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Norbert Elias in Frankfurt: Relational Clues in the Photographs of Gisèle Freund, 1932

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Introduction

The aim of this visual essay is to present several photographs of Norbert Elias and sociological colleagues taken in 1932 in Frankfurt by Gisèle Freund. The photographs capture various social interactions between Elias and his intellectual peers, including Karl Mannheim and Hans Gerth, in the relaxed atmosphere of cafés. The images document the informal, but no less important, intellectual gatherings, offering a visual record of both academic circles and the personal relationships of which Elias was part. The photographs are part of the Norbert Elias archive at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Germany, within the collection of images by 'Norbert Elias [estate]'. Gisèle Freund was a longtime friend and collaborator of Elias (Jitschin, 2018; Law, 2023), and she photographed Elias informally (as presented here) and in more formal portraits, as well as producing an extensive photographic record of Elias's African art collection. All of these photographs can be viewed in the archive, along with many others by Elias himself and those of other photographers.

However, amongst the large collection of images, there was something evocative, even haunting, about this particular small selection of photographs from 1932. The photographs are of Elias, fellow sociologists and friends doing what sociologists do – discussing, debating, socialising, drinking coffee and relaxing. The participants are seen in 1930s Frankfurt, residing in a place being reimagined through revolutionary and utopian planning and architecture (Mullin, 1977). They live and work in a city that recognises the need for women's equality in work and housing, especially for single women impacted by war (Henderson, 2009), and, like elsewhere across Europe, there is a vibrant public intellectual life 'lived large' and openly in cafés and bars (see Ward, 2001; Grafe and Bollerey, 2007; Pinsker, 2015; Jeffries, 2017). Elias and colleagues are part of a vibrant intellectual scene where past, present and possible futures can be problematised, criticised and rationalised (see Kettler et al., 1990). Yet at the same time, this was also a city where traditional working-class movements were fracturing (Wickham, 1979) and where there was a growing 'disjunction between rapid economic and social and slow political modernisation' (Lieberman, 1994: 287). Optimism and modernity on the edge of an abyss. Hitler's acquisition of power in 1933 and the

National Socialist German Workers' Party's promise of 'cleansing' Germany (Wachsmann, 2008: 122) meant that 1933 was to be a year of terror.

> Only in 1932 did I begin to feel there could be a real threat, because the whole country was full of private armies. That is something you cannot imagine...I remember distinctly in 1932 I became aware of the increasing threat of violence in the form of what were called Saalschlachten – assembly hall battles. (Elias, 1994: 43)

Far removed from the debate and 'Kaffee und Kuchen' for Elias and friends, as documented in the photographs from a few months earlier. Indeed, viewed through the prism of the present, the photographs are precisely haunting because we know what would come to Germany a year after Freund captured the images. Something visible was about to be rendered absent. We know from the vantage point of the present that the futures for many of those photographed are to be lost, changed, or never come to pass (see Fisher, 2012). The intellectual life of universities was also about to change beyond recognition (see Zneimer, 1978; Remy, 2002; Neumann et al., 2013) via 'the brute facts of [a] generation's biography' (Kettler et al., 1990: 1442).

> In spring 1933, a political purge began in German universities, affecting around one fifth of their academic staff... Their lives after their dismissal varied greatly. Whereas some managed to pursue highly successful careers while in emigration, others were murdered by the Nazis or committed suicide. (Grüttner, 2022: 513).

In 1932, Elias was 35 years old. He left Germany the following year, when he was neither a student nor a professor but an 'in-between' person (Elias, 1975). Elias and Freund would both flee to Paris separately (Jitschin, 2018; Quint Freeman, 2024), along with thousands of others who left everything behind. As Elias (1994: 49) writes, '*it must have been in March or April 1933. I laid plans with a student and good friend of mine [Grete Freudenthal] that she would drive me to Switzerland'*. It would be some time before Elias returned to Germany (Elias, 1994).

Approaching The Photographs

In line with visual essays, the aim here is not to overinterpret or evaluate the images but to present them as relational clues in their own right for the reader to review and consider (Jephcott, 1967). Photographs such as those presented here are richly detailed in terms of their substantive content and the relationships implied or observed among those depicted. They also serve as evidence of emotion, personal circumstances, patterns of consumption, dress and so forth. The images contain foregrounds and backgrounds – the content the photographer wanted to capture, as well as the extraneous, quotidian details that make up life. The images are also not 'flat', empty vessels of uniqueness, but instead capture dynamic figurations or gatherings of intellectual life at a particular moment in time (see Goodwin and Hughes, 2011; Goodwin, 2023, 2025). As with other documents of life, such as letters

and diaries, there is a need to recognise the challenges and dangers of adopting a *homo clausus* orientation, whereby any analysis would be:

> ... wrongly conceived as being only concerned with 'the individual' writer and/or 'their' 'uniqueness'. Instead, [they are] historically and spatially constituted – they provide insight into group identity and behavioural standards, both illuminating and involving changing relationships, interdependencies, power balances and, hence, 'figurations'. (Goodwin and Hughes, 2011: 681)

As such, the photographs are also not time-bound; they connect to prior relationships and to those that extend beyond 1932. We can look for overlapping connections and figurations shaped by orientations and interests at a particular time, with different figurations coming to the fore and others receding into the background. For example, if we are concerned with the Frankfurt School and philosophy, we can explore what the photographs tell us about Elias and Mannheim. If our interest is in wider sociology, then we can look to the relational clues linking Elias and Gerth, and on to C. Wright Mills. In relation to practice, the photographs allow us to trace and reimagine the links that connect Elias, Freund, Gerth, Mills, Jephcott and others (see, for example, Goodwin, 2018).

The images embody connections between Norbert Elias and Hans Gerth, both of whom were assistants to Karl Mannheim and apparently shared a stipend (see Gerth, 2002; Kilminster, 2011). In turn, the 'degrees of separation' between Elias and C. Wright Mills amount to a single step, established through Gerth's collaboration and extensive correspondence with Mills (see Gerth and Mills, 1964; Oakes and Vidich, 1999; Mills, 2000). These connections link continental European sociology with sociology in the United States. In relation to British sociology, Mannheim links Elias with Ilya Neustadt via the London School of Economics and Maurice Ginsberg, with Ginsberg being a major supporter of Neustadt (see Goodwin and Hughes, 2011; Rantanen, 2024). All are tantalising possibilities suggested by the images and the relationships to which they refer. These analytical possibilities can be explored further by:

> ....trying to imagine their lives and to read into the photograph whether they were happy or not, whether their lives were very hard or reasonably comfortable, whether they were respected members of their community or not (Smart, 2007: 1–2).

A great deal has been written about visual analysis and the underpinning approaches to the analytical interpretation of photographic materials (see, for example, Pauwels, 2015; Harper, 2023; Zvijer, 2023). However, a simpler, more humanistic approach is often preferable to an overly complicated interpretive framework that looks for 'signs', 'symbols', 'signifiers' and the like. As such, Smart (2007), in her book *Personal Life*, offers a useful starting point for a sociological analysis of the relational clues in visual

materials and photographs. When looking at photographs, begin by considering what the lives of those portrayed were like. From the image, ask what evidence of their emotional states can be observed. Survey the image to see what the clues reveal about their personal circumstances, whether material, professional or social.

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The Photographs of Elias by Freund (1932)



Photograph 1: Elias at Café Laumer by Gisèle Freund. Photograph with hand annotations. Source: Deutsches Literaturarchiv.

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Photograph 2: Elias, Gerth and Mannheim by Gisèle Freund. Photograph with hand annotations. Source: Deutsches Literaturarchiv.

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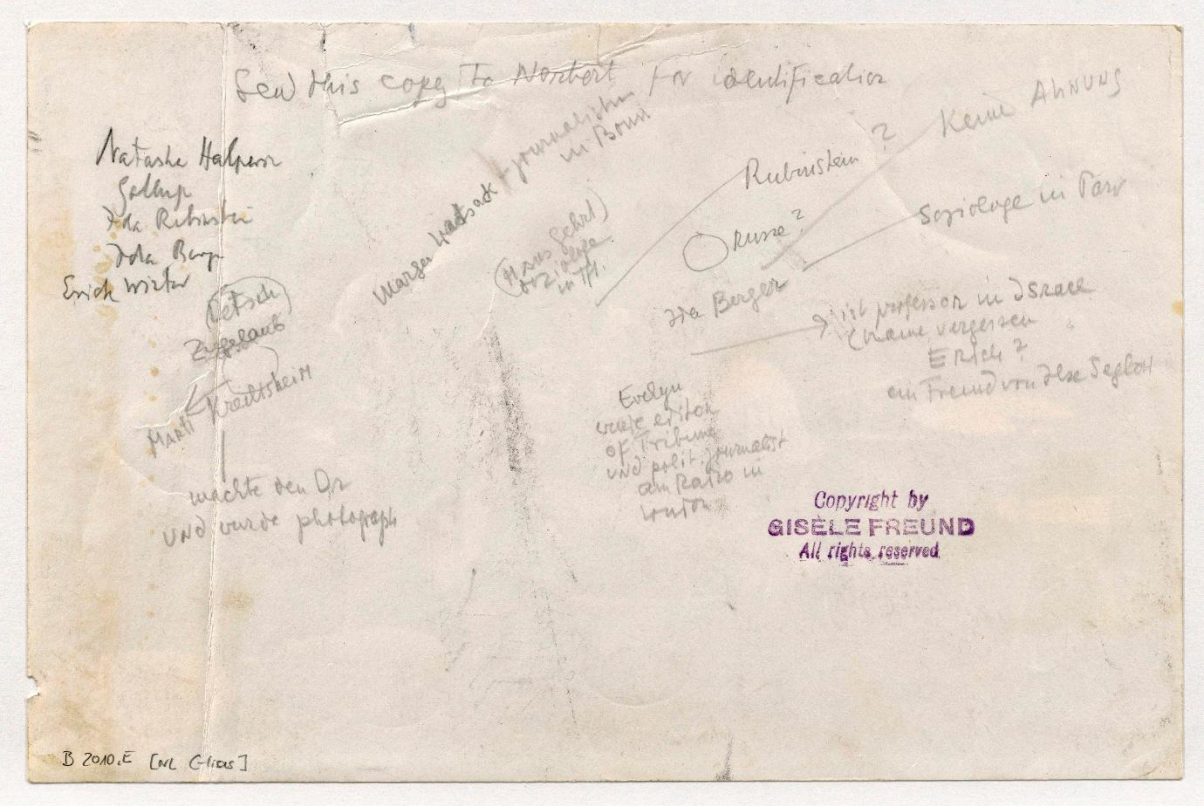
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Photograph 3: Elias and Mannheim in a Café by Gisèle Freund. Photograph with hand annotations. Source: Deutsches Literaturarchiv.

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Photograph 4: Sociologists at the Outdoor Café Laumer by Gisèle Freund. Reverse of the photograph with hand annotations. Source: Deutsches Literaturarchiv.

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Photograph 4. Although permission was not granted to reproduce the actual photograph, the rights owners granted permission to reproduce the annotated reverse of a photograph taken in what appears to be the courtyard of Café Laumer[1]. The reverse is striking, in that it is reminiscent of the network diagrams that would later feature in *The Established and the Outsiders* research (see Goodwin, Hughes and O'Connor, 2016). The faint pencil notes offer relational clues. In the picture, Elias and eleven others are sitting around a table in rattan chairs. There is evidence of food and drink on the table. What appears to be a cake stand atop a striped tablecloth. The participants, many of whom appear in the other images, are laughing, smiling, talking or lighting cigarettes. In the foreground, Elias and a woman are slightly turned towards the camera, side on, although not directly looking at the photographer.

[1] Opening in 1919, Café Laumer remains in business - at Bockenheimer Landstraße 67, 60325 Frankfurt am Main-Innenstadt II,Germany. https://www.cafelaumer.de/historie.

Reflections

The photographs of Elias, Mannheim, Gerth and others, taken at a crucial, tumultuous juncture in world history, offer clues about the academic circles and personal relationships of the early 1930s. They reveal an intellectual café culture that would take time to recover after the ravages of war and political, intellectual and religious persecution. The images are of their time but orient us to relationships past, present and future. Different intellectual figurations in different places at different times. As suggested, the hauntological quality of the images, something enhanced by the slight blurring of the images, refers to something that might have been. As such, the images are powerful documents with incredible sociological potential. It is perhaps here that we should consider future possibilities. While Elias's papers, housed at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach, Germany, have been extensively explored and used to extend Elias's intellectual legacy, the archived images have not. Where used, they are 'supporting materials'. Yet they offer much more and could provide deeper insights.

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