Abandon philosophy all ye who enter here

Alfred North Whitehead famously remarked that all Western philosophical writings could be reliably unified in a common origin - Platonism. Analogously, it is quite regularly remarked that the European sociological enterprise ultimately consists of a series of footnotes to Marx, Weber and Durkheim. For Whitehead there was no great shame in being a very late comer to a long-standing and constantly evolving intellectual tradition – process philosophy emerges out of just such a disposition. The contemporary sociologist, likewise, could presumably do a lot worse than gesture respectfully and enthusiastically towards his or her own gratifyingly intimidating trinity of intellectual forefathers. The long-standing narrative of the three wise men of sociology guarantees to its apprentices and advocates alike a productive means of orientation and self-justification. What it has running against it, however, is that it can serve to disparage everything anomalous to it through the motif of heterodoxy. That is to say, sociological perspectives not readily locatable under the cast of the three-dimensional shadow of the greats regularly fail to get a fair hearing. Norbert Elias’s work offers perhaps the most enduring case in point - it doesn’t draw its foundations from a sustained exegesis, application, synthesis or critique of the sociological orthodoxy, through no great fault of his own, and yet it has suffered as a direct result of its not having done so. This is something which cannot be considered simply in passing.

Elias’s 1922 doctoral dissertation *Idea and Individual: a critical investigation of the concept of history* closely analysed the role given to historical analysis within Kantian philosophy, and found it wanting. Setting itself out against the claims made by Kantian idealism upon historical analysis, Elias’s dissertation insisted that ideas are inter-generationally produced dynamic outcomes of community interactions, rather than always-already pre-determined timeless subjective forms. This ultimately paved the way for his concluding call for a tradition of historical work which would “look more deeply into the structure of society” (2006: 53) as a means of tracking down answers to its most fundamental and persistent questions. As Elias’s thinking developed beyond his dissertation, the responsibility for undertaking this sort of historical work fell to a gradually emergent intellectual figure - the sociologist. Much like the canonical sociological figures, and not just the routinely privileged three, Elias made his way into sociology not by relating to and breaking with a tradition called sociology, but rather by relating to and breaking from the philosophical tradition. That is to say, Elias became a sociologist because, on his reading, (neo-) Kantian philosophy was not able to think history adequately. The discoveries he made within his dissertation brought him to the realisation that there was an intellectual need for something like sociology, as opposed to philosophy, whilst the personal and political upheavals he experienced as a Jewish intellectual writing in Nazi Germany suggested that the need for sociology wasn’t simply intellectual.

There will perhaps come a time when this sort of preamble will no longer be required. For now, it will serve as a necessary counter-preface for the many who still know Elias quite simply as that civilising process guy (if even that). The fact remains that Elias is yet to receive the attention and respect which all of his followers and commentators, as well as many of his critics, believe he is due. And so, one observes within the ever growing literature on Elias a concerted effort to unravel the mystery of the seemingly reprehensible degree of
under-appreciation with which Elias’s work is still being received. Gabriel and Mennell’s edited collection enters into this breach, attempting both to address this problem, as well as to redress the balance. The book situates itself within the broader struggle, on the part of Elias scholars, to radically revise what has come to be known as the sociological mainstream. This is a struggle which Stephen Mennell, himself a Labour Party ministerial candidate in a previous life, has recently likened to a political campaign (2006: 75).

As the Series Editor Chris Shilling points out, Gabriel and Mennell’s collection “is not intended to serve as an introduction to Elias’s work” (3). It is largely to the credit of the aforementioned campaign that the present book no longer addresses the need to deal in such preliminaries – its very existence must be taken as a sign of the times that are finally changing in Elias’s favour. There is more to the present volume than political positioning, of course. Rather than being offered yet another no longer needed introduction to Elias, what the reader is instead offered here are twelve distinct chapters which each develop figural/ process sociology’s conceptual and empirical resources along a number of productive avenues. Organisational scholars will find particular interest in van Vree’s chapter on the emergence of meetings as a privileged site of institutional decision making as well as in Baur and Ernst’s interrogation of the potential contribution Elias’s work makes to current debates within research methodology. Both chapters add to the pioneering work already undertaken by Tim Newton, Ad van Iterson and Willem Mastenbroek, as well as a previous special issue of this journal in 2001 (Organization 8(3)), on the potential relationship between Elias and Organization Studies.

Beyond the immediate concerns of organisational scholarship, the reader will also find a demarcation of the various Eliasian resources available for an understanding of the Ecological (Quilley), an overview of the enduring contribution Elias’s work with Eric Dunning has made to the Sociology of Sport (Liston) and an attempt to render Eliasian concerns relevant to the study of International Relations (Linklater). The chapters by van Krieken, Wouters and Pratt develop the concept of The Civilising Process with respect to the areas of State Formation, Personality Formation and Prison Evolution respectively. Gabriel’s chapter identifies operable resonances between Elias’s work and Developmental Psychology, whilst Loyal’s chapter applies Elias and Scotson’s peculiarly under-utilised Established-Outsiders Model to a detailed exploration of race relations in Ireland. One cannot leave this book without realising that process sociology has already said quite a lot but people simply were not listening. Such a scenario seems destined to change.

And yet, the Eliasian project still doesn’t cover itself in glory when it comes to the question of philosophical dialogue. The editors’ opening chapter focuses on figural/ process sociology’s intergenerational processes and is structured in accordance with Elias’s personal fondness for the explanatory powers of the Platonic model of the torch race. The chapter offers a remarkably informative account of the dissemination and contestation of Elias’s work across three generations of scholars situated in a variety of different geographical locations and institutional settings. In so doing, Gabriel and Mennell set the Eliasian stall out against ‘social theory’, since for them it is a weasel term, as well as against the entire ‘philosophoidal’ turn in sociology, all of which is entirely “uncongenial to Elias and Eliasians” (15). In marking its opponent so clearly, this opening chapter sets the tone for the whole volume by refusing to acknowledge so much as the merest possibility that philosophy might actually be relevant to sociology. Richard Kilminster’s critique of ‘critique’ most overtly perpetuates this all too familiar Eliasian refrain by extending his own quest to purge figural/ process sociology of all philosophy (2007, 1998) into yet another direction.
Despite the connotations its title may evoke, therefore, this is not a book that sits easily on the shelf beside the work of Whitehead, Bergson and Deleuze. Figurational sociologists follow Elias’s suggestion that neo-Kantian philosophy cannot do the work of sociological analysis very much to the letter, and they proceed to draw the conclusion that all philosophy is best left to the philosophers – process philosophy included. But just like sociology, so too philosophy has developed since the 1920s - many 20th and 21st century philosophers would in fact share Elias’s critique of neo-Kantianism. By treating all philosophy with a sneering and arrogant disdain which oftentimes borders on paranoia, figurational sociologists have effectively chosen to ignore a whole host of contemporary debates. This disposition is hardly in keeping with the precepts of a self-consciously intergenerational epistemology, not least of all one which takes its literary impetus from Platonism. Sociology may well still need to distinguish itself from philosophy for the sake of creating a little breathing space for itself. A dogmatic refusal to enter into dialogue with contemporary philosophical developments hardly seems the most productive way of doing so. The time for introductions to figurational sociology may well have passed. The time for introducing figurational sociologists to philosophy, however, is not yet over.

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References


