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Introduction to 'Interaction and All That'

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In his paper 'Interaction and All That', which appears to have been written in the early 1960s but was never published, Elias returns to one of the central concerns that runs throughout his intellectual project: the persistent tendency within sociology to treat individuals, their motivations and their interactions as the primary explanatory units of social life. What he identifies in the paper as the *'genetic idea'* underpinning much sociological theory is the assumption that society can be understood by beginning with isolated individuals whose interactions subsequently generate social phenomena. Against this reductionism, Elias insists that sociology must abandon both the opposition between individual and society and the methodological individualism upon which it rests. Rather than viewing individuals as ontologically prior to society, he consistently argues that people exist only within historically constituted networks of interdependence. The task of sociology is therefore not to explain society through individuals, but to reconstruct the relational configurations through which individuals themselves become possible.

Such a critique was not a late development but can be traced throughout Elias's oeuvre. Already in his early essay 'On Seeing in Nature', he questioned the historically specific character of modern individual consciousness. Reflecting on Ancient Greek society, Elias observes:

> That the Hellene could never have become conscious of himself as an absolutely separate entity sharply distinct from the other. In their consciousness, individuals felt themselves strongly to be, beyond all the differences and contrasts, one with the other and with the world, encompassed by the single and eternal order of the universe. (Elias, 2006a [1921]: 8)

Here Elias anticipates a central theme of his later work: individuality is neither natural nor transhistorical but the outcome of long-term processes of social development. What later becomes the sociology of figurations already appears

embryonically in the recognition that different historical societies generate different forms of selfhood and what he was later to term distinct We–I balances (2010 [1987]: 137–208). A similarly critical engagement with philosophical individualism is evident in his doctoral dissertation, 'Idea and individual: a critical investigation of the concept of history' (2006b [1922]), where he challenges the Neo-Kantian conception of the autonomous subject. Yet it is only in *On the Process of Civilisation* and, arguably most explicitly, in 'The Society of Individuals' (1991 [1939]) that this critique is developed into a systematic sociological alternative. There he argues that the apparent opposition between individual and society is itself the product of a misleading conceptual vocabulary. Modern social thought repeatedly treats society as a secondary aggregation of already existing individuals. Elias rejects this assumption outright:

> A great many of the statements on the relation of individual and society that we come across today boil down to the opposite idea. 'In reality', the exponents of this standpoint think and feel, 'there is no such thing as a society; in reality there are only individuals.'... The assertion that individuals are more 'real' than society is nothing other than an expression of the fact that the people who hold this view believe individuals to be more important... The idea that in 'reality' there is no such thing as a society, only a lot of individuals, says about as much as the statement that there is in 'reality' no such thing as a house, only a lot of individual bricks, a heap of stones. (Elias, 1991: 11–12)

The significance of this argument lies not merely in its rejection of methodological individualism but in its reformulation of sociology's object of inquiry. Society is not an entity existing over and above individuals, nor is it reducible to their aggregate; rather, it consists of the structured patterns of dependence that bind people together over time. Consequently, the appropriate unit of sociological analysis is neither the isolated individual nor an abstract social whole, but the dynamic configuration of interdependencies through which both are constituted. Elias captures this relational ontology in one of his most important formulations, which also reinforces the close correspondence between dependencies and social functions:

> By virtue of this ineradicable interdependence of individual functions the actions of many separate individuals... must incessantly link together to form long chains of actions... each individual person is really tied; he is tied by living in permanent functional dependence on other people... These chains are not visible and tangible in the same way as iron chains... And it is this network of the functions which people have for each other, it and nothing else, that we call 'society'. (Elias, 1991: 16)

Here Elias replaces the static image of society with a processual conception of figurations. Social structures are not external constraints imposed upon autonomous actors but continuously reproduced webs of interdependence within which individuals simultaneously act and are acted upon. Relations rather than substances become the elementary units of sociological explanation.

It is precisely this relational conception that underpins 'Interaction and All That'. Although presented as a critique of interactionist sociology, Elias's argument is directed more broadly at a long intellectual tradition stretching from philosophy through psychology into sociology itself. Given their historical development, the persistence of individualistic assumptions within philosophy and psychology is perhaps unsurprising. More problematic, however, is their continued dominance within sociology, a discipline whose distinctive object ought to be relational processes rather than isolated actors. Elias therefore identifies methodological individualism not only in Spencer and Weber but also in twentieth-century theorists such as Parsons and Ginsberg.

For Elias, these approaches reproduce common-sense assumptions by treating institutions and wider social formations as the cumulative effects of individual motivations. Such explanations remain fundamentally circular because they attempt to explain social processes through psychological categories whose own formation presupposes social relations. Even Parsons, despite his extensive engagement with Durkheim and his language of social systems, ultimately remains confined within an individualistic framework through the conceptual pairing of an '*ego*' and an '*alter*'. The relational field is reduced to an interaction between already constituted individuals rather than explaining how those individuals themselves emerge within historically developing figurations.

In the paper, Elias identifies two principal sources of this persistent individualism. First, sociology has remained overly dependent upon explanatory models borrowed from the natural sciences, particularly physics:

> They cannot get away from the idea that one must proceed more or less as the physicists do, namely, to seek explanations of the more complex composite systems as a result of the behaviour and interactions of simpler component units which at this level are individuals. (p.5)

This atomistic model encourages sociologists to search for elementary units analogous to physical particles, thereby treating individuals as the basic building blocks from which society is assembled. Such an approach fundamentally misconstrues the nature of social reality and its different levels of integration.

Second, Elias argues that sociologists themselves remain insufficiently detached from the historically specific societies within which they live. Their theoretical assumptions unconsciously reproduce the ideological horizon of modern liberal societies, where autonomy, freedom and individual choice have become deeply institutionalised. Consequently, they approach society through what Elias calls a *'personality-centred vista'*. As he observes:

> Of course this is not a conscious and deliberate consideration: it is just that one cannot just distantiate oneself sufficiently in making a theory about society in general from the mould in which one's own mind has been cast as a member of a very specific society, an individualistic society. (p. 7)

Here Elias links a sociology of knowledge to a historical sociology. The dominance of methodological individualism is itself a social fact requiring explanation. It reflects not timeless scientific reasoning but the historically produced habitus of theorists embedded within liberal capitalist societies and their 'mental habits' (1991: 22). Consequently, Elias argues that sociology requires not merely criticism of particular theorists but a more detached and cumulative process of theoretical reconstruction. As he insists, *'a more lively discussion about theoretical matters is absolutely imperative'* (p. 6). Theory, however, is neither speculative philosophy nor arbitrary conceptual invention. Rather:

> Theory making is a coordinating activity. It requires the ability to keep in mind a great many facts, often a very often great many data at the same time and to work out a model showing how they are connected; or, if there are great gaps, suggesting by means of a model how they might be connected. (p. 7)

Theory therefore serves to coordinate empirical knowledge by constructing increasingly reality-congruent models of long-term social processes.

Interactionism

The dependence upon a residual conception of the individual continues to resurface within various forms of interactionist sociology. In this respect, interactionism represents the latest in a long line of approaches that, to borrow Elias's metaphor from *The Society of Individuals* (1991), imagine that the 'relation between people is often [...] like that between billiard balls: they collide and roll apart' (1991: 24). Outside of his discussion in 'Interaction and All That', this individualistic residue is more pronounced in some versions of interactionism than in others. Blumer's *Symbolic Interactionism* (1969), for example, retains a strongly individual-centred vocabulary, despite drawing extensively upon Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (1962 [1934]), in which the social constitution of mind and self is more clearly registered.

Goffman's position is similarly ambivalent. His work oscillates between three different models of the individual and never fully resolves the tension between an atomistic conception of actors and an acknowledgement of their social formation (Collins, 2004). Even where Goffman conceives sociality in terms of *mutual susceptibility*, however, he does not adequately grasp the structured and historically constituted interdependencies through which such susceptibility becomes possible. Interaction remains the meeting of already formed actors rather than a moment within wider figurations that both precede and constitute them. In 'Interaction and All That', Elias repeats arguments from other papers, specifically that interactionism remains wedded to a model of *homo clausus* rather than *homines aperti*. Thus he writes in *The Court Society*:

> In sociology, related ideas currently find expression in theories of action or interaction which are based — tacitly or overtly — on the idea that the starting point of all social investigations are free individuals, the absolutely independent masters of their own decisions and actions, who 'interact' as such. If an approach based on such a theory of action fails to make headway in solving sociological problems, it is supplemented by a system theory. While an action theory is usually based on the idea of the single individual outside a social system, a system theory usually rests on the idea of a social system outside single individuals... The preceding discussions show quite clearly why theories of action and interaction are of relatively little use to empirical sociological research. They are based on the same image of the person which tacitly underlies many historical studies in the classical manner, an image of single human beings each of whom is ultimately absolutely independent of all others — an individual-in-himself, a *homo clausus*. (Elias, 2006c: 153, 155).

Against interactionist sociology, Elias proposes that sociological explanation should begin with the question of 'how people are tied to each other' (p. 8). Interdependencies constitute the *centrepiece* of sociological investigation because they generate the structural conditions within which interactions occur. As he argues, '*it is this, the network of interdependencies which bind individuals to each other, which seems to me the essence of what we call social structure. This is the condition of their interactions, the framework which determines how far and in what manner they interact*' (p. 7). From this perspective, interactions are not explanatory primitives but outcomes of historically constituted figurations. The specific forms of dependence characteristic of industrial capitalism, for example, differ fundamentally from those found within hunting societies precisely because their relational structures have developed differently over time.

The methodological implications are profound. Rather than explaining social phenomena by aggregating individual actions, sociology must proceed in the opposite direction:

> Social events and social phenomena… can never be explained by other than social events… individuals, their motives and actions… can only be explained in terms of the social system of which they form part… one has to think, as it were, from the larger to the part system; and the individual is always… part of a larger social system without which he does not become… an individual personality. (pp. 10–11)

This does not imply that society possesses an existence independent of individuals, nor that individuals are somehow unimportant. Rather, Elias proposes what might be termed a genuinely 'society-centred sociology', in which individuals and social structures are understood as mutually constitutive moments within ongoing figurational processes. His analysis therefore transcends both methodological individualism and classical holism by locating explanation within historically developing networks of interdependence.

In addition, as he writes in a footnote in *Involvement and Detachment*, this requires a wholly different conception of social actors rather than a singular focus on 'action'. Elias argues that action and interaction theories mistakenly collapse fundamentally different forms of human activity—physical action, speech and internal reflection—into a single category of 'action', thereby obscuring their distinct functions and their relationship to one another. By privileging observable behaviour in the wake of behaviourism, these approaches neglect thinking and reflection as higher-order socio-physiological processes that shape action, resulting in an impoverished understanding of human conduct and social life.

> That sociological theories often concentrate on the representatives of one level only of the human personality — only on 'action' or only on 'experience' — thus relying on a flat, one-level picture and neglecting the many-levelled character of personality, has far-reaching theoretical consequences. Each of these partial schools of sociological thought treats its own part-aspect as if it were the only relevant aspect of people. Behavioural sociologists see actions in isolation, phenomenological sociologists, experiences (to name only these two). Figurational sociology, on the other hand, is concerned with human beings in the round. It is centred on a five-dimensional image of plurality of human beings that includes the directly visible four-dimensional behavioural aspects and the 'experiential', thinking, feeling, drive aspects of humans which, although not directly accessible to people's observation in the same way as bodily movements, are, nevertheless, accessible to human observation — for example, through the

> examination of linguistic and other symbols that carry meaningful messages from one person to others. Hence, problems of drives and drive-control, of emotions and emotional control, of knowledge and reflection as controllers or, alternatively, as dependents of emotions and drives — in short, the experiential aspects of people — in figurational sociology play no less a part than the visible movements of people's skeletal muscles that are singled out by behaviourists and action theorists. The task is to show their functional interdependence within the many-levelled units of human individuals and within the unplanned social processes that humans form with non-human agents and with each other. (Elias, 2007: 110–11)

Although 'Interaction and All That' often echoes Durkheim through its emphasis upon social facts, the irreducibility of social reality and interdependencies, Elias moves beyond Durkheim by specifying the relational mechanisms through which these social realities emerge and transform. His sociology is fundamentally processual rather than structuralist, concerned less with static social facts than with changing configurations of dependence that bind people together over time.

As noted earlier in this discussion, 'Interaction and All That' repeats many earlier themes and criticisms which go back to his earliest writings. Nevertheless, in some ways it serves as a transitional analysis to relatively later discussions of figurations. This is especially so if we look at his discussion of game models in chapter 3 of *What is Sociology?*, written just a few years after 'Interaction and All That', which takes this discussion further. Elias describes them modestly as merely 'didactic models' rather than as 'theory' *per se*, although they can be seen as the most comprehensive and fundamental exposition of his views on the whole subject. The series of models begins (just as do American theories of interaction, as in Parsons and Shils, 1951) with just two players, but the next group is of multiple players such as in modern team games, and the third group is of multi-person 'games' on two levels which are now too complex to be regarded merely as games. In each case, the group begins with models in which the central power ratio is very unequal and then looks at what happens when power ratios become relatively more even. In the third group, Elias discusses first a model 'of the oligarchic type'—clearly based on his study of court society—and then one of the 'simplified increasingly democratic type' (note the cautious phrasing). Even at the level of just two players, Elias is able to point to features that are rarely mentioned in the interactionist tradition:

> Both players will have correspondingly less chance to control the changing figuration of the game; and the less dependent will be the changing figuration of the game on the aims and plans for the course of the game which each player has formed by himself. The stronger, conversely, becomes the dependence of each of the two players' overall plans and of each of their moves on the changing

> figuration of the game — on the game process. The more the game comes to resemble a social process, the less it comes to resemble the implementation of an individual plan. In other words, to the extent that the inequality in the strengths of the two players diminishes, there will result from the interweaving of moves of two individual people a game process which neither of them has planned. (Elias, 2012 [1978]: 77)

There is no inter*dependence* without power ratios between people.

Conclusion

The questions raised in Elias's essay remain strikingly contemporary. In an era dominated by neoliberal rationalities, where consumer choice, entrepreneurial selfhood and individual responsibility have become pervasive modes of governing social life, his critique of methodological individualism has lost none of its force. Indeed, the ideological naturalisation of the autonomous individual makes Elias's insistence upon historically constituted interdependencies arguably more relevant today than when he first formulated it. Rather than beginning from isolated actors, sociology must recover the long chains of dependence through which individuality itself is socially produced. Yet, paradoxically, 'the detour via detachment' required to undertake this arguably appears to be less possible than before, with increasing extraneous socio-political valuations entering into the discipline of sociology and its institutionalisation. It is for this reason that the publication of this talk remains timely.

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