

# On Norbert Elias – Becoming a Human Scientist

Hermann Korte

# On Norbert Elias – Becoming a Human Scientist

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Translated by Stefanie Affeldt



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# Editor's Preface

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*Stefanie Ernst*

This first English edition of “On Norbert Elias” is a translation of the third, recently adapted edition in German. The German book was written and published in the 1980s by Suhrkamp/Frankfurt. Whilst Elias was still alive at that time and hesitated to agree to a biography planned by Hermann Korte as well as by Stephen Mennell (Ernst 2015)<sup>1</sup>, now, 25 years later, the third edition in German was published. This long temporal distance has led to new insights about Norbert Elias, especially in terms of his early youth, for example as a member of the Wanderbund (Hiking League) “Blau Weiß” in Heidelberg etc.

This English edition aims to transfer Hermann Korte's research results to an English speaking audience, too. Whereas for the 1970s one could identify a hesitating reception of process-theoretical thinking, there has been a growing audience

1 Ernst, Stefanie. *The 'Formation of the Figurational Family': Generational Chains of Process-Sociological Thinking in Europe*. In: CAMBIO: Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali 05, 2015, No. 09: 65–78. doi: 10.1400/234057.

in the last roughly 20 years. Meanwhile, Elias's book "The Process of Civilisation" has become a bestseller of Sociology.

This process of intensified reception has been supported by Johan Goudsblom, Eric Dunning, Stephen Mennell and Hermann Korte. Many other colleagues of the first generation of 'Elias-Scholars' have also to be mentioned (Ernst 2015). As an assistant of Dieter Claessens, Korte helped to organise Elias' first guest professorship in Germany, i.e. in Münster. Korte is, therefore, a member of the generation of elder 'Elias-Scholars', who not only knew him personally but also taught his theory as a professor of Sociology and helped Elias in his late career to become one of the best-known classical sociologists in the world.

Korte, in Eliasian terms, stands in a chain of the generations and is an important figure for the next generation of sociologists, as, for example, also for me.

I got to know Elias' 'process-book' in 1990, the year of Elias's death, in a sociological course about "Theories of Modernization", taught by Georg Weber and Armin Nassehi in Münster. In the following years, Nassehi supervised not only my Master thesis about 'Marriage in the Civilising Process'. He moreover encouraged and supported me to publish this work in a book at Westdeutscher Verlag in 1996. During that time, I met Hermann Korte as I was looking for an opportunity to intensify my studies on process-theory. Then Münster was predominated by systems theory or critical sociology, and as PhD candidate, my 'figurational capital' was too weak. Therefore, Hermann Korte invited me to visit him at Bochum, where he had a network of PhD students and 'Habilitanden', for example Annette Treibel and Gabriele Klein. I became his PhD student and found a suitable possi-

bility to study “Gender relations and leadership” (1998)<sup>2</sup> using Elias’ model of the ‘Established and Outsiders’. Korte introduced me to the figurational family, too, when the ISA congress took place in Bielefeld in July 1994. Thus, he was my personal chain to find access to Elias work, to process-theoretical research and the figurational network, too.

Therefore, with this book I also want to use the good opportunity to revitalise and continue the early connection of Elias with Münster, as an editor and via my institutional background that I continuously establish since by comeback in 2012 at the Institute of Sociology in Münster. In this context in 2016, we organized a conference in Münster about “Changing Power Relations and the Drag Effects of Habitus. Theoretical and Empirical Approaches in the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, expected to be published in 2017, and we held a series of lectures in memory of Elias’s Guest professorship in Münster in 1965 about “Gesellschaftspraxisprozesse und individuelle Praxis” (Social Processes and Individual Practice) which will be published at VS in spring 2017.

This book would never have been published without the help of others: therefore, I would, like to thank Elke Korte for her help and support to realise this project, Stefanie Affeldt for her great work of translating the book into English in painstaking detail in what amounts to detective work. Several translations and narrated editions in the English publication of Elias’s “Collected Works” at UCD, differed from the format of the German original texts, esp. concerning the

2 An English short version has been published in the *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 10, Nr.3/2003: 277–299 under the title ‘From Blame Gossip to Praise Gossip? Gender, Leadership and Organizational Change’.

footnotes. Here, Behrouz Alikhani gave me great assistance in finding the several texts.

Moreover, with this edition on the occasion of his eightieth birthday I want to thank Hermann Korte, too, as my former supervisor and mentor, who became an important colleague and friend.

Münster

January 2017

# On Norbert Elias

## Becoming a Human Scientist

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### Prologue

**T**he German version of this book was written in the mid-1980s. I had, at that time, already—and with increasing intensity—dealt with the works of Norbert Elias for a good twenty years. Over the years, I was also able to help him with some everyday items and accompany him on his journeys. This found formal expression in my appointment to the board of the Norbert Elias Stichting Amsterdam, which he had established in 1983. He had contributed his literary rights as capital, of which I have since been in charge, in coordination with my two board colleagues Johan Goudsblom (Amsterdam) and Stephen Mennell (Dublin), together with the literary agency Liepman (Zurich).

This also means that Norbert Elias was still alive when I was working on the text. He was not particularly taken with my plan, as well as with similar plans by Stephen Mennell. After several long conversations, he finally tolerated, albeit not endorsed, the project. It was not an easy time for any of us.

Now, thirty years later, the publisher Springer VS has

provided me with the opportunity to submit a revised and translated edition. While doing so, I have refrained from making the inept attempt to rewrite the book. Also, this was not necessary because the text of this biographical report on the whole continues to have substance until today. In my revision, I have focussed on editing only a few points.

Firstly, Elias is no longer alive; he died on 1 August 1990. For the second edition in 1997, I had not yet changed the corresponding sections of the text. He was still too much present as a person to me. Now I have taken this into account—even if Norbert Elias has persisted in his writings, in the memories of his friends—in the same way as he phrased it in the conclusion of his, in my eyes, most beautiful text “The Loneliness of Dying”: “Death hides no secret. It opens no door. It is the end of a person. What survives is what he or she has given to other people, what stays in their memory”.<sup>1</sup>

The memory remains alive, not least because the work on and with his opus continuously progresses, and one or the other new fact is being added to his biography. This is also due to the fact that research about individual persons, and the traces they have left, is much faster and more fruitful in the era of the internet. I will make a few comments on this.

1 Norbert Elias: *The Loneliness of Dying*. In: *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, Vol. 6, *The Loneliness of Dying and Humana Conditio*, UCD 2010, p. 52. Norbert Elias's quotes have been taken from *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, resp. ed. by Eric R. Baker, Artur Bogner, Edmund Jephcott, Marc Joly, Katie Liston, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, Richard Kilminster, Robert van Krieken, Steven Loyal, Stephen Mennell, René Moelker, Stephen Quilley, Alan and Brigitte Scott, and Cas Wouters, University College Dublin Press 2006–2014. Unless indicated otherwise, all quotes from German sources have been translated by the translator.

But first I have to mention a controversy that has already started during Elias's lifetime, shortly after the completion of my text in 1987—a controversy that has now also become history as the Elias-Duerr debate. In 1987 I had read the preprint of a chapter from Hans Peter Duerr's first book "Nacktheit und Scham. Der Mythos im Zivilisationsprozeß"<sup>2</sup> and could not imagine that an extensive, public debate would arise from Duerr's arguments. That this nonetheless happened was less related to the theoretical brilliance of the book but rather with the fact that though the attack against the process of civilization was focussed on Elias, it was in principle aimed at all process-oriented sociology and likewise concerned, for instance, Max Weber, Max Horkheimer or Jürgen Habermas. It was in particular the conservative print media, like the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* which again and again presented Duerr's propositions, above all his assumptions about biological and anthropological constants. His propositions fitted in nicely with the late 1980s in the federal republic and the then current discussions on the universal values of society. Duerr hardly found any support in the social sciences for his theses. Michael Schröter<sup>3</sup> and Michael Hinz<sup>4</sup> have exemplarily presented their analysis of

- 2 Hans Peter Duerr: *Nacktheit und Scham. Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß*. Vol. 1, Frankfurt/M. 1988. This was followed by four more volumes on the "Mythos of the Zivilisationsprozeß".
- 3 Michael Schröter: *Scham im Zivilisationsprozeß. Zur Diskussion mit Hans Peter Duerr*. In: Hermann Korte (ed.): *Gesellschaftliche Prozesse und individuelle Praxis. Bochumer Vorlesungen zu Norbert Elias' Zivilisationstheorie*, Frankfurt/M. 1990, pp. 42–85.
- 4 Michael Hinz: *Der Zivilisationsprozeß: Mythos oder Realität? Wissenschaftssoziologische Untersuchungen zur Elias-Duerr Kontroverse*. Opladen 2002.

Duerr's theses and have shown that no serious argument can be won with them against process-theoretically oriented sociology.

Now, as far as the biography is concerned, it is in particular the sources made accessible after his death on his membership in the Jewish Wanderbund "Blau-Weiß" (hiking club) that shed a new light on his autobiographical statements concerning the time in Breslau (today: Wrocław). He had only once commented on his time in the Jewish Jugendbund (youth association): "I had an enormous admiration for the German landscape. Even much later, in my early twenties, I had a very intimate knowledge of all the cathedrals—Bamberg, for example. I knew all the buildings by heart, all the styles. And actually there was a Jewish youth movement that was completely oriented towards these German things".<sup>5</sup>

Even though his membership in "Blau-Weiß" was known when he was still alive, he had never given any further written information on this issue, had trivialized its meaning in conversations or completely denied it. In my biographical fragment "Norbert Elias in Breslau"<sup>6</sup>, I had assumed that he had joined the hiking club under the impression of and only after the First World War. I had to correct this mistake, in the same vein as Elias had to abandon his reserved depiction of his time in "Blau-Weiß".

5 Cited from the Interview with Arend-Jan Heerma van Voss and Bram van Stolk 1984. In: *Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, Vol. 17, *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections*, Norbert Elias's story of life (1984), UCD 2013, pp. 71–140 (here: p. 86).

6 Hermann Korte: *Norbert Elias in Breslau. Ein biografisches Fragment*. In: *Zeitschrift für Soziologie*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, February 1991, pp. 3–11.

This was because in 1994 the historian Jörg Hackeschmidt reported findings from the *Central Zionists Archive* in Jerusalem. He was preparing a study on the “Zionist Organizations” in Germany and, during his research, came across the estate of Martin Bandmann from Breslau, a “leading thinker of the Jewish youth association”.<sup>7</sup> Also included in the estate was a diary which Bandmann had kept between 1919 and 1925. In this diary his friend Norbert Elias is mentioned almost every day. And the very same Elias had been a member of “Weiß-Blau” even before the First World War, at a time when he was still a high school student, and, after 1919, had become one of its ideological spokesmen. For this reason I have adopted some of the data during the revision of this text. As far as the whole complex is concerned, I have addressed this issue in another essay which I published in 2013, with six other texts from the last twenty years.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the 1990s, Jörg Hackeschmidt had to work on-site in the archives of Jerusalem. This was the then common practice for gaining access to sources. Nowadays, in the era of the internet, many of the relevant sources are digitalized. This provides several advantages, but it also means that archival work with and on the material is lost along the way—and with that, probably, also valuable insight. However, the global availability of personal data and publications greatly supports understanding the personal environment of a person.

7 Jörg Hackeschmidt: *Von Kurt Blumenfeld zu Norbert Elias. Die Erfindung einer jüdischen Nation*. Hamburg 1997, p. 17.

8 Hermann Korte: *Elias und der jüdische Wanderbund “Blauweiß”*, in: *Biographische Skizzen zu Norbert Elias*, Wiesbaden 2013, pp. 75–84.

In the recent past, the Marburg historian Adrian Jitschin has made a couple of new discoveries regarding the Elias family which might not have been possible without internet research. From the family tree with several so far unknown relations to the various places of Norbert Elias's residence: with his work, Jitschin enriched the knowledge on the biographical circumstance. I have drawn upon it and acknowledged this accordingly and hope that he will soon publish his findings.<sup>9</sup>

A further difference to the time when I was finishing the book needs to be addressed. Since 2007 eighteen volumes of Norbert Elias's 'Gesammelte Schriften', including a collective index, were published by Suhrkamp (for details see the bibliography). In this revision, I have taken most of my English quotations from the corresponding reference in the 'Collected Works of Norbert Elias', for those that have not yet been translated I refer to the 'Gesammelte Schriften'.

I have to thank Elke Korte for the critical review of the new manuscript and, in the editorial office, Cori Antonia Mackrodt for her informed support.

9 Published in Issue 39 of the Norbert Elias Stichting's biannual newsletter in summer 2013 (For details, refer to the bulletin at the end of the bibliography).