Elias’s life and work, his experiences as an exile from Nazi Germany to his explorations of power, social interdependence, and (de)civilization. Elias’s own intellectual trajectory in many ways charted the development of European social theory in the twentieth century, as well as his own capacious scholarship--what he called a “human science” (or “*Menschenwissenschaft*,” [p. 7])--that blurred the boundaries between sociology, history, philosophy, and psychology. Born in the Imperial German city of Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland) in 1897 to a Jewish merchant family, Elias served on the Western Front during World War I, although already radicalized

as a member of the Zionist Blau-Weiss Bund, alongside future German Jewish intellectuals like Erich Fromm, Leo Strauss, and Gershom Scholem. Having received a classical *Gymnasium* education, he went on to study both medicine and philosophy at the University of Breslau, eventually earning a doctorate with a dissertation on the philosophy of history. He then switched to sociology, first under the tutelage of cultural sociologist Albert Weber (the brother of Max) at Heidelberg, then under sociologist of knowledge Karl Mannheim at Frankfurt, where Elias completed his *Habilitation* in 1933 with a thesis on the “courtisation” of the French nobility under Louis XIV that would only be published thirty-six years later in German and first translated to English in 1983 as *The Court Society*.

As Dunning and Hughes relate, while Elias was working as Mannheim's assistant in Frankfurt, he forged ties with members of the Institute for Social Research (later referred to as the “Frankfurt School”) which shared a building (called “Marxburg”) with the Sociology Department, and Elias ended up facilitating Theodor Adorno's escape from Nazi Germany. After completing his *Habilitation*, Elias himself fled to Paris (his mother would later die in a Nazi extermination camp) where he had an informal affiliation at the École Normale Supérieure under philosopher of science Alexandre Koyré and embarked on sociological studies of kitsch art and the expulsion of the Huguenots from France. He moved to London two years later where he completed the research and writing of *The Civilising Process*, and then rejoined Mannheim as a Senior Research Assistant at the London School of Economics (where he also worked with evolutionary sociologist Morris Ginsberg), before being interned on the Isle of Man as an enemy alien (where he continued to offer informal courses, as well as wrote and produced an opera). He only joined the faculty of the University of Leicester in 1954, his first permanent academic position, before which he worked for the British military to “de-Nazify” German war prisoners, taught adult education, and helped develop and administer group analytic psychotherapy to war survivors alongside his fellow Frankfurt colleague S.H. Foulkes. With friend and fellow émigré Ilya Neustadt, Elias established Leicester as a center for academic sociology in the 1950s and 1960s, and continued to train students there until 1978 when he moved on to Bielefeld and Amsterdam. He also had a notable two-year stint in the early 1960s at the University of Ghana where he taught alongside noted British anthropologist Jack Goody.

Dunning and Hughes do not actually present this incredible biographical trajectory in a straightforward, chronological manner, in part because it has been well covered in earlier works by Elias's former students as well as in Elias's own essay, *Reflections on a Life*.^[8] Instead, they trace (often via Dunning's personal anecdotes) how Elias's various life experiences and academic affiliations progressively contributed to the development of his figurational theory of social life and his particular commitments to sociology as a positive science of human development. They emphasize the ways Elias's scholarship synthesized the various strains of social theory being developed in Weimar Germany, wartime France and postwar Britain. Elias adapted the post-Kantian (“post-philosophical” [p. 74])^[9] turn to actual, historical human relations outlined by Auguste Comte and Karl Marx, while departing from the strict evolutionism of the former and materialism of the latter, as well as rejecting the scientific positivism and functionalism that later sociologists had developed from these two foundational theorists. He likewise built on Max Weber's comparative and historical analysis of power as an asymmetrical social relation (a “structural characteristic of a relationship” [p. 66]) rather than an attribute or thing—and indeed much of Elias's classic work was concerned with how European states came to monopolize relationships of dependency—while rejecting Weber's tendency towards philosophical nominalism and his idealist rendering of the absolute detachment of the scholar. At the same time, like his Frankfurt School peers, Elias sought to connect the study of psychic and social development, combining both psychogenetic and sociogenetic analyses in *The Civilising Process*, which Elias saw as in direct dialogue with Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*, while simultaneously moving beyond the individualistic focus of Freud to a more sociologically informed psychotherapy that he would develop with Foulke. Such an attempt to synthesize Marx and Freud (in Elias's case, via Comte, Weber, and others) amounted to, Dunning and Hughes remark, “something akin to the search for the

'philosopher's stone' or the 'Holy Grail' among social scientists in the first half of the twentieth century" (p. 80).

As Dunning and Hughes insightfully detail, the resulting synthesis approached human individuals and the various social worlds they collectively create as ongoing processes of historical development. Attempting to avoid the reification of processes (what Elias called "process-reduction") to steady states in static conceptualizations like "structure," "system" or even "society," Elias adopted a new vocabulary of verbal nouns like "socialization," "urbanization," "sportization," et cetera (p. 51). Along these lines, he understood the proper object of sociological study to be "figurations"—the dynamic and fluid ties of interdependence that humans form with each other—thus replacing what he saw as a false individual-society antinomy premised on an understanding of humans as "closed-off" from one another (*homo clausus*) with an open-ended vision of *homines aperti* ("open people") (pp. 52-58). Such an insistence on process, Dunning and Hughes claim, served to circumvent the perennial "structure-agency problem" of social theory, sailing between the "'Scylla' of reification and determinism...and the 'Charybdis' of individualistic reductionism and voluntarism" (p. 57). The emphasis on history and interconnectedness further avoided what Elias similarly saw as a false philosophical divide between ideas and reality, between consciousness and materiality, with Elias instead treating reality not as "'a thing out there', but rather as a dynamic totality which includes humans and their...knowledge as an integral part" (p. 134).

Even by the 1950s, when Elias first took an academic post at Leicester, such philosophical preoccupations, historical perspectives, and comparative foci seemed decidedly old-fashioned in an Anglo-American academic sociology dominated by the functionalism of Talcott Parsons (the study of the functional integration of single social systems), increasingly reliant on quantitative methodologies, and deeply suspicious of evolutionary theories. Indeed, Dunning and Hughes devote much of the book to defending Elias against long-standing charges of evolutionism and ethnocentrism, charges levied perhaps most devastatingly by eminent scholars like Zygmunt Bauman, Anthony Giddens, and Jack Goody.^[10] These charges generally revolve around Elias's "central theory" (p. 76) of "civilization," a term that in the earlier sociologies and anthropologies of Herbert Spencer, Edward Burnett Tylor, and Lewis Henry Morgan referred to the contemporary West in distinction from the "savagery" and "barbarism" of other times and other societies. In *The Civilising Process*—what Dunning and Hughes insist is a poor translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (now re-translated in the Complete Works as "On the Civilising Process"^[11])—Elias traces the historical development of the elite discourse of *civilisation* in France in contradistinction to that of *Kultur* in Germany, as the self-consciousness of a rising, transnational bourgeoisie. "Civilization," in this sense, is an emic term used by historical actors to name new forms of social interdependence, which Elias understood as developing from earlier forms of "courtesy" and "civility." The development across these stages, for Elias, was indeed directional, but neither unilineal nor foreordained, and by no means equivalent to progress. Micro-socially it involved increasing self-restraint, self-control over emotion and violence, and self-detachment, which Elias traced through the study of books on manners beginning with Erasmus. Macro-socially, the civilizing process accompanied the growing centralization of state authority and mapped onto what Elias called "functional democratization" which accompanied industrialization and urbanization: "the emergence of larger, more differentiated, and denser 'chains of interdependence'" (p. 67). Dunning and Hughes claim that Elias neither saw these trends as a property of the West nor approached how they played out in Europe as a measure for non-Western societies. As Elias detailed in his later work, while the development of European civilization seemed to follow an overall "curve," it involved various civilizing "spurts and counter-spurts" of domination and violence, and, unlike biological evolution, was reversible (pp. 120-121). Dunning and Hughes also insist that Elias's attempts to empirically chart this curve did not necessarily entail a value judgment, that he fully recognized the unintended consequences of civilization in the development of nuclear arms and global warming—existential challenges that Elias hoped sociology would help prepare humanity to confront (p. 137). Rejecting contemporary "epistemic relativism" or "heteronomy" he ultimately viewed as self-deceptive and unscientific, Elias bemoaned the postmodern tendency to "throw out the developmental baby with the evolutionary bathwater" (p. 130).

Dunning and Hughes have certainly done an important service in introducing those readers primarily familiar with Elias's classic essays to the breadth of Elias's work—which ranged from essays on Mozart, African art, and football; to socio-historical monographs on suburban Leicester and *The Germans*; to theoretical treatises on symbolism and temporality; to a book of poetry[12]—drawing out the central social theory embedded within such prolific writing. Indeed, most critiques of Elias build from a relatively superficial reading of *The Civilising Process* and tend to ignore the half-century of work written thereafter. But it is equally specious to read back into Elias's earlier work the more developed ideas of his later years, and it would not be unreasonable to believe that a study written in the 1930s, based largely on nineteenth-century historical scholarship, would share in the prevailing cultural presumptions of the time, or would project a willful counterpoint of a world of civilized self-control and detachment to the anti-Semitism and Nazi violence through which Elias was living. After all, as Dunning and Hughes explain, Elias's method was one of “detour through detachment” (p. 13), by which self-distanciation from one's object of study is but a first step to contributing to the record of established knowledge and subsequently developing an engaged social critique. Presumably Elias's own engagements shifted over the years, and one should thus read his scholarship within those historical shifts. Defending the integrality of Elias's work fails to recognize the very process-related complexities of the authorial subject on which Elias himself would surely insist.

The defensive posture Dunning and Hughes adopt unfortunately takes away from the engaging and pedagogically beneficial final section of their book, where they compare and contrast Elias's figurational sociology to the parallel social theories of three of the most pre-eminent thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century: Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, and Pierre Bourdieu. Giddens was a colleague of Elias at Leicester in the 1960s and has been perhaps the most persistent, critical interlocutor of Elias. Giddens' approach, Dunning and Hughes elaborate, follows from the same commitment to historical and comparative study that rejects Parsonian functionalism, but Giddens brackets the Comtean empiricism so central to Elias's sociological method (pp. 174-75). Giddens' theory of structuration similarly addresses the structure-agency problem, but, as Dunning and Hughes criticize from an Eliasian perspective, tends to reduce structure to rationalistic agency, thus ignoring the affective qualities of human life (p. 178). Foucault, on the other hand, was a more consistent admirer of Elias and underwrote the French translation of Elias's monograph, *The Loneliness of the Dying*. [13] Dunning and Hughes compare the two theorists' similar analysis of Velázquez's painting, *Las Meninas*, as a meditation on the art of representation and the myth of a disconnected *homo clausus*, though ultimately they see Foucault's interpretation of the painting's testimony to an epistemic rupture as displaying a neo-Kantian nominalism Elias would reject (p. 186). Even more closely tied are Bourdieu and Elias, with Bourdieu frequently referencing Elias, both authors drawing on the same sociological tradition, and both seeking to address hoary theoretical questions regarding the basis for social action. While Dunning and Hughes liken Bourdieu's “habitus” to Elias's use of the concept in *The Civilising Process*, they ultimately criticize the residual structuralist and dualist elements in Bourdieu's model, describing it as a “‘co-deterministic’ halfway house” between reified notions of structure and individual agency (p. 200). [14] In all three cases, instead of exploring the ways in which the theorists represent alternate means of addressing similar questions that Elias confronted, each with different costs and benefits, Dunning and Hughes evaluate these alternatives by how far they stray from the Eliasian solution that they implicitly accept in its totality minus some quite minor, perfunctory critiques (p. 205).

In the end, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology* makes a strong and convincing case that Elias's larger historical-theoretical oeuvre and underlying sociological model deserves more sustained attention by both card-carrying sociologists and other scholars of the “human sciences.” Whether it represents a solution to the present crisis of academic sociology which Dunning and Hughes characterize as marked by “paradigmatic heterogeneity, diversity of interests, and inter-school tensions” (p. 202) certainly still remains an open question. Indeed, one would have to already accept Elias's projection of sociology as a positive science in the service of social change to see such a lack of “a common programme of theory and

research” (p. 209, n. 9) as necessarily a detriment to the field. While Elias presents a robust model for how historical research and social theory can mutually inform each other, the book, given its disciplinary focus and deployment of the complex language that Elias developed, will ultimately be of more interest to students of the latter. Scholars of France will find the work of a familiar figure usefully re-contextualized but might understandably wonder whether the authors themselves could have benefitted from a bit more of a “detour through detachment” in their treatment of their important research subject.

NOTES

[1] Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Revised Edition (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

[2] Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983).

[3] Norbert Elias, *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*, eds. René Moelker and Stephen Mennell (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 2007).

[4] Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2007); Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley, eds., *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 1998); Dennis Smith, *Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory* (London: Sage, 2001).

[5] Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).

[6] Jason Hughes, *Learning to Smoke: Tobacco Use in the West* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

[7]. Alvin Gouldner, *The Coming Crisis in Western Sociology* (New York: Basic Books, 1970).

[8] Norbert Elias, *Reflections on a Life* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

[9] Kilminster, *Norbert Elias*.

[10] Zygmunt Bauman, “The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias,” *Sociology* 13(1979):117-125; Anthony Giddens and Gavin Mackenzie, *Social Class and the Division of Labor: Essays in Honour of Ilya Neustadt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Jack Goody, “Elias and the Anthropological Tradition,” *Anthropological Theory* 2(2002): 401-412.

[11] Norbert Elias, *On the Civilising Process*, eds. Stephen Mennell, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Richard Kilminster (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 2012).

[12] Norbert Elias, *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); Norbert Elias, “Stages of African Art, Social and Visual,” in *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: University College of Dublin Press, 2009 [1970]); Elias and Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*; Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (London: Frank Cass, 1994 [1965]); Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996); Norbert Elias, *The Symbol Theory* (London: Sage, 1991); Norbert Elias, *Time: An Essay* (London: Routledge, 1991); Norbert Elias, *Lors der Menschen: Gedichte/Nachdichtungen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987).

[13] Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985).

[14] François Depelteau, "Relational Thinking: A Critique of Co-Deterministic Theories of Structure and Agency," *Sociological Theory* 26(2008): 51-73.

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