

The Politics of Figurational Sociology

Stephen Dunne
University of Leicester School of Management
University Road
Leicester
LE1 7RH
UK

Paper Re-Submitted To:

The Sociological Review [3rd of November, 2008]

Abstract

Figurational sociology is so often said to distance itself from the political issues of the day. Whilst this is certainly true with regards to the present day, it in no way follows that figurational sociology seeks to distance itself from politics *as such*. On the contrary, as will be shown within this paper, politics is and always has been a central concern for figurational sociologists. This political concern, however, is an exclusively long term concern; figurational sociology purposively postpones present political engagement *for the sake of* developing a sufficiently detached sociology that would *eventually* facilitate in the delivery of effective practical and political measures. This paper discusses the stakes involved in, as well as the reasoning behind, the assignment of such a place to politics. It gestures towards two distinct and separate concepts of social control that exist within figurational sociology and then proceeds to offer a critical consideration of the consequences that can be derived from any temporal demarcation of the political done on their basis. The paper ultimately suggests that figurational sociology's position on politics raises a series of as yet unanswered questions, questions which can no longer remain unanswered by the contemporary figurational sociologist.

Key Words: Norbert Elias; figurational sociology; involvement and detachment; political intervention; social control; social policy; public intellectual

For me, sociology is an undertaking in which the primary task is to help us to orientate ourselves in this social universe of ours – to orientate ourselves better than we are able to do now, and accordingly to act less blindly...I think we must be strictly scholarly, of course, but always with the knowledge that a sociologist has the hard task of helping to orientate ourselves in the unknown social universe which we form with each other (Elias 1998: 144).

My ethos is, that we have to see the world in all its ugliness, as it is without disguises. Then we can perhaps make a better world of it, but only if we know how the world really is, not if we conceal it from ourselves (Elias, c.f. Featherstone 1987: 209).

There is obviously something very wrong with a scientific discipline if its leading representatives allow political sentiment to dominate their scientific work (Elias 1987a: 224).

Introduction

Two of sociology's characteristic concerns find immensely sophisticated expression and expansion within the work of Norbert Elias and his followers: figurational/process sociologists. Firstly: a concern for the appropriate place that is to be given to normative evaluation within sociological investigation. Secondly: a concern for the appropriate place that is to be given to sociological investigation with respect to social policy. This paper offers a close but ultimately critical consideration of the manner in which figurational sociologists have responded to these two concerns. It will be of particular interest to those who are engaged with Elias' work. And it will be of more general interest for anyone concerned with understanding how a great sociologist, and later his followers, have groped around and grappled with such characteristically sociological concerns.

The paper's argument develops across this introduction, seven core sections and a conclusion. The first of these core sections makes the case for a renewed

consideration of figurational sociology's engagement with questions of the political by setting this against the background of figurational sociology's historically chequered relationship to the sociological mainstream. The following three sections then discuss and analyse figurational sociology's complex engagement with questions of the political. Within these three sections particular emphasis is placed upon how, for figurational sociology, the very possibility of any sort of social intervention is placed only upon the very distant temporal horizon. That is to say, the politics of figurational sociology, if there are ever to be any, will only ever be found in the long-term.

The next two sections of the paper then gesture towards an unresolved tension which I argue exists both within Elias's own engagement with the political and also within his followers' subsequent defence of this engagement. In this regard, on the one hand Elias makes a contentious appeal towards an immanent idea of the relationship between sociology and society. In so doing, Elias describes historically determined chains of human interdependencies in terms of their tendency towards restraint and subsequently explains the very manifestation of sociology in terms of this tendency. That being the case, on the other hand, Elias also makes a less conspicuous but nonetheless apparent appeal towards sociology as an almost socially transcendent force. In this regard sociology is posited as a figuration of future specialists who will know more than most both about how human interdependencies work and, moreover, about how they can be made to work better. The penultimate section of the paper raises a series of questions on the basis of the discontinuity between these two accounts of sociology's relationship with society and with politics. The concluding

section then calls for more debate around this discontinuity, around these questions, and around others like them.

Figurational Sociology and the Politics of Reception

Norbert Elias and his followers have long sensed the significance, even the urgency, of their figurational approach to sociology. As far back as the late 1970s Johan Goudsblom, one of the most influential figurational sociologists, took it upon himself to re-assess sociological theory *as such* from the viewpoint of Elias's ideas (1977a). Later, in what remains perhaps the definitive introduction to Eliasian sociology¹, Stephen Mennell argued that Elias's work 'is intended to offer solutions to major problems of sociology and the social sciences more generally' (1998: 251). More recently still, Stephen Loyal and Stephen Quilley have gone so far as to insist that 'Eliasian sociology seems best placed to provide a 'central theory' not only for the social sciences, but for the human sciences more generally' (2005a: 826). Elias himself concurs on this point when he says:

We, my friends and I, had to toil and to labour in order to overcome the inertia of a process reducing sociology. To keep alive the memory of the not-knowing and of the struggle in which new knowledge gained the ascendancy is a duty which must not be shirked. It took almost half a century before process sociology found resonance in society at large (1987b: xl).

Something significant is at stake, therefore. Mennell admits how he 'always tended to view the promotion of his [Elias's] ideas as a kind of political campaign' (2006: 75). So a crucial task for the figurational sociologists of today seems to be that of getting their message across to the widest possible audience. Mennell is by no means the sole

champion of such a cause. The hugely significant project of translating Elias' complete works into an eighteen volume collection is already bearing fruit (Elias 2005a, 2005b, 2007a, 2007b, 2007c; see also UCD Press 2008). Extended secondary commentaries and edited collections abound (e.g. Fulbrook 2007; Dunning et. al. 2006; Loyal and Quilley 2004; van Iterson et. al. 2002; Salumets 2002; Smith 2000; Dunning 1999; Goudsblom and Mennell 1998; Mennell 1998; van Krieken 1998; Fletcher 1997; and Dunning and Rojek 1992). A four-volume *Masters of Modern Social Thought* series has been dedicated to Elias's work (Dunning and Mennell 2003)².

Figurational sociology, on this cursory reading at least, is being pushed further and further towards centre stage of the English speaking sociological world. Yet figurational sociology has often been said to be upon this very cusp of centrality: very often and not only recently. Over three decades ago, for example, Goudsblom's comprehensive overview of the reception of Elias' work was written against the background of the 'intriguing' (1977b: 38) fact of its then relative obscurity. Over twenty years ago, Dennis Smith proceeded to make the point that 'Elias is no longer an outsider' (1984: 386) whilst three years later Mike Featherstone suggested that Elias's work 'now shows signs of gaining the attention and acknowledgment it has long deserved' (1987: 197). So if Elias has indeed already become a key name within sociology, as seems to have been continuously suggested, one might then wonder what motivates the contemporary campaign for figurational sociology.

Zygmunt Bauman once observed that figurational sociologists are convinced of an ‘astounding contradiction between the profundity of Elias’s work and the shallowness of its reception’ (1978: 117). Perhaps this conviction remains prevalent on the part of figurational sociology’s representatives, even to this date. Perhaps the contemporary campaign for figurational sociology seeks to redress the supposed dissonance between the level of reception continuously expected and the level of reception actually observed. Indeed, speculations as to why the majority of sociologists have been relatively slow on the uptake of Elias’s work are by no means scarce. Richard Kilminster ultimately identifies ‘the unavailability in translation of his major works for so long’ (1987: 213-214) as the most decisive factor. Elsewhere Goudsblom (1977b: 39) suggests that the manner in which Elias’s work has resonated in different ways around the world is *itself* a sociological issue requiring sociological investigation³.

In as much as it has been said that the sociological mainstream has been somewhat hesitant or hostile towards an engagement with figurational sociology, even to this date, it has also been said that figurational sociology has at times been guilty of responding in kind. For Johann Arnason, the distinctiveness of the figurational approach to sociology can itself ‘be clarified in terms of a systematic opposition to components and variants of a dominant paradigm’ (1987: 431). Similarly Goudsblom suggests that even as far back as Elias’s very early essay on kitsch (1935/1998) we find expressed certain ‘features that have characterized Elias’s subsequent writings, beginning with *The Civilizing Process*. One typical feature was a certain disdain for

scholastic disputation' (1977b: 75/1986: 325). Elias, for his part, has attempted to defend his idiosyncratic reluctance to engage with his contemporaries by saying:

it is more productive for the future of sociology if I go on working in the laboratory as I have done before, like a physicist who would go to his labour every day and do his stint instead of criticizing other physicists (Elias, c.f. Kilminster 1987: 215).

Such a disposition has led many figures towards making the criticism that Elias, and later his followers, tend to make something akin to a straw man of a variety of alternative/competing theoretical sociological positions (e.g. Coser, 1979, Horne and Jary, 1987 and Layder, 1986), a criticism which Featherstone (1987: 200) says, 'has an element of truth'. The interchange between Maso (1995b, 1995b), Goudsblom (1995) and Kilminster and Wouters (1995), on the subject of the role given to Kantian philosophy within figurational sociology, is truly exemplary in this regard. As Dick Pels (1991: 179) forcibly remarks, when it comes to figurational sociology:

Intellectual competition is basically considered a waste of time, and a lowly occupation; the defence of tribe and turf is undertaken reluctantly and only if provoked (but then no quarter is given). By this sovereign aloofness, 'process sociology', as it prefers to be called, thus effectively reduces the complexity of the outside intellectual world⁴.

This seeming reluctance of figurational sociologists to engage with alternative schools of sociological thought is no doubt also what Eric Dunning and Stephen Menell have in mind when they argue:

A recurrent criticism of Elias and his 'school' over the years has been that we are, in effect, a 'sect' and that we 'celebrate' and 'worship' Elias, a charismatic figure, and his work, rather than criticising and testing it. There may, of course, be some 'Eliasians' whose behaviour is something sect-like in

this way just as there are sect-like Marxists, Parsonians and Foucauldians. However, we suspect that this sort of criticism stems at least in part from the refusal of ‘core Elisian’ to accept *manifestly false interpretations of Elias* such as that he was an ‘evolutionary’ or ‘progress’ theorist. (2003: xxxii) [Emphasis added]

The tendency of figurational sociologists to point towards and undermine such *manifestly false interpretations of Elias* (e.g. Dunning and Mennell 1979; Dunning 1992; Dunning 1989; Dunning 1996; Mennell and Goudsblom 1997; Dunning and Mennell 1998; Mennell 1998: 227-250; Loyal and Quilley 2005b) surely informs the notion that an Elisian ‘sect’ exists. Nevertheless, that there is a campaign seeking to promote Elias’s work is not and cannot be understood as a deficiency of the work itself. Too often, the idea that there is an Elisian ‘sect’ gets in the way of the ideas themselves, thereby blocking sympathetic and systematic access to them. There is, in other words, always something quite trivial about every single ‘are you/we for or against the ideas of theorist x?’ discussion. In this respect both Dennis Layder (1994: 115) and Nico Mouzelis (1993) advocate the bypassing of such superficial tit-for-tat-ism in favour of analysing how Elias’s *work* is both connected to and disconnected from the sociological canon. This means that attention should be paid not so much towards the sociologists as towards the sociology, not towards the sociology of figurational sociologists (in the sense of what brought and keeps them together) but towards the sociology of figurational sociology (in the sense of the work bearing that name).

Following such a lead, this paper discusses a compelling tension that I argue exists *within* Elias’s work. I do this by interrogating the manner in which some of the principles it lays down stand as the greatest barriers to that which it otherwise seeks to

achieve. The intention here, to be clear, is neither to ‘promote’ nor ‘refute’ figurational sociology. Instead, I will follow both Alan Sica’s suggestion that Elias can be overcome only after his work has been sufficiently engaged (1984) and Johann Arnason’s (1987: 429) demonstration of how one might argue ‘with Elias against Elias’. In so doing, I intend to work with figurational sociology upon its own terms, as it were, in order to develop some of the consequences of these. In particular, it will be my central contention that figurational sociology *denies itself* the very thing which it hopes to eventually achieve – a sociology that would one day help to bring social processes under more conscious control (Elias 2000: xiv).

This is not to leave the opening theme of the politics of figurational sociology’s reception behind, however. The discussion began with the theme of the politics *behind* figurational sociology. It continues with an extended discussion of politics *within* the writings of figurational sociology. And it concludes by connecting the scenario of the former with the consequences derived from the latter.

The Spiralling Difficulty of Detachment

[I]f social scientists, although using more specialised procedures and a more technical language, are in the last resort not much less affected in their approach to the problems of society by preconceived ideas and ideals, by passions and partisan views, than the man in the street, are they really justified in calling themselves scientists?...Can social scientists make any specific contribution to the solution of major problems, even of their own groups, of their own country, class, profession or whatever it is, if they accept as the self-evident foundation of their theories some of the religiously held creeds and norms of one or the other of these groups, so that the results of their studies are destined from the start to agree, or at least not to disagree, with the basic tenets of these communal beliefs? (Elias 1987b: 15)

It is clear from the above quotation that Elias wanted social science to be scientific. By this I mean that for Elias, common sense opinions and partisan knowledge claims were the highest hurdles to be jumped on the way towards a properly scientific social science. Chris Rojek argues that such a de-prioritization of the political in the name of and for the sake of a scientific sociology ‘illustrates the main reasons for the mixed reaction to Elias’s work’ (1986: 594). Responding to this charge of political quietism, Eric Dunning explains how the apparently apolitical nature of Elias’s work was itself a product of his desire to develop a body of sociological knowledge that would give deeper insight into the processual dynamics *of* political crises (Rojek, 2004: 342-343). It seems that there is, for the time being at least, something of a decision to be made between the quest for knowledge and the quests of politics. Of course, Elias is by no means the first figure to comment upon the apparently antagonistic relationship between value and science, between the moderator and the microscope, between the sociologist’s vocation and the sociologist’s own social being. To offer a list of theorists that offer considerations in this regard here would be to trivialize the significance and specificity of their respective contributions. Suffice it to say for now that in closing the sociological shop to value trading, Elias falls in line with a long tradition of interrogations that attempt to prioritize demonstrations of *what is* at the expense of elaborations of *what ought to be*.

What is particularly notable about Elias’s refusal to politically commit figurational sociology, therefore, is not so much its consequential would-be claim towards heightened object adequacy – this would hardly be an innovation. What *is* remarkable about this particular political refrain is its sheer consistency and resolve, unwavering

most notably in the face of an anti-Semitic Holocaust which dramatically affected both Elias, as an expatriated German Jew, and his family, people who did not exile. Such a momentous event would have driven many scientists to break their moral and political silence (see especially Elias, 1994). If anything, however, the Holocaust in fact only hardened Elias's scientific resolve, making the need for sociology's political detachment appear to him as something all the more crucial. In the 1968 postscript to *The Civilizing Process*, for example, he writes:

If the present study has any significance at all, this results not least from its opposition to this mingling of what is and what ought to be, of scientific analysis with ideals. It points to the possibility of freeing the study of society from its bondage to social ideologies. This is not to say that an investigation of social problems which rejects the primacy of political and philosophical ideas means renouncing the possibility of influencing the course of political events through the results of sociological research. The opposite is the case. The usefulness of sociological research as a tool of social practice is increased if the researcher does not deceive himself by projecting what he desires, what he believes ought to be, into his investigation of what is and has been. (2000: 468)

For Elias sociology could become scientific, indeed it ought to. It ought to become scientific because in so doing it could eventually become practical. And it could eventually become practical only to the extent that social scientists might come to prioritize description above prescription. This position, for its part, is consistently and unanimously endorsed by Elias's followers. Herman Korte suggests that Elias' self-distancing 'from current political controversies...serves to give access to a better understanding of currently existing cultures and civilizing forms of community' (2001: 30) whereas Eric Dunning argues that figurational sociologists 'eschew what one might call the political/ideological or philosophical 'quick fix', and stress instead the need to carry out theory-guided research' (1996: 203). Figurational sociology

insists upon not confounding any political aspirations it may have *for* actually existing empirical events *with* these actually existing events. It refuses to mis-represent the reality of what is by juxtaposing ideas of what ought, or ought not, to be the case.

Elias argues elsewhere that:

The sociologist should not be required or expected to express his convictions about how society *ought* to develop. Sociologists ought rather to free themselves from the notion that there is or even will be any necessary correspondence between the society they are investigating and their own social beliefs, their wishes and hopes, their moral predilections or their conceptions of what is just and humane (1978: 153).

All of this being the case, the specificity of this particular challenge is heightened by the fact that sociologists participate within the facts they study: they themselves are organs of the very body they seek to observe. Elias is fully aware of fact that any sociologist, figurational or otherwise, 'cannot cease to take part in, and to be affected by, the social and political affairs of their groups and their time' (1987b: 16). Not only that. Elias shows that whenever the political situation within which the sociologist operates becomes particularly intense or dangerous, during a war for example, an unexamined emotional response will become all the more likely, hence furthermore jeopardising the accuracy of the account. Elias calls this continuity of oughts a *double-bind*: emotional responses spiral out of control, thereby blocking the very possibility of the detached stance that would be capable of grounding them to a halt.

On this he says:

High emotivity of response lessens the chance of a realistic assessment of the critical process and, hence, of a realistic practice in relation to it; relatively unrealistic practice under the pressure of strong affects lessens the chance of bringing the critical process under control (1987b: 48).

This observation doesn't come as some sort of afterthought to Elias's theory of knowledge (most clearly articulated within his *Involvement and Detachment*); it rather acts as a foundation for it. Elias shows how the sociologist is intimately involved within the very thing they must otherwise eventually detach themselves from. And, as will be shown in the next section of this paper, it is in his discussion of autonomous and heteronomous values that Elias attempts to simultaneously overcome *both* the somewhat positivist notion that sociology should become a 'value-free' science *and* the avowedly pluralist notion that values, as inevitable, should be worn upon every sociological sleeve.

Acceptable and Unacceptable Values

[E]very scientific endeavor has moral implications. Instead of distinguishing between two types of science, one of which is "value-free" while the other is not, one may find it both simpler and more apposite to distinguish in scientific pronouncements between two types of evaluations, one autonomous, the other heteronomous, of which one or the other may be dominant (Elias, 1956: 229).

This section explains how the above quotation can be understood as a response to the difficulty of double-bind processes discussed in the previous section. This explanation will in turn lead the way towards a discussion of how Elias argues that sociology might *still* be considered practically useful, despite the continuously asserted requirement for evaluative detachment.

As we have seen, the starting point for much of what Elias says on the place of sociological evaluation is that the sociologist is *always* implicated within a politico-social situation. Indeed, Elias argues that a sociologists' own involvement in the

social world 'is itself one of the conditions for comprehending the problems they try to solve as scientists' (1987b: 16). It is for this reason that he makes a distinction between autonomous and heteronomous values. Elias' 'autonomous' values are those which access, and to a large extent structure, the object(s) with which any field of study concerns itself (the 'value' of achieving demonstrable observations in the case of the human and natural sciences or the 'value' of explaining the evolution of webs of human figurations in the case of sociology, for example). This is why Goudsblom argues (1977b: 81/1986: 333) that throughout his work, Elias

is evaluating – on the basis that the highest professional value for a sociologist is to provide more adequate knowledge of the social world, knowledge which will have the practical significance that it will enable us to act more realistically than we do today. This, in Elias's view, is the central task confronting sociologists: to break out of the confines of short-term, group-centred fantasy thinking, and to discover more realistic means of orientation... this task should be conceived of not in a definitive, but in a developmental sense: as an effort to reduce the fanciful and increase the realistic elements in our thinking about societies.

As Elias himself puts it within *What is Sociology?* (1978), investigative fields can be distinguished from one another *on the basis of* the institutionally legitimated autonomous values that they hold as their own. Such values create autonomy on the part of a field of investigation. To say that a field *has* autonomous values is only to say that it *has* various standards and procedures which its practitioners observe and uphold – there is nothing perversely subjectivist or relativist in any of this. The success and strength of an intellectual field, social scientific or otherwise, is hence to be found, for Elias, in its ability to achieve a level of 'relative autonomy' from other fields on three ascending levels. Firstly, relative autonomy with respect to the nature of its subject matter. Secondly, relative autonomy with respect to the manner in which

that subject matter is accessed. Finally, relative autonomy with respect to the manner in which this relatively autonomous subject matter is institutionally legitimated and perpetuated within and across various research programmes and formalised pedagogies (Elias 1978: 59).

In opposition to these autonomous values which go towards constituting the strength of a field of enquiry, Elias posits ‘extra-scientific, heteronomous valuations’ (1987b: 34-35) which, he argues, are always to the detriment of a field of enquiry insofar as it makes claims towards the value of its enquiries. In order to demonstrate this point, he poses the example of a doctor treating an epidemic or fighting cancer. Certainly, the doctor may well feel a profound empathy towards their patients. Indeed, the empathic will to help the sick may well be the primary reason why so many doctors become doctors in the first place. Nevertheless, the ability to treat patients will not come from the doctors’ empathy alone. On the contrary, the very therapeutic ability sought will rather come from the doctors’ own ability to detach themselves from emotional responsiveness, thereby more fully involving themselves in the study of the facts of the given illness. Certainly, it is medical science that constitutes these facts as facts. But for Elias, this does not make these facts any less real. As he argues:

What we call “science” is merely an expression of people’s ability to break the hold of the double-bind process in their relationships with inanimate nature, to lower, at the same time, the fantasy level of their knowledge, the danger level of natural events, and thus to put the double-bind process into reverse gear (1987b: 98).

The doctor, in other words, is in the best position to treat the patient when s/he is detached from any evaluation of the way in which ill people should be (i.e. not ill) and

focuses instead upon the way in which ill people are (i.e. ill). Sociology, for Elias, has yet to achieve such a high level of relative autonomy. For as long as it continues to be done on the basis of heteronomous values, it will not ever reach such heights. For Elias, heteronomous values intrude into the very make-up of any science, impeding its ability to progress and tarnishing its very claim toward scientificity. Sociological progress is only to be had when sociologists become ready and willing to leave their moral ideals and political beliefs outside of their vocation, precisely for the sake of the vocation. The temptation for the individual sociologist to politically intervene will always exist. Yet moving forward on the basis of heteronomous values (the wishes of the researcher, their hopes and ideas as to how society *should* be) is, for Elias and his followers, more inexcusable still. On the basis of such pseudo-sociology, tyranny and despotism may well take centre stage. With dogma taking the place of observation, Elias argues that:

We end up believing and feeling we actually *are* what we ought to be and what we may even want to be. More precisely, we confuse fact with ideal, that which *is* with that which *ought to be* (1978: 118).

Or as he goes on to say in the same book:

The sociologist should not be required or expected to express his convictions about how society *ought* to develop. Sociologists ought rather to free themselves from the notion that there is or even will be any necessary correspondence between the society they are investigating and their own social beliefs, their wishes and hopes, their moral predilections or their conceptions of what is just and humane (1978: 153).

This means that for Elias, the characteristic question of involvement is *what does it mean for me or for us?* Towards the other extreme, the characteristic question of

detachment is *what is it?* (1987b: 6). Historically, Elias argues, the natural sciences have become very successful in gradually achieving the level of detachment necessary to prioritize the latter, more detached, form of questioning. That the social sciences have been so unsuccessful in achieving a comparatively sufficient level of detachment is a serious problem in the eyes of figurational sociology, perhaps the most serious.

Elias insists that until heteronomous values are sufficiently pacified, it will never be possible to put the social sciences to the service of that which they attempt to understand. Elias' extended and at times ill-tempered criticism of what he calls 'the new deductionists' proliferating within the social sciences is not only that they are wrong to see things otherwise. More seriously, his criticism picks up on the fact that these 'new deductionists' are doubly wrong: they see *no* problem in allowing heteronomous values *to* take free reign (1984: 217-220). Much in the way that the cosmologist is not required to have a view on divinity, although they are fully entitled towards such views, Elias insists that the sociologist must strive to show how society works without expressing how they feel it should work. To quote Elias once more:

The stronger the hold of involved forms of thinking, and thus of the inability to distance oneself from traditional attitudes, the stronger the danger inherent in the situation created by peoples traditional attitudes towards each other and towards themselves. The greater the danger the more difficult it is for people to look at themselves, at each other and at the whole situation with a measure of detachment (1987b: xiv).

Figurational sociology therefore attempts to lift sociology out of various magico-mythical structures of thought towards more reality congruent appreciations of the world. The Comteian undertones are intentional. Sociology denies itself the potential

to properly understand and subsequently describe social processes of human interdependencies for as long as it relies upon presuppositions that simply do not stand up to the test of empirical evidence. For as long as sociology is content to buttress itself upon theological and/or metaphysical (read: heteronomous) foundations, it refuses itself the ability to even set sail on its voyage. For Elias, the sociological Odyssey therefore steers along very treacherous surroundings, sailing ‘between the Scylla of physics and the Charybdis of metaphysics’ (1978: 22, 166), ‘between the Scylla of “staticism”...and the Charybdis of the “historical relativism” which sees in history only constant transformation’ (2000: xii) and ‘between the Scylla of positivism and the Charybdis of apriorism’ (2000: 471).

The epic journey, riddled with obstacles, is made more difficult still by thoughts clouded in the dense fog of moral judgment, by so many ‘oughts’ masquerading as ‘ises’. Elias saw the sociologist as a destroyer of myths (1978: 50-70) and as such, if s/he is to be capable of fulfilling such a mandate, s/he must work only upon solid and sensible (i.e. non-mythical) foundations. Elias’s explicitly pronounced Comteian indebtedness is hence to his notion of sociology as a relatively autonomous science. Whilst Comte is said to have failed in empirically verifying this insight, he is said to be commendable for having succinctly stated the problem of sociology, a problem still currently in search of a convincing solution (1978: 33-47). As Elias argues elsewhere:

Neither physicists nor philosophers so far recognise the distinct order of human beings, which we call societies, as an order with structures and regularities of its own, as a semi-autonomous level of the Universe. To establish this fact requires a struggle against many established views and against the groups of people who are the holders of these established views (1982: 67).

The current campaign for figurational sociology might best be understood in terms of this continuing struggle. It is not only sociologists that stand to gain from success in this regard, but, it is claimed, society as such, as the following sections of this paper will go on to show. As the later sections of this paper will also show, however, this claim is not very well supported, despite the best efforts and intentions of many contemporary figurational sociologists.

The Eventually Engaged Policy of Present Non-Engagement

Up to this point, we have identified the main reasons as to why figurational sociology scorns the pronounced temptation and, perhaps, the prominent tendency for sociologists to adopt an evaluative stance towards the political affairs of the day. Yet we are by no means entitled to conclude from this partial reading that figurational sociology is therefore apolitical *as such*. Indeed, as Mennell (1977: 106) suggests, the opposite is in fact the case:

Underlying all Elias's writings, even those apparently least concerned with mundane practical problems, is a moral commitment to the calling of sociology and a belief that to understand the compelling nature of blind social processes is to increase the *chances* of controlling them.

Similarly, Kilminster and Wouters further underline the fact of figurational sociology's political emphasis when they say that Elias

in fact embraced a sociological programme in which illuminating the human social condition with a view to potentially changing society was *integral*...Elias wanted to encourage the development of adequate sociological

knowledge as an aid to understanding, and thus contributing towards controlling, blind social forces (1995: 96).

How can this be? Given what we have so far read of moral and political sentiments as values heteronomous from and as such detrimental to figurational sociology (and the social sciences more generally), how can it be said, with any degree of consistency, that figurational sociology is itself determined by a moral commitment? How can it be the case that figurational sociology has a place, even a foundational one, for that which it programmatically excludes as something of an interfering other (i.e. heteronomous values such as political commitments)? These questions demand further investigation.

Returning to our earlier example, it was not empathy that treated the patient but its suspension: the sympathetic doctor was best able to realize the intention to cure by resorting to a state of disinterest. By going through such apathy, the doctor's prior empathy was given the greatest chance of being meaningfully realized. The patient was best served in the process. In Elias's words, the doctor took a '*detour via detachment*' (1987b: 9, 35-36; see also Kilminster 1993: 92-3). Elias draws consequences from this scenario for sociology. He argues that a similar '*detour via detachment*' might be possible if sociologists were willing to suspend their beliefs of how society should be, instead focusing upon showing

how and why the interweaving of interdependent individuals forms a level of integration at which forms of organization, structures and processes cannot be deduced from the biological and psychological characteristics of the constituent individuals (1978: 47).

The investigative task of sociology is stated above. Its strategic goal in light of this task, Elias argues, is to make ‘*blind, uncontrolled processes more accessible to human understanding by explaining them*’ (1978: 154)⁵. The need for a long term perspective upon these matters becomes crucial. As Quilley and Loyal argue, when it comes to figurational sociology, ‘direct political commitments and involvements must be one step removed from the immediate process of sociological investigation’ (2005a: 815).

Or as Elias himself puts it:

Our primary task is to see that the human sciences provide us with a more adequate, better fitting faculty to diagnose the present events in the social universe. Once we have a more realistic diagnosis, we can really determine what we should do about things. One can only make a better fitting diagnosis if one has long-term processes in mind. They cannot be made, as is so often done today, simply by means of short-term, makeshift predictions (Elias 1998: 150).

Richard Kilminster looks forward to the future proliferation of morally and politically detached sociologies, assuring everybody that ‘the process of the development of sociology is not yet completed’ (2004: 38) and Loyal and Quilley insist that ‘over the long term, sociology will eventually underwrite more effective political interventions’ (2005a: 815). *This long term focus is the singularly most crucial point to be considered within any discussion of the politics of figurational sociology*⁶. In the long term sociology could reach the stage where, on the basis of having achieved a more complete understanding of human figurations in the round, it might *then* put its knowledge to use – not a moment before. For now, the exact nature of these interventions is not a concern nor should it even be borne in mind; the present task is to achieve a properly sociological investigative and explicative orientation.

Figurational sociology is not a project launched at the absolute expense of *any* political vision, therefore. What many consider to be its political silence might best be explained in terms of the patience it has to say something eventually, but only when the time is right; a concern *to not propose* the under-examined, *to not promote* the unproven and *to not speak* without the authority of certainty. Espoused for now is a sort of engagement by removal, a postponed political participation and the firm promise of a politics to come, at some stage, in the long term.

It is in this sense that Kilminster suggests that the figurational sociologist's political passion might for now be channeled into and expressed through the work he or she does (2004: 33). This would be to convert figurational sociology into a vocation. This is indeed the suggestion. Motivated by its patience for a politics to come, figurational sociology works forward with purpose, strengthened by the confidence that it will one day arrive at the point of being prepared to say something politically and morally definitive, in the long term. For now, however, the will to become involved is suspended, through the detour via detachment, and is instead placed at the vocational level. The figurational sociologist thereby becomes deeply involved in their work, for the sake of the politics that might one day come, adopting a disposition which Elias calls *secondary involvement* (1987b: lii).

Figurational sociologists admit that such a transition will not be easily had. A significant challenge lies ahead⁷. One need only consider the dynamics of double-bind scenarios, as Elias himself does (1987b: 99), to recognize the inherent difficulty of even suggesting the inauguration, not to mention the following through, of any project

which would hope to successfully detour via detachment. For now, we cannot know where the detour via detachment will take us, nor do we know whether a sufficient number of people are prepared to take such a detour. Nevertheless, for as long as unknowns such as these remain unknown to us, figurational sociology's eventual political affiliations will also.

This is a questionable position. Before arguing *why* it is questionable, I will first of all lay the final foundations for my argument by alluding towards two distinct and separate ways in which figurational sociology has discussed social processes with respect to *control*. On the one hand there exists an empirically derived, retrospectively focused understanding of control. Control, in this sense, is a general affair which social scientists can make no special claims towards. On the other hand, there exists an understanding of control which is speculatively derived and prospectively focused. Control, in this sense, is a general affair whilst also being something which the social scientist possesses special knowledge about.

Control as a Socially Prevalent, Really Existing Force

For anybody that has ever taken even so much as a passing interest in the writings of figurational sociologists, the first understanding of control requires little introduction. This is the understanding of control figurational sociologists derive from the empirical observation that individuals have gradually formed a disposition to manage their own conduct, without necessarily having to be coerced into doing so. For figurational sociologists, the manner in which individuals have come to learn to restrain their own

actions is itself an empirically demonstrable sociological phenomenon. Let *The Civilizing Process* and indeed the entire figurational oeuvre stand testament to this claim. It is patently not the case that what Elias called ‘The Civilizing Process’ was (and indeed continues to be) something imposed upon each individual, sociologist or otherwise, as if from the outside. For in as much as the Civilizing Process is an historical-sociological phenomenon, it is also a psychological, one might even say an existential, one. Within civilized societies, each individual learns to become civilized. The issue is not one of kind but rather one of degree. As Elias argues:

There is no zero-point of civilizing processes, no point at which human beings are uncivilized and as it were begin to be civilized. No human being lacks the capacity for self-restraint. No human group could function for any length of time whose adults failed to develop, within the wild and at first totally unrestrained little beings, as which humans are born, patterns of self-regulation and self-restraint [*sic*]. What changes in the course of a civilizing process are the social patterns of individual self-restraint and the manner in which they are built into the individual person in the form of what one now calls ‘conscience’ or perhaps ‘reason’ (1992: 146)⁸.

On this topic of each and every individual’s capacity towards self-restraint, Elias discusses what he calls ‘the triad of basic controls – control over natural processes, over social processes and, individually, over the processes of their own selves’ (1987b: 66). Elias shows elsewhere (1987c) that humans have gradually learned to control their own emotions towards certain ends, resulting in the proliferation of various scenarios of what he calls the *controlled de-controlling of emotional controls* (see also Wouters 1987, 1986)⁹. This term designates the sort of scenario wherein individuals become so aware of the existence of formal or implicit constraints upon their own behavior, *and* the behavior of those with whom they are associating, that the rules which usually govern ‘civilized’ behavior become gradually relaxed.

Competitive sport, as Elias and Dunning (1986) show, is perhaps the most obvious modern example of such a controlled decontrolling of emotions: its very existence so vividly illustrates the capacity of many individuals to be *simultaneously* emotionally overawed and nonetheless internally governed by a variety of elaborate rules of conduct.

It so follows that one does not have to be an intellectual, social scientific or otherwise, in order to be capable of controlling their actions towards civilized ends. Kilminster suggests that this very insistence upon every human being's capacity for self-restraint represents one of the major distinctions that can be made between the work of Elias and that of Karl Mannheim, for example. For Kilminster, Mannheim emphasizes the need for social planners because he (Mannheim) firmly believes that individuals do not possess the heightened capacity for self-constraint which Elias attributes to them. The result of this being that for Kilminster, Mannheim's model of control implies a 'perhaps greater authoritarianism than he probably would have admitted' (1993: 104).

As Kilminster puts it in more forthright terms still:

Elias did not share Mannheim's commitment of sociology to the guiding of practical measures to effect changes in the wider society, within the tradition of liberalism. Rather, he took a longer-term view and had a more circumspect attitude towards the possibilities of controlling blind social forces through planning (1993: 83).

The mentioning of this 'more circumspect attitude' paves the way towards a discussion of figurational sociology's second understanding of control with which I am presently concerned. Whilst it is of course the case that the emphasis of figurational sociology has traditionally been upon the demarcation of the limits of

control, rather than the establishment and maintenance of it, there are also various occasions where figurational sociology nonetheless insists upon a certain notion of social planning which is undertaken by specialists. It is towards an elaboration upon the significance of occasions like these which this paper now turns.

Control as a Socially Stratified, Spectrally Possible Force

As has been already argued, figurational sociologists believe that it is crucial to *eventually* adopt a politically facilitative role. This politically facilitative role cannot be adopted just yet, however. The facts are simply not yet ready to hand. A sustained period of evaluative detachment and patient sociological investigation are required in order to bring them about. Any worthwhile social policy can be derived only out of these facts. Such a factually derived social policy, for its part, will eventually be oriented towards achieving better *control* over networks of human interdependencies. Or, to reassert in the language of figurational sociology: sociology, having eventually become a relatively more autonomous discipline, having taken a prolonged detour via detachment, on the basis of a generalized commitment to a state of secondary involvement, will fulfill its evaluative promise by aiding the achievement of the end of control. Elias maintains this position throughout his work:

Perhaps by understanding better the compelling forces at work in a configuration such as that of the established and the outsiders one may in time be able *to devise practical measures capable of controlling them* [Emphasis added] (Elias and Scotson, 1994: 173).

The task of sociological research is *to make these blind, uncontrolled processes more accessible to human understanding* by explaining them, and to

enable people to orientate themselves within the interwoven social web – which, though created by their own needs and actions, is still opaque to them – and so better to control it [Emphasis in the original] (Elias, 1978: 154).

We can only elicit sociological knowledge which is sufficiently adequate *to be of use in solving the acute problems of society* if, in posing and solving sociological problems, we cease giving precedence to preconceived notions of what the solutions ought to be over the investigation of what is [Emphasis added] (Elias, 2000: 460).

These excerpts offer some quite telling axioms. In the first, we learn that sociology might eventually devise practical mechanisms for controlling social configurations. In the second, we learn that the task of sociological research is to help people to understand the social web, so that they can better orient themselves within it. And in the third, we learn that sociological knowledge, properly gathered, can both pose and solve the acute problems of society. Elsewhere, in an interview with Peter Ludes, Elias is asked whether he believes intellectuals, especially social scientists, should work out alternatives to the predominant patterns of social life. Elias responds in the affirmative and illustrates how this might come about by reciting a fable which he entitles ‘The Great Struggle of the Intellectuals’ (Elias 1984: 231-241)¹⁰. This fable is perhaps the closest Elias ever came to making a positive assertion of what he felt a social utopia would be like. Like all fables, of course, it has to be taken with a pinch of salt. Pinch of salt in hand then, what is perhaps most apparent about this particular social utopia is the significance that Elias gives to specialist intellectuals within its decision making mechanism¹¹. Figurational sociology’s need for specialist intellectuals in the constitution of social strategy is elsewhere underscored by Gousdblom when he remarks:

Clearly there is a need in contemporary societies for specialists who explore social processes, who fill in the gaps in our knowledge of the changing social universe, and who expose disguised mythologies...Until now, no group has managed to come into its own as a professional group with sufficiently developed institutional safeguards against the intrusion of heteronomous evaluations (1977b: 83/1987: 335).

It is clear that the sociologist, more precisely the sociologist of the future, is given a privileged place within these writings. Irrespective of whether the issue is control or the facilitation of control, it is an issue for the eventually existing sociological specialist. These specialists will eventually achieve a standpoint from which they can get a better view of social processes. Accordingly, they will be both those who really know the potential controllability of social processes and also those who should be prioritized within any discussion of social control. These specialists, these social scientists of the future, will eventually be in a position to 'solve the acute problems of society' and to 'devise practical measures capable of controlling them'. Nowhere does Elias argue that the human capacity towards self-restraint is a product of sociology. But it seems that the sociologists of the future will eventually become producers of just this form of practical knowledge. This is a promise which figural sociology has made, a promise which its specialists will seemingly deliver upon in time.

Such an understanding of control is not at all easily squared with the understanding of control outlined in the previous section. There, control was a descriptive phenomenon derived out of empirical observation. Here, control is a prescriptive phenomenon derived out of self-confident speculation. There, control was a capacity ascertainable by human beings in general. Here, control is something ascertainable by the sociologist of the future. There, control was an equitably distributed privilege of

human beings as such. Here, control is a privilege towards which specialist intellectuals will eventually become entitled. These two separate concepts of control are in no way complimentary. On the contrary, as I will show in the following section, one notion undermines the other: control cannot be consistently understood both ways. I will demonstrate why this is the case by raising a series of related questions to which figurational sociology has yet to offer any satisfactory answers.

Questioning the Politics of Control

The Harmonization Question

We know that figurational sociology offers a long term, process oriented understanding of control. Furthermore, we also know from figurational sociologists that control is not to be understood in absolute terms but rather in relative terms, that control isn't simply a matter of coercion and that individuals have gradually developed the capacity for self-restraint. But at the same time, we are also told that social scientists might eventually be in a position to aid, perhaps even direct social processes, towards particular ends. As Stephen Mennell once said

Somewhere in *The Civilizing Process* Elias speculates that the potential for planning social life is increasing...but the general implication of the game models runs against that: there is certainly room for further discussion here (1987: 560).

For the sake of furthering this discussion, the first question I would like to ask is the following: how can the assertion that individuals have the capacity for self-restraint be

squared with the assertion that social scientists will eventually be in a position to help, even direct, social processes towards certain worthwhile constraints? To put it otherwise, if individuals are gradually developing the capacity towards self-restraint then what need do they have for specialists in this area? And on the other hand, if such specialists are required then what is the point in highlighting the fact that individuals are capable of self-restraint if they are always going to require such specialists, irrespective of their own capacities?

If there is already control then control is not necessarily needed. And if there is not yet enough control then more control is perhaps needed. Figurational sociology, for its part, seems to assert both that there is sufficient control (in the sense that individuals have the capacity towards self-restraint) and that more control is needed (in the sense that social scientists will eventually help effectuate appropriate measures towards control). It is not at all clear at present how the latter concept of control is in any way harmonious with the former.

The Speculation Question

The assertion that *any* body of knowledge will be one day capable of solving *the acute problems of society* is a reassuring one. One can certainly draw comfort from figurational sociology's promise of a control to come. In the long run, social science will have developed tools that will facilitate in the creation of more effective political strategies (more effective than a politics built upon the foundation of the present day, not sufficiently detached social sciences). Such optimistic clairvoyance, a

clairvoyance which posits the future as the proof of its politics, must, however, at some point deliver upon its promise for it not to be found wanting. Put differently: in order for figurational sociology's prophecies to be seen as sound, the future must one day come and this future must bring with it figurational sociology's much anticipated, continuously promised yet frequently postponed coherent political position. If such a position is not eventually achieved then all talk of detouring via detachment will have necessarily amounted to nothing.

Figurational sociologists believe that the day of a politically oriented social science will eventually come, even if only in a facilitative role. But this belief, like so many other beliefs as to how the future will be, is not and cannot be supported by empirical evidence. Certainly, this particular belief is informed by faith in the idea that the trends of the past will continue into the future. But there are no absolute guarantees that these trends will actually continue into the future. One can either believe that they will continue, or one can believe otherwise. Advocates of figurational sociology, for their part, choose the path of optimism. Pessimists, it seems, are to persuade themselves as to the virtues of patience. Insight into the form which the future politics of figurational sociology, facilitative or otherwise, will assume will be given in the long term. Until then it seems that pessimists are required to believe, along with figurational sociologists, that the detour via detachment is one worth taking.

Such a take on politics certainly demands something akin to a leap of faith. My second question, then, is the following: in the final analysis, how do figurational sociologists know, without any doubt, that the detour via detachment will be

ultimately worth taking? I say without any doubt because figurational sociology must be certain that benefits are to be found in taking the detour via detachment in order to justify its present day political silence. This is not a criterion which I am imposing onto figurational sociology. It is, as has been shown, rather the very manner in which figurational sociology judges itself insofar as its tendency towards social evaluation and manipulation is concerned. It is only because politics (or any sort of social intervention) is held as being a long term concern *that* figurational sociologists eschew present day social policy.

The Implementation Question

As has been shown, Elias repeatedly affirmed his outright reluctance to name the issues which the sociologists of the future would eventually address; his followers seem quite content to follow suit. In this sense, it is very difficult to speak of the politics of figurational sociology other than to say that they are of a derivative nature. We do not even have much material at our disposal with which we might fathom a guess as to what figurational sociology's politics might eventually be like, so consistent are its representatives on this very point. All of this because the politics of figurational sociology are intentionally concealed in conscious anticipation of rigorous scientific data, out of which a politics might *then* be constructed. Social science will not, indeed cannot, be directed by non-scientific values. Detached investigation must precede any sort of practical intervention.

Assuming for now that figurational sociology's proposed separation between autonomous and heteronomous values can actually be made in a non-contradictory manner, the need to consider the transition from a stage of description towards a stage of implementation must be embraced at some stage. In simultaneously putting the problems of intervention's content, save 'control', off for another day *and* through insisting that intervention's form will be such that it will be capable of '*solving the acute problems in society*', it is necessarily implied that at some point, somebody will have to take figurational sociology's politics seriously.

But in explaining the social world, the sociologist does not automatically form a natural disposition towards controlling it. Explanation and control are two distinct and separate tasks. Belief in the contrary does not make the contrary the case. The will to intervention must be inaugurated before it can be practiced. That being the case, there has not yet been such an inauguration done in the name of figurational sociology. Neither in Elias's work, nor in the work of his followers, have the many serious challenges consequential to the sociologist's transition from observer to controller/control facilitator, a transition directly implied by their writings, been adequately addressed.

My third question, therefore, is two-fold and of a primarily tactical orientation. On the one hand, what will be the institutional framework that will grant to figurational sociology the position which it sees as necessary to itself insofar as control facilitation is concerned? On the other hand, how will this position be obtained and secured by figurational sociologists? I wonder whether we are to take Elias's version of a social

utopia, as laid down within his interview with Peter Ludes, as indicative in this regard. If so, this third question would then focus upon the question of whether such a utopia is itself worth striving towards. If not, this third question would then focus upon the need for a consideration of how figurational sociology's ideals are to be implemented.

The Justification Question

The fourth question I want to ask has already been posed, in a round about way, by the work of Arnason (1987, see also Bogner 1987 *esp.*: 268-279). As far as I can tell, it has not yet been adequately addressed by any figurational sociologist. Put simply, the question is this: *why control?* In other words why, despite figurational sociology's moral and political procrastination, does there exist such a normative casting of *control* throughout the writings of Elias (and also his followers)? What is so undeniably wonderful about control that it requires no justification? Why is it that we can all seemingly agree that control is that which the social sciences should eventually strive towards?

As Arnason (1987: 450) points out, 'the concept of control is not culturally neutral'. For this very reason, figurational sociology's goal of control must itself be justified by figurational sociologists. Elias's position on social control seems to have recourse to one of the many heteronomous values which, as has already been demonstrated, he was at pains to exorcise from his project *for the sake of* the project. When Elias and his followers predict a controlling sociology we are entitled to ask *control for what?* Control towards what? Control away from what? Control in the name of what? Whose

control? Who controls? Who is controlled? And what is it that justifies the idea of 'control' as the hopefully one day obtained achievement of sociology and, indeed, of the social sciences more generally?

I think that if it is to be consistent, figurational sociology cannot answer such questions without conceding something else along the way, this precisely because figurational sociology seeks to create a space for itself that is autonomous *from* just these very questions. Yet in raising the issue of 'control' as an issue with which sociologists might be one day concerned, Elias implicated every single one of these heteronomous values within the very structure of that which apparently functions by keeping them outside (i.e. figurational sociology). On initially studying the works of figurational sociology we find that the proper place of moral and political questions is not within figurational sociology since reflection upon these very issues is considered detrimental to sociology's existence. And yet, when we study the matter more carefully, we find that in seeking the possibility of social control and naming it as an eventual goal, the very elements excluded from the sociological edifice become its most basic, constituent parts. These questions simply cannot be avoided, in other words. Either a case is to be made for why control is an autonomous value of sociology. Or else control is to be constituted as a value heteronomous to sociology, and dismissed accordingly.

The Contradiction Question

The final question I want to raise returns to the discussion invited by Stephen Menell with which this section opened. Within this particular piece, Menell was responding to the point raised by Hans Haferkamp (1987a, see also 1987b) concerning the premature undermining of social planning within Elias's work. For Haferkamp, figurational sociologists cannot dismiss planning actions *a priori*, precisely because the question of whether social planning can be successful is an empirical question. For me, the question is not so much whether Elias is right or wrong in de-prioritizing social prescription. My final question is rather to ask whether figurational sociology is actually being consistent *with itself* when it posits the goal of control as a goal towards which it should aspire. For me, it is questionable as to whether an emphasis upon a social control to come is in any way consistent with the core of the figurational project.

In particular, the idea of the sociologist as a controller is not at all tenable within Elias's own work which is at pains to emphasize the blind, unplanned, non-teleological course of social development: 'From plans arising yet unplanned. By purpose moved, yet purposeless' (1991: 64) as he once so eloquently put it. The statistical table indexing the complexity of societies outlined in *What is Sociology?* (1978: 100-103) or Elias's critique of the apparently fraudulent presuppositions embedded within 'development studies' sociology (1978: 145-156) are enough to suggest that he would be the first to banish the idea of a thing called 'society' being a controllable object from his own work.

Yet Elias's stance against sociology as strategy is more deep seated still. The unplanned, unintentional and non-voluntarist development of human societies is, for most if not *all* of his commentators, one of the core foundations upon which his entire project is built (e.g. Fletcher, 1997; Goudsblom, 1977; Goudsblom and Mennell, 1998; Mennell, 1998; Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998; Smith, 2000 and van Krieken, 1998, also see esp. Mennell, 1977 *pace* Merton, 1936). If human figurations might one day be the subject of conscious control then social development is, in the final analysis, *not* blind and unplanned and hence, Elias's utopian predictions (i.e. sociology might one day be in a position to control society) bear no relation to his premises (i.e. social development is blind and unplanned). A programmatic principle cannot be simultaneously true *and* false, figurational sociology cannot have it both ways. Either society has the capacity for being controlled - in which case figurational sociology loses one of its core foundations. Or else society does not have the capacity for being controlled – in which case there is no longer a need for sociological specialists. In either case, as I have already said, something has to give way.

Conclusion

Figurational sociology sees itself to be best serving any future political interventions it might one day make by not formally considering the nature of these future interventions for now. Rigorous sociological investigation serves to suppress moral and political allegiances in what Elias calls a secondary involvement. Figurational sociology realizes its political affiliations by taking a detached detour via secondary vocational involvement. For the time being it must stammer at the point of policy,

indeed, on issues of policy it insists upon remaining without anything to say. Furthermore, it will have no need to apologize in this regard: moral and political silence is a necessary condition of sociological investigation as far as Elias is concerned; heteronomous concerns serve as impediments to the possibility of sociology becoming autonomous from other disciplines. Without sociology achieving a relatively high level of autonomy, there will be nothing justifying the socio-political interventions it eventually makes.

At the very same time, the hope of bringing human interrelationships under the conscious control of those who understand the manner in which they function (i.e. the sociologists-to-come) underpins all of Elias's work. Figural sociology does see itself as one day being capable of making well informed political interventions. It is not solely scientific curiosity that nourishes the figural sociologist's imagination. Secondary involvement is itself a way towards creating the possibilities of appropriate interventions. The will to action undeniably exists but it is temporarily suspended for the sake of sufficiently developing the proper capacity towards intervention. Elias's position on the potential malleability of society was done in the name of a sociology that does not presently exist. But, as has been shown in this paper, these sociologists to come will at some stage have to engage with moral and political questions if they hope to implement moral and political controls. On this unresolved issue, an issue which Elias doubtless recognized yet simultaneously denied, a lot of work is to be done.

This brings me full circle back to the political campaign mentioned at the beginning of this paper: the campaign for figurational sociology. Bearing in mind Loyal and Quilleys' Eliasian inspired polemic for the 'necessity of a scientific sociology' (2005b: 849), I would suggest that this 'necessity' itself requires more in the way of justification and less in the way of affirmation. Figurational sociologists must confront the problematic place of the two distinct and separate ideas of controlling society evident within Elias' work, particularly in the face of the fact that his sociology denies itself the very idea of the socially transcendent agency directly suggested by the latter concept of social control discussed above. If we are to have any faith in figurational sociology's muted promise of a politics to come, we are collectively entitled to a broader discussion of what form that politics might assume. Only when figurational sociology becomes more forthcoming in this regard may it go about the business of affirming its own political significance in good faith.

Figurational sociologists do not imagine their work as eternally dwelling upon the task of interpreting the social world. At some point they too will want to play their hand in changing it. Into what will the social world be changed once figurational sociology reaches its promised level of sophistication? The question remains in search of a solution – attempting to work towards it would doubtlessly strengthen the manifesto behind and campaign for figurational sociology.

Footnotes

1. That said, Mennell himself points out in his Preface “Elias feels that his work speaks directly for itself” (1998: x). Perhaps Elias’s work is itself the best introduction to Elias’s work.
2. One could also look towards the Norbert Elias Foundation (see <http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/>), the seemingly discontinued *Figurations* newsletter (see http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/index_ND.htm) as well as the fact that the most recent ‘Elias in the 21st Century’ conference (Leicester: 2006) announced plans for the launching of *Anthroposphere: A Journal for the Human Sciences*, an interdisciplinary journal which would be largely guided by Eliasian concepts, for further evidence as to the existence of a campaign for figurational sociology.

It should also be said that whilst the case is presently being made for figurational sociology, figurational sociologists themselves refuse to cast Elias’s work with recourse to ‘the old great man theory’ (Elias, 1971: 7, c.f. Loyal and Quilley, 2005b: 843). Offering neither a sociological starting point nor a theoretical system without precedent, Stephen Loyal and Stephen Quilley point out that in many ways “Elias’s value lies, somewhat paradoxically, in his profound unoriginality” (2005b: 243). Genius, for Elias, is not genesis, it is not the property of an isolated individual projected onto its environment but something produced between individuals bound to one another within a spatially and temporally dynamic figuration. Figurational sociology bids an un-fond farewell to the idea of the autonomous individual as locus of meaning or starting point of enquiry.

Elias continually disparaged such ego-centric (1978, 14-15) images of man as *homo clausus* (2000: 472). In his Adorno prize acceptance speech he proudly acknowledges the reception of a torch from his predecessors that he will, in turn, carry forward to his successors (1977: 67, c.f. Korte, 2001: 18). Elsewhere, he insists that the “way in which an individual person goes about thinking, perceiving, or performing scientific work is grounded in the thought processes of previous generations” (1978: 37). Elias’s study of Mozart is a pertinent point of reference in this regard (1993) as is his analysis of a letter from Goethe to a friend regarding the remarkably great mind of the 24 year old ‘Ampère’ (2000: 22-26).

3. Goudsblom (1977b: 80/1986: 331) argues:

Subject to an unplanned and apparently uncontrollable process of increasing specialization, sociology, and indeed social science in general, is badly in need of a unifying central theory or perspective which might serve as a guide for the various specialisms and which might help to show how they are related to each other. Elias’s work constitutes a deliberate attempt to counteract the forces that threaten to break up the social sciences into a congeries of disconnected fields. It represents an effort to rescue sociology from disintegration through specialization. No matter how badly such an attempt is needed, it is bound to meet with great resistance. It goes against vested interests in specialization, and runs counter to dominant habits of thought

4. In the same article Pels goes on to argue:

Perhaps more than any of his accused, Elias himself has been *homo clausus*, turning his back upon an intellectual world which would never listen to this particular stranger’s voice. His followers have been quite successful in setting up a closed shop in their particular corner of the social-scientific world (p. 182).

Towards which Mennell (1991: 187-8) responds by saying:

I do not believe, *pace* Pels, that the research of those sociologists influenced by Elias proceeds without reference to and engagement with other intellectual standpoints... I wonder whether the openness of the 'Eliasians' to ideas from many other disciplines, and the total absence of sociological chauvinism among them, is something that gets up the noses of more narrowly discipline-proud sociologists?

5. For Richard Kilminster, the very fact that figurational sociology gives pride of place to a consideration of politics should not really be that surprising. As he argues

There is a forgotten 'evaluative' dimension, born in the German tradition of the sociology of knowledge. It has its origins as a moral-political strategy, a wager for a strong scientific sociology as a counterweight to the spiraling social and ideological conflicts of the 1930s. Sociology can evaluate the feasibility, credibility and desirability of reform programs put forward by political groups and in political ideologies and illuminate the roots of conflict. At the same time, coming from this tradition it means almost certainly that Elias takes it for granted, hence does not always bother to keep repeating, that sociology can be comparative, empirical inquiries into real societies, also significantly reframe so-called 'ethical' questions posed by philosophers. It is thus obvious that Elias is no practitioner of any simple-minded 'value-free' sociology (1991: 173).

6. Elsewhere Elias argues:

No doubt a long-term perspective demands a greater capacity for distancing oneself for a while from the situation of the moment. But it also opens the way towards a greater detachment from the wishes and fears of the moment, and thus from time-bound fantasies. It increases the chance of a more fact-oriented diagnosis (1987b: xv).

And:

At present the emphasis on short-term forecasting threatens to stifle basic or long-term research and theory building in sociology... We need more basic research into the largely unknown human universe, in order to find out *why* things have happened, and *why* they are happening today (1998: 149-50).

7. As well as the challenge being recognized as significant, the stakes are believed to be nothing short of grand. Consider:

Galileo is still remembered as an exponent of the struggle of physics for autonomy from powerful extra-scientific ideals, in that case particularly the religious type. As far as can be seen, representatives of sociological theories, and indeed of theories in the human sciences generally, are as yet hardly aware that an analogous struggle for autonomy lies ahead of them. But in their case the principal fight for emancipation has the character of a struggle for autonomy from the political and social ideals of the day (Elias 1987a: 225).

8. As Helmut Kuzmics insists:

In addition to self-*coercion*, which has been forced upon the individual from outside, Elias has always stressed the importance of self-*control*. Socialization under civilised conditions uses up a lot of time and other resources. Elias has often been criticised as

if his image of man were purely reactive, as if his model of socialisation only involves conditioning through fear and coercion and leaves no room for the pleasures of learning. This sweeping judgment is misguided (1987: 523).

9. Cas Wouters (1987: 426) traces the expression back to a series of lectures Elias gave at the University of Amsterdam during 1970-1971.

10. In another interview, this time with Johan Goudsblom, Elias again gestures towards the necessity for sociologists to play their hand in controlling social processes:

It is necessary to form a theory so that, in the future, we may be able to judge more closely what kind of restraints are required for complicated societies to function and what type of restraints have been merely built into us to bolster up the authority of certain ruling groups. What I have done is not enough, it is only one step. We must find out more about it. We do not know. I do not believe that we can live entirely without restraints, as some communes today try to do. But I firmly believe that the ways in which restraints are built in today are wasteful and uneconomical (Elias 1998: 145).

11. This is obvious from the text of the interview itself. Micael Björk (2005: 58) suggests that within this particular interview:

Elias asserted that intellectuals should stimulate a detached involvement in the body politic. He did not think that intellectuals were everything, but he thought that in a period of crisis they could make a difference, 'backed by a wide public opinion to make governments think twice' (Elias, 1984: 287).

References

- Arnason, Johann (1987) 'Figurational Sociology as a Counter-Paradigm', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 429-456.
- Bauman, Zygmunt (1979) 'The phenomenon of Norbert Elias', *Sociology*, 13, 117-125.
- Björk, Micael (2005) 'A plea for detached involvement: Norbert Elias on intellectuals and political imagination in inter-war Germany' *History of the Human Sciences*, 18(2), 43-61.
- Bogner, Artur (1987) 'Elias and the Frankfurt School', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 249-285.
- Coser, Lewis (1979) 'Review of *What is Sociology?*', *American Journal of Sociology*, 86(1), 192-194.
- Dunning, Eric (1989) 'A Response to R.J. Robinson's, "The Civilizing Process": Some Remarks on Elias's Social History', *Sociology*, 23(2), 299-307.
- Dunning, Eric (1992) "'Agency' and 'Structure' in the Work of Norbert Elias' in Eric Dunning and Chris Rojek (Eds.) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, pp. 240-244, London: Macmillan.
- Dunning, Eric (1996) 'On problems of the emotions in sport and leisure: critical and counter-critical comments on the conventional and figurational sociologies of sport and leisure', *Leisure Studies*, 15(3), 185-207.
- Dunning, Eric (1999) *Sport Matters: Sociological Studies of Sport, Violence and Civilization*, London: Routledge.
- Dunning, Eric, Dominic Malcolm and Ivan Waddington (Eds.) (2006) *Sport Histories: Figurational Studies in the Development of Modern Sport*, London: Routledge.
- Dunning, Eric and Stephen Mennell (1979) "'Figurational Sociology': Some Critical Comments on Zygmunt Bauman's, 'The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias'", *Sociology*, 13 (September), 497-501.
- Dunning, Eric and Stephen Mennell (1998) 'Elias on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust: on the balance between 'civilizing' and 'decivilizing' trends in the social development of Western Europe, *The British Journal of Sociology*, 49(3), 339-357.
- Dunning, Eric and Stephen Mennell (2003) 'Editors Introduction' in Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell (Eds.) *Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought: Norbert Elias*, pp. ix-xxxvii, London: Sage.
- Dunning, Eric and Stephen Mennell (Eds.) (2003) *Sage Masters of Modern Social Thought: Norbert Elias*, London: Sage.
- Dunning, Eric and Chris Rojek (Eds.) (1992) *Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process: Critique and Counter-Critique*, London: Macmillan.
- Elias, Norbert (1935/1998) 'The Kitsch Style and the Age of Kitsch', in Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell (Eds.) *The Norbert Elias Reader*, pp. 26-35, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (1956) 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 7(3), 226-252.
- Elias, Norbert (1971) 'Sociology of Knowledge: New Perspectives', *Sociology* 5(2), 149-68; 5(3): 355-70.
- Elias, Norbert (1977) 'Drake en Doughty: De ontwikkeling van een conflict. [Drake and Doughty: The development of a conflict]', *De Gids*, 140 (5/6), 223-237.
- Elias, Norbert (1978) *What is Sociology?* Trans. Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Elias, Norbert (1982) 'Scientific Establishments', in Norbert Elias, Herminio Martins and Richard Whitley (Eds.) *Scientific Establishments and Hierarchies*, pp. 3-69, Dordrecht: D. Reidel Publishing Company.
- Elias, Norbert (1984) 'Knowledge and Power: an Interview with Peter Ludes' in Nico Stehr and Volker Meja (Eds.) *Society and Knowledge: Contemporary Perspectives in the Sociology of Knowledge and Science* (Second Revised Edition), pp. 203-241. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.

- Elias, Norbert (1987a) 'The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 223-247.
- Elias, Norbert (1987b) *Involvement and Detachment*, Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (1987c) 'On Human Beings and Their Emotions: A Process-Sociological Essay' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 339-361.
- Elias, Norbert (1991) *The Society of Individuals*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (1993) *Mozart: Portrait of a Genius*, London: Polity Press.
- Elias, Norbert (1994) *Reflections on a Life*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Elias, Norbert (1998) 'An Interview in Amsterdam' in Johan Goudsblom and Stephen Mennell (Eds.) *The Norbert Elias Reader*, pp. 141-151, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (2000) *The Civilizing Process – Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. Trans. Johan Goudsblom, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Elias, Norbert (2005a) *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias (Volume One: Early Writings)*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, Norbert (2005b) *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias (Volume Two: The Court Society)*. Trans. Edmund Jephcott, Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, Norbert (2007a) *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias (Volume Eight: Involvement and Detachment)*, Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, Norbert (2007b) *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias (Volume Nine: An Essay on Time)*, Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, Norbert (2007c) *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*. Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, Norbert and Eric Dunning (1986) *The Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, London: Blackwells.
- Elias, Norbert and John. L. Scotson (1994) *The Established and the Outsiders – A Sociological Enquiry into Community Problems*, London: Sage.
- Featherstone, Mike (1987) 'Norbert Elias and Figurational Sociology: Some Prefatory Remarks', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 197-211.
- Fletcher, Jonathan (1997) *Violence and Civilization – An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Fullbrook, Mary (Ed.) (2007) *Un-civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias*. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Goudsblom, Johan (1977a) *Sociology in the Balance: A Critical Essay*. Oxford: Blackwell
- Goudsblom, Johan (1977b) 'Responses to Norbert Elias's work in England, Germany, the Netherlands and France' in P. R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (Eds.) *Human Figurations: Essays For [Aufsätze für] Norbert Elias*, pp. 37-98, Amsterdam: Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift.
- Goudsblom, Johan (1987) 'The Sociology of Norbert Elias: Its Resonance and Significance', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 323-37.
- Goudsblom, Johan (1995) 'Elias and Cassirer, Sociology and Philosophy', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 121-126.
- Goudsblom, Johan and Stephen Mennell (Eds.) (1998) *The Norbert Elias Reader*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Haferkamp, Hans (1987a) 'From the Intra-State to the Inter-State Civilizing Process?', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 545-57.
- Haferkamp (1987b) 'Reply to Stephen Mennell', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 562.
- Horne, John and David Jary (1987) 'The Figurational Sociology of Sport of Elias and Dunning: An Exposition and Critique', in John Horne, David Jary and Alan Tomlinson (Eds.), *Sport, Leisure and Social Relations*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Kilminster, Richard (1987) 'Introduction to Elias', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 213-22.
- Kilminster, Richard (1991) 'Evaluating Elias', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8, 165-176.
- Kilminster, Richard (1993) 'Norbert Elias and Karl Mannheim: Closeness and Distance',

- Theory, Culture & Society*, 10, 81-114.
- Kilminster, Richard (2004) 'From Distance to Detachment: Knowledge and Self-Knowledge in Elias's Theory of Involvement and Detachment' in S. Loyal and S. Quilley (Eds.), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, pp. 25-41, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kilminster, Richard and Cas Wouters (1995) 'From Philosophy to Sociology: Elias and the Neo-Kantians (A response to Benjo Maso)', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 81-120.
- Korte, Herman (2001) 'Perspectives on a Long Life: Norbert Elias and the Process of Civilization' in T. Salumets (Ed.), *Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies*, pp. 13-31, London: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Kuzmics, Helmut (1987) 'Civilization, State and Bourgeois Society: The Theoretical Contribution of Norbert Elias', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 515-31.
- Layder, Derek (1986) 'Social Reality as Figuration: A Critique of Elias's Conception of Sociological Analysis', *Sociology*, 20(3), 367-386.
- Layder, Derek (1994) *Understanding Social Theory*. London: Sage.
- Loyal, Stephen and Stephen Quilley (Eds.) (2004) *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Loyal, Stephen and Quilley, Stephen (2005a) 'Eliasian Sociology as a 'Central Theory' for the Human Sciences', *Current Sociology*, 53(5), 807-828.
- Loyal, Stephen and Quilley, Stephen (2005b) 'Science, Cumulative Knowledge, Secondary Involvement and Synthesis: A Reply to Our Critics', *Current Sociology*, 53(5), 843-850.
- Maso, Benjo (1995a) 'Elias and the Neo-Kantians: Intellectual Backgrounds of *The Civilizing Process*', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 43-79.
- Maso, Benjo (1995b) 'The Different Theoretical Layers of *The Civilizing Process*: A Response to Goudsblom and Kilminster & Wouters', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 12, 127-45.
- Mennell, Stephen (1977) "'Individual" action and its "social" consequences in the work of Elias', in P. R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (Eds.) *Human Figurations: Essays For [Aufsätze für] Norbert Elias*, pp. 99-109, Amsterdam: Amsterdam Sociologisch Tijdschrift.
- Mennell, Stephen (1987) 'Comment on Haferkamp', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 4, 559-61.
- Mennell, Stephen (1991) 'Reply to Pels and Kilminster', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8, 185-189.
- Mennell, Stephen (1998) *Norbert Elias – An Introduction*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Mennell, Stephen (2006) 'Elias and the counter-ego: personal recollections', *History of the Human Sciences*, 19(2), 73-91.
- Mennell, Stephen and Goudsblom, Johan (1997) 'Civilizing Processes – Myth or Reality? A Comment on Duerr's Critique of Elias', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 39(4), 727-731.
- Merton, Robert K. (1936) 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action', *American Sociological Review*, 1(6), 894-904.
- Mouzelis, Nicos (1993) 'On Figuration Sociology', *Theory, Culture and Society*, 10, 239-253.
- Pels, Dick (1991) 'Elias and the Politics of Theory', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 8, 177-183.
- Rojek, Chris (1986) 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment in the Writings of Norbert Elias', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 37(4), 584-596.
- Rojek, Chris (2004) 'An Anatomy of the Leicester School of Sociology: An Interview with Eric Dunning', *Journal of Classical Sociology*, 4(3), 337-359.
- Salumets, Thomas (Ed.) (2002) *Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies*, Quebec: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Sica, Alan (1984) 'Sociogenesis versus sociogenesis: the unique sociology of Norbert Elias', *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, 9, 49-78.
- Smith, Dennis (1984) 'Norbert Elias – Established or outsider?' *Sociological Review*, 52(2),

- 369-384.
- Smith, Dennis (2000) *Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory*, London: Sage.
- UCD Press (2008) 'The Collected Works of Norbert Elias', Available Online at: <http://www.ucdpress.ie/ucdpress/elias.asp>. Last Accessed 15th of January, 2008.
- van Iterson, Ad, Willem Mastenbroek, Tim Newton and Dennis Smith (Eds.) (2002) *The Civilized Organization: Norbert Elias and the future of Organization Studies*, Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.
- van Krieken, Robert (1998) *Norbert Elias*, London: Routledge.
- Wouters (1986) 'Formalization and Informalization, Changing Tension Balances in Civilizing Processes', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 3(2), 1-19.
- Wouters, Cas (1987) 'Developments in the Behavioural Codes between the Sexes: The Formalization of Informalization in the Netherlands, 1930-85', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 405-27.