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Introducing *Human Figurations: the Journal of Social Processes*

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Human Figurations: the Journal of Social Processes is an interdisciplinary academic journal focused on long-term social processes that takes inspiration from Norbert Elias's sociological imagination, seeking to develop and extend this. The journal originally ran between 2012 and 2021 under the title *Human Figurations: Long-Term Perspectives on the Human Condition*. We are relaunching it under this revised subtitle after a hiatus of five years, which was the time needed to assemble a renewed editorial team and to secure the placement of the journal on the University of Leicester's Open Journals Platform, supported by the Norbert Elias Foundation. The new subtitle echoes the name originally proposed for the journal in early discussions of its development and is intended to signal both continuity with the previous title and a somewhat broader remit and spirit of openness to a range of perspectives, topics and approaches. The journal uses the Diamond Open Access model, incurring no charges to authors or readers, aligning with the university's open access initiatives and ensuring wide accessibility. All articles are double-blind peer reviewed (including those by members of the editorial team which appear in this relaunch issue) and are now assigned DOIs. Plans are underway to seek indexing in major bibliographic databases, such as Scopus and Web of Science.

That the journal should be hosted at Leicester is, we suggest, particularly apt. Elias, widely regarded as one of the most important sociologists of the twentieth century, was a member of Leicester's Sociology Department in the 1950s and 1960s under the headship of Ilya Neustadt. The 'Leicester School' of sociology that Elias developed together with Neustadt gained international renown and continues to have a growing influence on scholars across the globe. The journal regards Elias's approach as an exemplar of relationally and processually oriented research, not a prescribed framework. His sociology is radically processual, relational and synthetic; it comprises a model of sociology as a bridging discipline, integrating cognate disciplinary domains—particularly history, psychology, anthropology and the other social sciences—into a unified analytical scheme. We welcome work that shares this

synthetic ambition and ethos, regardless of whether it draws principally on Elias, as well as scholarship that engages critically with his ideas and his approach.

In 1972, Elias drafted plans for a new international journal whose terms of reference were similarly broad. 'Nothing is more striking in our time', he wrote, 'than the rate of change, the dynamic character of the social universe which [human beings] form with each other' (Elias, 1972). If anything, the rate of change has further increased since the time Elias wrote, making the need for a long-term perspective all the more pressing. However, without an adequate grasp of the processes through which present-day dynamics have developed, our chances of better collectively orienting ourselves to them, let alone of bringing them under a greater degree of control, are slight at best.

As Cicero remarked, 'To be ignorant of what occurred before you were born is to remain always a child' (Cicero, 46 BCE/1939: §120). The same line, albeit in a slightly different translation, was quoted in the opening editorial of the journal's inaugural issue, and it remains as pertinent as ever. Indeed, in relaunching this journal on the new platform, our intention is to reaffirm many of the aims that were eloquently set out by its then Editor-in-Chief, Katie Liston (2012). We intend *Human Figurations* to provide an enduring forum for scholars studying the human condition in its many facets and dimensions, and to bring into conversation developments both within and, most particularly, between disciplines that can inform understanding of long-term social processes. In doing so, our aim is partly to counter two dominant, interrelated tendencies of contemporary academic life: its fragmentation into ever more specialised and mutually insulated fields, and the predominance of static, short-term approaches to human affairs. The journal seeks to engage scholars across sociology, history, psychology, politics, international relations, anthropology, cultural studies, criminology and geography, especially those working in the interstices between established disciplines.

Perhaps it is difficult to find any age in which the dominant feeling is not one of crisis and malaise, but at any rate the current versions of the deep crises in world affairs of our own time remain a reminder of the need to anchor our grasp of them in an understanding of the long-term historical processes they embody, as well as the complex interconnections between all the various levels and dimensions of social life. This is a task for which Elias's sociology provides an invaluable foundation.

Aims and Scope

The journal's primary aim is to advance scholarship on long-term social processes and the human condition, welcoming contributions from across the social sciences and humanities. Submissions are not limited by research design or data type; the journal

welcomes contributions from all forms of research practice and across the full range of research materials.

There are three particularly important characteristics of the journal's orientation. First, it seeks to foster *interdisciplinary dialogue*, particularly at the intersections of conventional disciplines, appealing to a wide range of scholars internationally. This aligns with Elias's broader conception of sociology, beyond narrow departmental boundaries, and the journal will continue to publish articles that build upon, refine and/or challenge his perspectives. Second, it encourages research that is *process-oriented*, engaging with the *historical dimensions* of research questions and fostering comparative perspectives attentive to long-term dynamics. Third, it encourages a *relational* understanding of social life that explores the interdependencies between different levels and dimensions of social dynamics.

Format

The mainstay of the journal will be peer-reviewed, research-based articles of circa 6,000–8,000 words (plus references and appendices). However, the journal will also permit longer-form contributions of up to 12,000 words, particularly in relation to topics that require more extensive theoretical exegesis and/or empirical analysis. Additionally, we may periodically invite shorter pieces such as author responses, short commentaries, rapid responses to particular social developments and so forth. The journal will publish two issues per year, featuring original research articles, review essays and book reviews, aligning with the frequency of similar open journals.

Each volume may also include conceptual polemics, critical review essays and translations of influential texts in languages other than English, as well as more exploratory and provisional work that seeks to develop a new research agenda or define a new field of enquiry. Journal issues will typically include a 'Classic Essays' section, which encompasses papers by Elias or other key figurational researchers that have been translated into English for the first time or which have hitherto remained unpublished for other reasons, including 'discoveries' or unpublished essays, photographs, notes and other materials from the Norbert Elias archive at the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* (DLA) in Marbach am Neckar, Germany.

Additionally, issues may sometimes include a 'Rapid Response' section featuring interviews, debates and exchanges between leading academics in processual and figurational sociology, particularly as these relate to major contemporary topics. This section might also include research notes and provisional findings from scholars who wish to report on work in progress.

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This first issue of Volume 10 begins with a paper related to a project entitled *PATHS – Psychedelics as Therapeutics: Harm Reduction and Safety*, a £2.5 million Wellcome Trust-funded programme of research. The paper, 'The Civilising of Psychedelics: Pharmaceuticalisation from Below as a Part-Process of American and European Informalisation', traces the sociogenesis of psychedelics in the United States and Europe from the 1950s to the present. The authors, **Michael Dunning, Jason Hughes, Hannah Farrimond and Joshua Stuart-Bennett**, draw on Elias's figurational sociology as well as relationally oriented work on substance use and health to trace a shift in psychedelic use from counter-cultural sacrament to therapy and technology of the self. They argue that this shift should not be understood as the simple 'discovery' of a therapeutic potential that previously lay dormant in the substances themselves, but rather as a part of longer-term informalisation processes, which were in turn bound up with shifting balances of power between established and outsider groups and with changing behavioural and emotional standards. Accordingly, they propose that the ascendancy of microdosing psychedelics can be understood as part and parcel of a more general development they theorise as 'pharmaceuticalisation from below'.

The second paper, by **Leon Wai Lau**, 'Towards the Process of Civilisation in East Asia: Applying and Extending the Theory of Civilising Processes to China, Korea and Japan', addresses the important question of how to analyse processes of civilisation beyond Western Europe, focusing in particular on East Asia. Against the background of the need to refine and extend understanding of how long-term processes developed in these countries, as well as a concern to broaden the methodological, analytical and empirical scope of theories of civilising processes beyond Europe, this paper outlines some possible approaches to investigating different patterns of psychogenetic and sociogenetic change in China, Korea and Japan. The paper highlights the key theoretical, methodological and analytical challenges, as well as proposing approaches to address those challenges.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, artificial intelligence was not a topic addressed by Elias himself, raising some interesting challenges today for the analysis of AI-governed systems and large language models in particular. In 'Asymmetric Dependency and the Algorithmic Figuration: Towards a Figurational Sociology of Artificial Intelligence', **Lucy Elizabeth Císař Brown and Jason Hughes** argue that such systems and models introduce a structurally novel dynamic into contemporary figurations: one of asymmetric dependency, in which people are materially, and increasingly affectively, dependent upon systems that remain in key respects structurally indifferent to any particular person's response. This dynamic has several effects. It generates what the authors term 'behavioural civilising': the shaping of observable conduct through

monitored compliance rather than through the internalisation of restraint. This behavioural civilising, in turn, suspends the shame functions through which figurational pressure is ordinarily converted into self-restraint, generating decivilising pressures within the same figuration. Extended engagement with conversational AI also introduces a mode of exchange in which thought is elaborated and transformed rather than merely returned, which the authors term 'generative reflection'. Their analysis both extends the Eliasian framework to new forms of AI-mediated sociability and contributes to the understanding of that sociability as a disruption and transformation of core psychogenetic processes.

In 'The Revolt of the Established: Elias, Ressentiment and Authoritarian Populism', **Robert van Krieken** reflects on recent scholarship referring to the dynamics of 'power devaluation' and 'dethronement' in analysing the turn to authoritarian populism by examining the interaction between, first, Elias's conception of the 'drag effect' in the relationship between social habitus and shifts in social structure and, second, his analysis of the dynamics of established–outsider relations, at both an intra-nation and an inter-nation level. The paper argues that it is the interaction of these dynamics that underpins the various forms of authoritarian populism, taking the form of a 'revolt of the established' and creating the conditions for a destabilisation of the norms of civilised conduct and interaction for the sake of the protection of existing relations of power and status.

The renowned French photographer and photojournalist Gisèle Freund was part of Elias's circle in Frankfurt in the early 1930s, and a visual essay by **John Goodwin** presents several photographs that she took in 1932 of Elias and sociological colleagues, including Karl Mannheim and Hans Gerth. The photographs of informal interactions provide a visual record of Elias's academic circle as well as his personal relationships. All of these photographs can be viewed in the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv*, along with many others, including some taken by Elias himself and by other photographers. Goodwin's piece exemplifies some of the non-standard forms of academic output that the journal now seeks to include, both in terms of its use of a visual essay format and as a presentation of work in progress.

An edited collection entitled *Norbert Elias's African Processes of Civilisation: On the Formation of Survival Units in Ghana*, edited by Dieter Reicher, Adrian Jitschin, Arjan Post and Behrouz Alikhani (Springer VS, 2022), has recently been published, comprising Elias's writings on his experiences at the University of Ghana between 1962 and 1964 and his subsequent reflections on African societies, state formation and civilisational development. This review essay by **Hans-Peter Waldhoff** positions the Ghanaian essays within the broader intellectual and biographical context of Elias's theory of civilisation and relates them to the more general problem of the persistence of violence within the civilising process. The paper highlights Elias's concepts of

survival units, village-states, tribal formation and the relationship between external constraint and the development of self-restraint, as well as discussing his distinction between reality-congruent and fantasy knowledge, his critique of pseudo-metaphysical notions of cultural difference and the significance of the 'stranger' as a position capable of generating sociological objectivity. The paper draws on Freud, Gellner, Simmel and related theorists to argue that civilisation must be understood as a fragile, multilayered process vulnerable to interruption, corruption and authoritarian reversal, and suggests that Elias's Ghanaian writings invite a critical reassessment of his comparative sociology and its relevance to contemporary crises of knowledge, democracy and de-civilisation.

In our 'Classic Essays' section, we are also very pleased to be able to present two important papers, one by **Elias** with an introduction by **Stephen Mennell and Steve Loyal**, and the other by **Richard Kilminster**, again with an introductory note by **Stephen Mennell**. Elias's essay, 'Interaction and All That', written in the early 1960s but never published, reflects on the tendency within sociology to treat individuals, their motivations and their interactions as the primary explanatory units of social life. The concept of social interaction, argues Elias, remains anchored in the opposition between 'the individual' and 'society', with individuals and their motivations viewed as ontologically prior to their interactions with each other. In contrast, he articulates the importance of regarding individuals as existing only within historically constituted networks of interdependence, making the core sociological task one of reconstructing the relational 'figurations' through which individuals themselves become possible and thus placing interdependence more centrally than the concept of 'social interaction' does within the constitution of individual experience.

Finally, it is with great sadness that we commemorate **Richard Kilminster** and his immense contribution to figurational sociology. Richard died on 21 August 2026; we honour him through the inclusion of his hitherto unpublished essay, 'Streaking: The Naked Truth', together with an appreciation written by **Stephen Mennell**. A long-standing member of staff at the University of Leeds and chair of the Editorial Advisory Board of Elias's *Collected Works*, Richard was among the most important exponents of Elias's work, particularly in relation to exploring its (post-)philosophical implications and ramifications. In 'Richard Kilminster: An Appreciation', Mennell reflects upon a friendship and collaboration that began in the early 1970s, when the two were among the very few British sociologists taking the work of Elias seriously and when, like the courtiers of Louis XIV that Elias discussed so vividly in *The Court Society*, Stephen and Richard found that they themselves had been set up as rivals in the orbit of a luminary figure: Elias himself! Mennell traces Richard's distinctive contribution to figurational sociology (and sociology more generally), culminating in his advocacy of a 'post-philosophical sociology', which, following Elias, recast seemingly intractable problems posed by philosophers in ways that made them amenable to research.

Indeed, even the most seemingly marginal social phenomena could, when treated with a combination of empirical humility and intellectual ambition, productively cast light on matters that philosophers typically discussed in the abstruse and serious tones of highbrow theory. Richard's discussion of streaking is a case in point. Its origins lie in a passing remark by Elias that the crucial thing about streakers was that they *ran*: they did not stand still, waiting to be caught; they were in motion—the practice is necessarily a transitory one. Richard pursues the implications of this insight, showing how streaking can be understood as part and parcel of the informalisation processes of the 1960s and 1970s which, as theorised by Cas Wouters, involved both a loosening of codes governing dress, the body and sexual conduct and a heightened demand for more nuanced and differentiated self-restraint. As such, streaking can be understood as a momentary, playful release from such intensified demands. Streakers, argues Richard, flout the taboos surrounding the body, but only in a fleeting way, before returning to the ordinary constraints and rules of everyday life—it is, as such, an example of what Elias and Dunning (2008) called the *controlled decontrolling of emotional controls*.

Significantly, there are several (then) contemporary references in Richard's piece (e.g. to 'Mary Whitehouse' and 'Page 3') which date the discussion and which will likely be unfamiliar to readers outside of the UK and/or who did not live through the 1980s. The phasing out of Page 3—a practice of showing topless glamour models on Page 3 of the UK's most widely read tabloid newspaper—and the reference to Mary Whitehouse (a much-lampooned moral campaigner who sought to restore the behavioural standards of a former age) attest to a particular historical juncture where female nudity of the sort portrayed in Page 3 images was eventually successfully challenged not so much because it was vulgar, but because it was considered sexist. Such emergent standards point towards further waves of informalisation and reformalisation precisely of the type Richard discussed, expressing 'pressures from below' where, for example, the 'N' word came under certain conditions to be considered more taboo than the 'F' word in public life. Richard's somewhat wry, scholarly yet accessible style is a hallmark of his more general work, in which he was able to bring figurational sociology to bear simultaneously on everyday social issues and some of the most fundamental questions of our time.

We hope that the papers in this issue are of interest across a number of disciplines and fields in their own right, and that they will support and connect usefully with a range of research concerns. *Human Figurations: the Journal of Social Processes* looks forward to developing all of these types of research interests with readers and contributors, in the spirit of studying the human condition in all its aspects with theoretical rigour, openness to intellectual innovation and exchange, and illuminating empirical research.

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