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Elias and the counter-ego: personal recollections

STEPHEN MENNELL

ABSTRACT

Norbert Elias (1897–1990) achieved international recognition as a major sociologist only towards the end of his long life. As a German Jewish refugee in England, he did not even gain a secure academic post (at the University of Leicester) until he was 57. Apart from his *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* [The Civilizing Process], which was published obscurely in 1939, all his other books and most of his essays were published after his formal retirement. These personal recollections date from that last highly productive part of his life, when he gradually attracted an extensive international following. They depict his foibles, some endearing, some that seemed perversely to stand in the way of his growing reputation.

Key words Norbert Elias, figural sociology, Germany and the Netherlands, sociology in Britain

I paused to watch the fly marks on a shelf
And found the great obstruction of myself.
(Thom Gunn, 1965: 392)¹

In conversation, Norbert Elias experimented with the concept of a ‘counter-ego’. Although I myself never discussed it with him, I think I knew exactly what he meant – and to what it corresponded in his own experience – as soon as Cas Wouters mentioned the idea to me. Like so many other civilized human beings, Norbert was often his own worst enemy.²

The clearest illustration, and the one with the most far-reaching consequences in frustrating and delaying the dissemination and reception of his ideas – the very things he most deeply cared about – was his repeated obstruction of attempts to publish an English translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (*The Civilizing Process*; Elias, 2000). Some of us have occasionally speculated about how differently the discipline of sociology might have developed in the Anglophone world in the post-war years had *The Civilizing Process* been published in translation within a few years of the appearance of its near-contemporary, Talcott Parsons's *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), and been received with comparable acclaim. Only a decade ago, an excellent British textbook of sociological theory (Scott, 1995) was still able – quite rightly – to begin with a chapter entitled 'Talcott Parsons: Where It All Began'; the same textbook contains no reference whatsoever to Elias, which is particularly ironic in view of its dedication by the author 'To all my friends at Leicester'. Parsons's hegemony in sociology world-wide in the post-war years still leaves its mark: the discrediting of his functionalist systems theory from the 1960s onwards notwithstanding, the expressly neo-Kantian assumptions on which Parsons's work was founded (see his autobiographical essay, 1970) have never been repudiated by most later schools of sociological thought, and they are reflected in the un-processual character of concept-formation still prevalent in the discipline. *The Civilizing Process*, in contrast, provides a paradigmatic example of theoretical-empirical research based on much more fruitful and clarifying process-concepts.

Why, then, did Elias obstruct the publication of his work in English? We know that there were several earlier attempts to bring out *The Civilizing Process* before the version by Edmund Jephcott published in 1978 and 1982. Not long after the war Patrick Gordon Walker, who was later to be British Foreign Secretary, tried to interest publishers, and a draft of the first volume seems to have been circulating in Leicester in the 1960s. In the early 1970s, when I first encountered Elias and his ideas, Eric Dunning³ was completing a highly readable and faithful translation – again of the first volume – and that was the version which I myself first read. But it was never published. Once Eric had completed it, Norbert wanted to begin to revise the original text. In particular, I gather, he said that back in the 1930s he had made copious notes on social conventions about masturbation, had felt unable to use them at the time, and now wanted to insert a new section about that. There is something metaphorical about that story. To say that Norbert was a perfectionist probably conceals more about him than it reveals: Ilse Seglow⁴ remarked that he found it 'difficult to let his children go', and I find it hard to guess what aspects of his life created the problem. Something seems, so to speak, to have brought about the formation of a strong counter-ego.

Eric Dunning's experience with the translation of *The Civilizing Process* was repeated when, in collaboration with Grace Morrissey, I translated *What*

is Sociology? (1978). From the very beginning, I was irritated by Elias's mode of working. Even though – at least until the last few years of his life – we had no serious disagreements, I felt an admiring ambivalence which, with his usual perspicacity in interpersonal relations, Norbert soon picked up. I remember him saying to one of our circle, 'Stephen is very loyal', but he was always aware of my impatience. I always tended to view the promotion of his ideas as a kind of political campaign, perhaps because I was active in politics. I was a Labour city councillor in Exeter when we first met, and later was SDP parliamentary candidate for Exeter in the 1983 General Election. Norbert in turn felt ambivalent about my involvement in politics, which he basically regarded as incompatible with the relative detachment required for good sociological work, though at a stage when it looked as though I might conceivably be elected an MP he said he looked forward to taking tea with me on the terrace of the House of Commons.

My connection with Norbert was purely accidental. One morning some time in 1969 I was sitting drinking coffee in the Common Room at Exeter with my then colleague from the Department of Economic History, Mike Morrissey, who was telling me that his wife, Grace, was going quietly mad with boredom bringing up two small children in their cottage in the heart of rural Devon. She had a good degree in German from the University of Manchester, and had been told that there was a lot of important German sociology in need of translation into English. I said that though my own German was not very good, I had a reasonable familiarity with German sociological terminology, and could help her out in handling that. And I said I would give some thought to finding something worth translating. After consulting my head of department, Professor Duncan Mitchell, what I came up with was Alfred Weber's *Kulturgeschichte als Kultursoziologie* (1950[1935]), which seems a piquant choice in view of what I was later to learn of the importance of Alfred Weber in Norbert Elias's intellectual history (Elias, 1994: 101–20). But, after months of enquiries by my literary agent Mike Shaw, it became clear that no British publisher was interested in Alfred Weber. Instead, Mike came back to me with an enquiry from Hutchinsons: would Grace and I be interested in translating a little book called *Was ist Soziologie?* by someone called Norbert Elias? The name rang only the very most distant bell; years afterwards I worked out that the faint tinkling noise was due to John Goldthorpe's having put Elias's article 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment' (1956) on a reading list in my Cambridge undergraduate days – but I doubt very much that I had read it, let alone understood it, as a student. Actually, I felt far from enthusiastic about translating Elias's book, which sounded like an introductory textbook rather than a classic major work.⁵ As I subsequently learnt, Juventa Verlag had commissioned it as an introductory volume for the German translations of the successful Prentice-Hall series of elementary textbooks, because the equivalent American book

of the same title – *What is Sociology?* by Alex Inkeles (1964) – was manifestly intellectually inadequate. Nevertheless, we translated two test pieces from the book, passages chosen as we understood by the author, and in due course we were informed that our efforts had been met with enthusiasm by this remote figure, who had previously been very disappointed with the incomprehension of professional translators. So we began work on the book, and there commenced my long correspondence and subsequent friendship with Norbert.

My initial reaction was of disappointment. I could not at this stage see the significance of the Introduction (with its mysterious diagram of a pattern of interdependence that Eric Dunning called ‘the false teeth’), nor the second chapter (‘The Sociologist as Destroyer of Myths’). I did, however, enjoy chapter 1 (‘Sociology – the Questions posed by Comte’), which changed my perception of Auguste Comte, whom I had until then – on the basis of John Goldthorpe’s lectures at Cambridge and Robert Bellah’s seminar at Harvard – regarded as a wildly eccentric 19th-century figure of little contemporary relevance to sociology. When we reached chapter 3, the ‘Game Models’, the penny dropped decisively. This was what I had been looking for and groping inchoately towards in my lectures on sociological theory at Exeter. I had spent the year 1966–7 as a Frank Knox Fellow in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard, sitting at the feet of Parsons, Homans, Lipset, Riesman, Bellah in sociology, Gergen and McClelland in psychology, Maybury-Lewis in anthropology, and preoccupied with what is called the ‘macro–micro’ problem. That was the time when Peter Blau’s *Exchange and Power in Social Life* (1964) was the talking point in sociology, and as an economics graduate I enjoyed subjecting its primitive rational-choice assumptions to examination and finding them inadequate (Mennell, 1974: 91–115). I had read Simmel (1950[1908]) on the significance of numbers in social life, and understood why the dyadic model of interaction was an inadequate foundation for ‘bridging the macro–micro gap’. Twenty years later, when I attended the American Sociological Association’s 1992 meeting in Pittsburgh, with macro–micro relations as its theme, American sociology did not seem to have moved any further forward. But here, in 1971, was the solution. The models were not exactly a ‘theory’ as conventional sociologists would understand the term but, to use a phrase of Harold Garfinkel’s, they served as ‘aids to a sluggish imagination’ in showing how interdependence was related to power ratios, how power ratios were related to unplanned social processes, how the structure of social processes was related to people’s perception and the formation of ideologies, and much else (including how futile was the conventional agency–structure distinction, even when dressed up in superficially processual language like ‘structuration’). Later, after reading *The Court Society* (rev. edn, 2006), the second volume of *The Civilizing Process*, and *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1994[1965]), I was also to

understand how power struggles and power ratios were related to the formation of habitus. For the moment, though, the Games Models were sufficient revelation. From then on, I understood what *What is Sociology?* was about, and appreciated the 'need for new means of speaking and thinking'. I used the models in my first book – which appeared four whole years before our translation and was much more widely read – as well as in my contribution to the Elias *Festschrift* (Mennell, 1977). But the immediate consequence was that, having found there was no point in explaining conventional sociological jargon to Grace, I found myself forced (with my as-ever inadequate German) to assume the role of senior partner in the translating team, because the task was much more fundamental than I had realized at first. Even so, I felt a grain of scepticism about introducing neologisms; I remember in particular thinking that the word 'figuration' would be subject to the same process-reducing pressures, and if it caught on would soon come to be used as statically as 'system' used to be.

I am jumping ahead. I had not yet met Elias. For more than a year, we sent draft chapters to him. By this time, Grace Morrissey was living in Glasgow. She posted her manuscript drafts to me in Exeter, I revised them, had them typed, and sent them off to Norbert in Leicester, along with clearly organized lists of the problems that had arisen – with the request that he gave us his guidance on how recurrent words should be translated, so that we could gradually become more consistent and eliminate the problems as we worked through the book. To my amazement, we received little feedback – and next to no response to our detailed queries. He seemed less pleased with the first few complete chapters than he had been with our test pieces, and we redoubled our efforts – but without much specific help. He sent me an offprint of his article on science in *Economy and Society* (1972), and suggested I read his two-part article on the sociology of knowledge in *Sociology* (1971) as well as 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment' from the *British Journal of Sociology* (1956). I have to say they did not help much. They would have done, had I known then what I know now about Norbert's work. But if so, I would not have needed them.

Finally, I sent off the complete typescript, with further revisions made to the earlier chapters in light of the penny's having dropped when translating the later chapters. Now the time had come actually to meet Norbert Elias, and around noon on 10 August 1972 I was waiting in Hutchinson's offices in Fitzroy Square, London, for Norbert to arrive from Leicester. Anne Douglas, our editor, told me that Norbert had muddled the dates and arrived the previous day, but had gone off cheerfully to the British Museum library saying that no day in London was ever wasted. She also warned me that Norbert was 'very old', implying though not saying that he was probably getting a bit gaga. In retrospect that is amusing: he must have been just 75 and had 18 more very productive years to live.

Norbert arrived (again) and whisked me off straightaway to a famous fish restaurant in nearby Charlotte Street, an old haunt of his as I gathered.⁶ I remember feeling very nervous as we walked down the street on a beautiful sunny day. We did not talk about the translation much, then or later, but – perhaps in response to my clumsy enquiries about his own intellectual origins – he quizzed me about my own ideas. Was I interested in phenomenological sociology, which was all the rage then? I said incautiously that yes, I was a little. ‘Ah,’ said Norbert, ‘I thought so.’ Within a few moments he had told me why I should be highly sceptical. I think that was probably the starting point for an essay I subsequently published (during the ‘war of the schools’ in British sociology) attacking the foundations of ethnomethodology (Mennell, 1975). And we had not yet reached the restaurant. There, I remember, Norbert quickly discovered that I had never eaten eel, and ordered me to choose it. My problem in coping with the bones probably ensured that Norbert was able to do most of the talking. Encountering the man after reading the book quickly convinced me that here was a sociological mind in a league above Talcott Parsons, with whom I had studied and whom I briefly came to know quite well intellectually and socially at Harvard in 1966–7. Yet that remained difficult to reconcile with the fact that no one in British sociology – outside an immediate circle of those associated with Leicester – seemed to know anything about Elias. I remember one early conversation in which I allowed myself to appear too impressed when he told me that he had been Karl Mannheim’s assistant in Frankfurt; it was immediately apparent that Norbert was insulted to be considered less than the equal of the then better-known sociologist.

In 1974 I applied for a post in the Department of Sociology at Leicester. By this time I had met Eric Dunning, as well as Joe and Olive Banks and some other colleagues of Norbert’s there. I was expected to be appointed – Joe told me afterwards they had pencilled in my name on the timetable for the following year. In the event, my interview was a world-record disaster. I had been kept waiting around in corridors, metaphorically and literally, for 24 hours. Probably I wanted too much to escape Exeter and go to Leicester. But there was something else that raised my level of anxiety to the point where I became incoherent: Norbert had just had his spectacular falling-out with Ilya Neustadt.⁷ Neustadt himself seemed to have taken to me, but Norbert and Eric both told me that it would be better not to dwell on my connection with Norbert – the main reason why I wanted to move to Leicester. Altogether, it was very inhibiting, and not my happiest moment. In retrospect, the hash I made of the interview may perhaps be seen as an unplanned figurational consequence of Norbert’s counter-ego-driven propensity to fall out with many of those closest to him. He made up for it that evening by filling me up with Chivas Regal round at 19a Central Avenue, talking brilliantly – this was the first time I heard the idea of processual

theories in five dimensions (Elias, 1992: 14, 35) – and packing me off in the early hours anaesthetized in a taxi.

Still nothing much happened about the translation of *What is Sociology?* As early as 30 November 1972, Anne Douglas wrote from Hutchinson's that 'Professor Elias's silence is really rather worrying'. After a while, it transpired that Norbert had lost the typescript. I had a photocopy made of the carbon copy; this was long before word-processors, and back in the days when even obtaining a photocopy was a slow and tiresome business. I remember a telephone conversation with Percy Cohen, the editor of the Hutchinson's sociology series, in which I explained the delays. Percy said it would soon be too late to bother bringing out the book, because the moment had passed – the first volume of Immanuel Wallerstein's *The Modern World System* (1974) had appeared, along with several other books marking a turn back towards historically orientated sociology, and Percy thought Norbert had missed the boat. (Back in the 1960s, Percy and Norbert had jointly taught sociological theory at Leicester, with Percy championing the then-current functionalism, and Norbert his developmental approach, which was then considered hopelessly *passé* and Victorian.⁸)

Finally it was decided that I would go up to stay with Norbert at Central Avenue for about a week over the New Year of 1975, to make the final corrections to the translation. I arrived with the 'flu, which deprived me of my only chance of swimming with Norbert in his pool.⁹ But I could still work. We did not, however, sit down as I expected, to go systematically through the chapters using my careful lists of queries and problems. Norbert had again mislaid the Introduction and first two chapters, but managed to unearth the last four. He sat me down at his old German portable typewriter (with the *y* and *z* transposed), and started dictating a new opening section to chapter 3 (the Game Models). Nothing Norbert dictated was new: everything had already been said in the book, but in a slightly different order. Perhaps we worked like this for one full day. Subsequently I used some of the new material in place of some of the old; that is why the first few pages of chapter 3 are the one place in the book where the German and English texts do not fully coincide.

Norbert, however, was distracted much of the time by an impending talk he had promised to give to a conference of art historians, taking place in one of the Leicester halls of residence immediately after the New Year. The invitation was in consequence of the exhibition of Norbert's collection of West African art, held a few years earlier at the museum in Leicester (Elias, 1970). We climbed up into the loft to select the pieces he would need for his talk; the house, including the unused garage as well as the loft, and 19b next door, were packed with this marvellous collection. In the end he chose just three small ritual figures, to illustrate his model of the three-stage process of development from the purely native form through a stage when greater

expression was given to individual craftsmanship, to the incipiently kitschified product for the tourist market; when he died, he left two of these pieces to me.

The talk was a disaster. Norbert had not written any notes, and without notes he could be either brilliant or awful, with nothing much in between (rather like my own performances at job interviews, I reflected much later). By this time my wife Barbara had arrived in Leicester and, while I sat at the front and handed up the figures to Norbert when he needed them, she sat anonymously at the back. She was therefore able to hear one of the organizers remark, 'My God, how are we going to keep this old fool's stuff out of the conference volume?'¹⁰

We returned to Central Avenue, and Barbara put on the kettle for a cup of tea, whereupon the fuses blew. Norbert grumpily laid the blame at her door. The truth became plain. The kettle was plugged into a tree of adaptors and stood on top of the refrigerator, which itself stood right next to the cooker and had been working overtime for many years. We opened the door, and removed what provisions remained in the lower shelves. There did not seem to be much room, and then we realized that the whole of the top shelf was taken up by an enormous block of ice attached to the underside of the freezer compartment. The fridge had never been defrosted. We used bowls of hot water to dislodge the ice, which was so heavy that I could scarcely lift it out. We also investigated Norbert's store cupboards, to find huge numbers of boxes of coffee bags and tins of dry-roasted nuts, which apparently he had fallen into the habit of buying every time he went shopping. This might have been a legacy of wartime rationing; but Norbert was not very domesticated.

The next day Joop and Maria Goudsblom arrived from Amsterdam.¹¹ It was the first time we had met them. By this time both Barbara and I had severe 'flu. The Goudsbloms, however, said they were immune because, following Norbert's advice and practice, they took lots of vitamin pills. It seemed very loyal. They were both very ill after they returned to Amsterdam.

For Sunday lunch, Norbert packed all five of us into two taxis and we drove out miles into the country to have lunch in a favourite country pub. I remember that Joop chose steak and kidney pudding with suet crust, another example of when in Rome doing as the Romans do. After lunch we went for an enormously long walk in near-freezing fog, with Barbara and me visibly wilting. It was one of my first experiences of Norbert's practice of peripatetic sociology. Joop broached the possibility of my contributing to the *Festschrift* for Norbert's 80th birthday two years later. Back in Norbert's earshot, we fell into conversation about theories of science. I ventured to remark that perhaps the gulf between Norbert's views and at least the later work of Karl Popper (1972) was not so great.¹² This was the first time I saw Norbert go nuclear. He was most offended.

The meeting with the Goudsbloms proved to be of as great long-term

importance as my contact with Elias which had occasioned it. Joop and I were soon in very frequent correspondence. He secured Norbert's agreement that he and I would revise the translation of *What is Sociology?* together. I was aware that Norbert trusted Joop in a way that he did not trust me – quite rightly, for my understanding of Norbert's ideas was much shallower than it became later, though I also resented the fact that he did not give the text the relatively brief amount of time it would have taken to go systematically through the problems.¹³ I visited the Goudsblooms in Amsterdam in August 1975 for the first of countless times, and I remember sitting in the sunny garden and resolving the major problems.¹⁴ About the same time I was working over Joop's English translation of his marvellous – but, as it was to prove, premature – *Sociology in the Balance* (1977).¹⁵ In retrospect, I realize that I am really more a student of Joop's than directly of Norbert's. That is not only because a decade later Joop was to promote my book *All Manners of Food* (1985) for an Amsterdam doctorate, and thus become formally my *doctorvader*; it went back much further. I suppose that I just learnt more about Norbert's ideas from Joop than I did from Norbert himself. I am not entirely sure why this was so. Over the years I probably met, and certainly corresponded with, Joop more frequently than I did with Norbert. After he left Leicester, I only rarely had tête-à-têtes on matters sociological with Norbert. Besides, by then, he was becoming increasingly deaf, and he seemed to have particular difficulty with my gruff Yorkshire tones. Furthermore, especially in the later years in Amsterdam (where he lived in a spacious apartment above the Goudsblooms' house) he tended to invite me to visit him late at night – sometimes as late as 11.00 p.m. – after he had finished work; by that time of day I, although nearly half a century younger than Norbert, was usually well past my best while he, the octogenarian and nonogenarian, was in full flight.

But of course I did learn vastly from Norbert. Sometimes it was in conferences, such as the meeting in Aachen on his 80th birthday in 1977 at which we presented him with the *Festschrift*, and at which I was effectively inducted into the wider Elias circle – that was where I first met Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, Anton Blok, Peter Gleichmann, Hermann Korte, Nico Wilterdink, Cas Wouters and many others.¹⁶ After that, the major gatherings of the clan tended to occur every few years around Norbert's birthday, 22 June. There was the 1984 conference in Bielefeld on long-term social processes, with Elias himself, Immanuel Wallerstein and William H. McNeill as the key figures; Michel Foucault should have been there, but did not arrive because, as we subsequently learned, he was at that very moment on his deathbed. Before we knew that sad news, I remember with pleasure Norbert taking his British friends (including in that category Francis Carstens) to a meal at the Bültmannshof; it was the time of the *Spargelfest*, and almost everything except the dessert featured asparagus. Norbert was showing signs

of nostalgia for England.¹⁷ In 1987, there were the splendid celebrations of Norbert's 90th birthday in Apeldoorn and Amsterdam, with many distinguished friends of his, including Pierre Bourdieu. Of considerable significance in British sociology, there was the conference on Norbert's work which Eric Dunning and I organized at Balliol College, Oxford, on 5–6 January 1980, under the auspices of the Theory Group of the British Sociological Association. The Theory Group's gatherings usually attracted 20 or 30 participants, but on this occasion about 100 turned up, from as far away as Australia, and including almost enough of the Dutch 'figurational family' (as Cas Wouters called it) to charter a small aircraft. Tony Giddens arrived unexpectedly from Cambridge on the first morning, and we junked the official programme for the first session in order to stage an impromptu debate between Elias and Giddens. If I recall correctly, much of it centred on Norbert's objection to Tony's undue deference (as he saw it) to philosophy. During the rest of the conference, demands were made from the floor for Norbert to spell out his intellectual antecedents and his own 'philosophical' position. 'If you look backwards over your shoulder for long enough', he began, and paused dramatically, 'you get a stiff neck.' I spent a great deal of time in-between sessions, along with others, trying to persuade him at least to explain what were his objections to philosophy. He seemed to be struggling with his counter-ego. He resented anything that smacked of acknowledging that philosophy as a discipline had anything to offer in the modern intellectual world – he regarded it, I think, as about as relevant as theology and his attitude had the strength of old-style French anticlericalism. In the end, he capitulated. In the final session on the second day he spoke, seemingly off the cuff, about his attitude to Kant's philosophy and the dominance of the *homo clausus* conception of the human being in western philosophy since the Renaissance. The substance of these remarks was to appear in print a couple of years later in his essay on 'Scientific Establishments' (1982), and was subsequently developed in many other contexts; for example, the last section of *The Society of Individuals* (1991a) and *The Symbol Theory* (1991b). I am sure I was not alone among the participants in finding this exposition a revelation that greatly deepened our understanding of Elias's work. Much as he had hitherto resisted it, writing about this undoubtedly helped the reception of his work among British sociologists. In the following two weeks, Norbert undertook a strenuous tour of British universities – Leicester, Leeds, Edinburgh and Exeter. I remember my slight trepidation in Exeter when I had to introduce Norbert to his namesake, our pet cat. To my relief, he seemed flattered to have a cat named after him; the cat did not communicate his view on the matter.

On other occasions in the late 1970s and early 1980s, I went alone to visit Norbert at Bielefeld, where between 1978 and 1984 he was a Permanent Fellow-in-Residence at the Zentrum für interdisziplinäre Forschung (ZiF).

The first time was in March 1979, when I wanted his advice about the research I intended to begin on the culinary cultures of England and France. I showed Norbert a flow chart which I had drawn to represent my preliminary thoughts. He did not approve of flow charts – of course, he pithily made me see, they represented process-reduction at its worst. He sent me off to read Drummond and Wilbraham's *The Englishman's Food* (1939), and in retrospect I am astonished and ashamed that I had not read that *opus classicus* already. That Elias knew the book was symptomatic of his vast store of knowledge about British society and history accumulated in his four decades in England, and over the next few years his letters often included a passing thought about cuisine. Later, in July 1981, I returned to spend a week with Norbert at the ZiF after I had gathered voluminous research material, and it was there that I drafted the chapter-by-chapter outline for *All Manners of Food*. We also talked of many other things. I specifically remember crossing the road one sunny evening on our way to eat at 'the Greek' on the main concourse of Bielefeld University, while talking, again, about theories of knowledge and science, when Norbert finally made me understand that Hegel had been raising important questions about the growth of knowledge (albeit in a metaphysical way), and at last overcame the mistaken view that I had picked up as an undergraduate from reading Popper's vitriolic account of Hegel. That was also the occasion on which Norbert decided my education in German culture was deficient, and summoned Artur Bogner¹⁸ to take me on a pub crawl. I demurred, but he insisted, and Artur enjoyed himself taking me on a grand tour of *hefetruben Weizenbier* and the like. Norbert probably wanted to get back to an evening's dictating to his current amanuensis, Erik Backer. He was then working on a new Introduction to the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* – that was one reason for the long gap between the publication of the two volumes in English – and there were already variorum texts of a huge essay extending the theory of state-formation backwards into the earliest origins of agrarian urban centres such as Sumer. I offered to boil down the gist of them into an Introduction of manageable length, which I did over the next couple of months back in England. As I expected, however, Norbert thanked me very much for my efforts, but felt unable to use my text. His letter is worth quoting at length for the light it casts on his attitude to his work; it provides an illustration of what he may have had in mind in talking about the 'counter-ego', but it also shows his academic super-ego and is so honest and forceful that it makes me feel arrogant to have dared offer advice on these matters of presentation:

I was most grateful for the effort you have made to produce a shorter version of my introduction to Volume II and it reads much better than any introduction I can hope to produce on my own, but there are a number of things you have not included in your version of the

introduction which my inescapable conscience tells me ought to be included. I have made a last ditch effort to find a compromise between your advice (which one part of myself knows is good advice) and my conscience (which has been my loyal adviser for 84 years or so). But that effort has been cut short by a very stern letter from David Martin [then managing director of Blackwells, saying] . . . he will have to go ahead sans introduction if the MS is not forthcoming immediately.¹⁹

The second volume appeared in 1982 without any Introduction.

Perhaps the high tide of my friendship with Norbert was my *promotie* at the University of Amsterdam in September 1985, when he sat majestically in the middle of the front row of the audience. The tide ebbed the following day, when there took place a conversation between us which created double difficulties. We went for a walk together in the Vondel Park, and Norbert asked me about my own writing plans. I said – I think reasonably clearly – that I believed the time had come for someone to write a book about Norbert's own ideas, and the research tradition in which they had come to be employed, to make them more accessible to a wider sociological audience. I thought he had given his approval. Later it turned out that he had the impression that I had in mind a different kind of book from what I actually did – he thought I meant to edit a selection of writings in the 'figurational' style. To make matters worse, I asked about what he was writing at the moment, and he told me about *The Symbol Theory*. I then made two entirely misjudged remarks. One was a flippant comment that he wrote so fast that I couldn't keep up, and he ought to stop to give me a chance. Later, he was to use that as the justification for accusing me of wishing him dead; certainly it had been a most inappropriate remark to make to someone who – as a reading only just between the lines of *The Loneliness of the Dying* (1985) makes plain – was fearful of the process of dying, if not of death. And, maybe even worse, I implied as delicately as I could phrase it that I was worried that *The Symbol Theory* could end up damaging rather than enhancing his reputation. In that, I am still not convinced I was entirely wrong; although the book contains many striking insights, it is badly structured and repetitive. (A characteristic of several of his later works, this was at least in part the consequence of Elias's failing eyesight, which both increased his reliance on dictating to assistants and prevented him from effectively editing the resulting typescripts.) Richard Kilminster, who edited the text with Norbert's approval, sought to make more radical changes than Norbert would permit, and very little was actually cut. Even sympathetic readers like my Monash University colleague Harry Redner initially failed to see anything in the book that everybody did not know already.

There were happy times after that. During the year I spent as a Fellow at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) at Wassenaar – on

22 October 1987 to be precise, because I was at Cas Wouters's birthday party at the time – Norbert rang me to ask me to go to Strasbourg the next day but one, in order to accept on his behalf a doctorate *honoris causa*. I was greatly honoured, even if Christian de Montlibert and his Strasbourg colleagues inevitably viewed me as very much second-best.²⁰ On my return to Amsterdam, I took Zdzisław Mach²¹ with me to present Norbert with the furry *epitoge*, and over dinner Norbert indulged in nostalgia about his young days skiing in the Silesian mountains, where Zdzisław had recently been conducting field research in what were now the Polish Western Territories (Mach, 1993).

But the 1985 conversation in the Vondel Park continued to cast a long shadow. Earlier in 1987, when I had already written drafts of the first five chapters of what was to become *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image* (1989), Elias tried to stop me completing it. He declared it anathema, and had his agent, Ruth Liepman – to her acute embarrassment – telephone me and write a stiff letter. I suppose, at a pinch, he could have prevented my extensive use of quotations from his work. It was an uncomfortable situation, and for a while I stopped working on the book. I was rescued when Richard Kilminster proposed to write a similar book, and wrote to Norbert to tell him so. At this point, Norbert recognized the impossibility of stopping all secondary writing about his work, and gave us both the go-ahead.²² During the year I spent at NIAS, I drove up to see Norbert late at night every couple of weeks or so, but we did not talk about my book. Periodically there were eruptions. These usually coincided with Cas Wouters – who, along with Joop Goudsblom and Eric Dunning, was reading each draft chapter as I finished it – enthusing to Norbert about how good my book was going to be. Elias wrote me a quite savage letter in January 1988. Yet civility was somehow maintained. On Norbert's 91st birthday there was a small dinner in Amsterdam at which the first Premio Europeo Amalfi was presented to Norbert for *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen* (1987a), judged the finest work of sociology published in Europe that year. Anton Blok was invited for the first time since his celebrated 1981 apostasy, which enabled Hermann Korte to remark gleefully to me that 'You are in the doghouse, Stephen, but Anton is in hell!' About that time, even Joop had joined me in the doghouse. Norbert had taken exception to Joop's publishing an essay on 'Priests and Warriors' (1988),²³ accusing him more or less of plagiarism. Of course the charge was absurd, directed at the friend who more than anyone else had spread the word about Elias's importance and, over the previous two decades, created a major research school centred on his theories. Joop took this badly; but his time in purgatory was less prolonged than mine, and I had gradually become inured to the red-hot poker. In retrospect, it seems clear to me that Norbert was by then suffering from the mild paranoia of the very old; in the light again of *The Loneliness of the Dying*, I

think the reason is clear. Very old people become increasingly dependent on friends who were once their protégés, who are at the same time becoming less dependent on them; the power ratio is shifting, and that is resented.

In the end, though, we were reconciled. My book about Elias's sociology came out in mid-1989, and of course I sent a copy to its subject. Nothing was said until the last time that I saw Norbert. It was the end of January 1990, just a week before I left to take up the chair of sociology at Monash University, Australia. Joop and Maria Goudsblom threw a farewell party at their home for all my Dutch friends, and Norbert came downstairs. He told me that, after all, he quite liked my book and had decided that it would 'do some good'. And, more touchingly, he presented me with a copy of his own latest book (and, as it proved, the last published in his lifetime), *Studien über die Deutschen* (*The Germans*, 1996²⁴). It was inscribed, 'For Stephen . . . dass er Europa nicht vergesse. Freundshaftlich, Norbert'. Just six months later, I was writing obituaries in Australia, and faxing them overnight to *The Times* and *The Independent* in London.

At the beginning of these reminiscences I used Norbert Elias's fugitive notion of the counter-ego as a peg on which to hang them. But, if the concept has any value, it would scarcely be consistent with the principles of figurational sociology to see the counter-ego as the static property of a single *homo clausus*. Reviewing the course of my close but sometimes slightly fraught relationship with Elias in the last 18 years of his life, I am sure that I can see two counter-egos at work.

NOTES

This article is based on personal recollections and on the author's correspondence with Norbert Elias, the originals of which are now deposited with Elias's papers in the Deutsche Literaturarchiv, Marbach/Neckar, Germany. It is a revised version of a 1996 draft intended for a book that was never published, a translation of the recollections of Elias's Dutch friends (Israëls, Komen and De Swaan, 1993) with additional contributions from his English associates.

- 1 The superscription is my own choice, but Elias appreciated Thom Gunn's work and translated one of his poems into German (Elias, 1987b: 51).
- 2 I do not wish to make too much of the idea of the counter-ego as a key element in Elias's thought. Cas Wouters and Michael Schröter have confirmed to me that he used the expression in conversation when he was recovering in October 1983 after having been taken seriously ill in Greece and flown back to Amsterdam. He described his 'decision' to go on living in terms of a triumph over his *Wider-Ich*, which had been enticing him to die. It is, however, unlikely that the term was merely the product of a fleeting whim. Elias was very knowledgeable about psychoanalysis – indeed in the last years of his life he wrote many drafts of his

thoughts about Freud, without its resulting in anything publishable – and my best guess is that the idea answered to something more general that he recognized in himself.

- 3 Eric Dunning (1936–), now Professor Emeritus, University of Leicester; Elias's collaborator in their work on the sociology of sport and leisure (1986).
- 4 Ilse Seglow (1900–84) practised as a psychoanalyst in London. She had been an actress, and wrote her doctoral thesis in Frankfurt with Mannheim and Elias on the development of the theatre in Germany; see her recollections of the period (1977).
- 5 On 17 July 1971 I was just about to send the test pieces to Elias, and wrote to my agent, Mike Shaw: 'I'm quite happy to help Grace with the Elias, because I quite enjoy the work. She's quite keen to tackle this, as she was getting cold feet over the sheer scale of the Weber. On the other hand, there's not much academic kudos for me in translating Elias, whereas the Weber would have been a landmark.' Little did I know that Elias's book was decisively to affect the direction of my academic career.
- 6 This was the first of innumerable meals to which Norbert treated me. Despite my very best efforts to reciprocate, I do not believe I ever succeeded in footing the bill for any meal we had together.
- 7 See the inexcusably cruel comment on Neustadt that Elias inserted into his essay, 'Towards a Theory of Communities' (1974: xli n.). Leicester colleagues have pondered what caused the breach between the two close friends, but no one can be sure.
- 8 Ian Wilson, an undergraduate in the Department of Sociology at Leicester in the 1960s, took copious notes on the Elias/Cohen seminar, which have been deposited with the Elias papers in the Deutsche Literaturarchiv in Marbach/Neckar. Also of interest, in the same archive, are very full notes on Elias's first-year lectures on sociology made by Mike Levin, later Senior Lecturer in Politics at Goldsmith's College, London.
- 9 After moving into 19a Central Avenue in 1966, Elias had the entire garden removed and a heated outdoor swimming pool built there. The clearance between his house and that next door did not permit earth-moving machinery to be used, and Elias told me admiringly how the entire excavation was accomplished by a pair of 'Irish navvies' with a wheelbarrow.
- 10 Not everyone shared this view; one of our colleagues from Exeter, Michael Snow, a Lecturer in Fine Art, was greatly impressed, but he must have been in a small minority.
- 11 Johan Goudsblom (1932–), now Professor Emeritus of Sociology, University of Amsterdam, Dutch champion of Elias's sociology and leader from the 1960s to the 1990s of the 'Amsterdam School' of 'figurational sociology'.
- 12 Elias's essays on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences, including an onslaught on Popper's earlier work, are widely scattered among many journals and edited books. They will form volume 14 of the 'Collected Works of Norbert Elias', scheduled for publication by UCD Press in 2007–8.
- 13 When we did discuss a specific translation problem which caught Norbert's interest, he was most constructive. For example, I had pestered him for months or years about my dissatisfaction with the key term *Zustandsreduktion*, arguing

that it was not states that were reduced but processes that were reduced to states. That was how we came to agree upon the expression 'process-reduction' in English.

- 14 I made the final revision in the course of the following 18 months. The book was eventually published by Hutchinson and Columbia University Press in 1978, to my great relief at a stage in my career when I needed publications to my credit! It underwent a few further vicissitudes; the main one that sticks in my mind was the embarrassment of Joop's having to explain to Reinhard Bendix, whom Columbia had persuaded to write a brief Foreword, that it was quite wrong to speak of 'interaction' as one of Elias's key concepts, and that he should instead write 'interdependence'.
- 15 The book had made a great mark in Dutch, but the work of Elias which underpinned it was then so much less well known in the English-speaking world than in the Netherlands that few readers seem to have appreciated its significance.
- 16 Only much later, in fact since I wrote the first version of this essay in 1996, did I come to realize that not just I, but most of the others too, were being inducted. In fact, until then the 'figurational family' that has since become a vast worldwide research network did not really exist. Elias had largely separate circles of friends in several countries, but only to a very limited extent did they know each other. In Britain, there were two generations of friends. There were fellow refugees and other friends from his early years in London, such as the historian Francis Carstens (who, having been Patrick Gordon Walker's guide through the left underground in Berlin in the early years of Hitler's regime, was the link between Elias and Gordon Walker). Then there were the younger sociologists Elias came to know mainly through Leicester (from Bryan Wilson through Eric Dunning to Richard Kilminster). The two generations did not know each other very well. In the Netherlands, Elias had known Goudsblom since the 1950s, and in the late 1960s and 1970s gathered a large and interdisciplinary circle. Led by the sociologist Goudsblom, the political scientist Van Benthem van den Bergh, and the anthropologist Anton Blok (who, however, broke with the group for some years in the 1980s – see Mennell, 1989: 228–32), the younger members included Abram de Swaan, Nico Wilterdink, Cas Wouters, Christien Brinkgreve, Ali de Regt, Pieter Spierenburg, Bram Kempers and many others. Elias's followers in Germany included Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann who, however, were not close to each other and did not know Goudsblom until they came together to edit the *Festschrift*. Two conferences, in Aachen in 1977 and at Balliol College in 1980, effectively created the close international research network that has grown and spread over the ensuing quarter of a century.
- 17 At the time, German had gradually become Elias's main working language again, but sometimes he switched between English and German quite unconsciously. I remember one amusing incident (on a different occasion in Bielefeld) when Norbert telephoned Hermann Korte in Rheda to ask him to look up in the railway timetable the latest train I could catch back to Strasbourg where I had to attend a Council of Europe meeting. He began by asking me questions in English and speaking in German down the line to Hermann, but finished speaking German to me and English to Hermann.

- 18 Artur Bogner was then a doctoral student at Bielefeld who had been one of Elias's assistants; now a specialist on Ghana at the University of Bayreuth.
- 19 Letter from Elias to Mennell, dated 14 September 1981.
- 20 Christian de Montlibert had been striving for several years to have the Université de Strasbourg II award a DHC to Elias, so could not help but be disappointed to have to make do with me. The whole Department of Sociology gathered at L'Ancienne Douane and after dinner I had to give an impromptu seminar on Elias's work in my fractured French, lubricated by good wine. The following day, after the ceremony, things were a little spoilt when Christian asked me whether he should telephone the indisposed Elias in Amsterdam. I remembered that Elias had spoken perfect French as a young man, and assented. It was a disaster, because Norbert could not follow a word that Christian said, seemed not to know who he was, and eventually rang off.
- 21 Zdzisław Mach, now professor and director of the Institute of European Studies at the Jagiellonian University, Kraków, in 1987–8 one of my fellow Fellows at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study, Wassenaar.
- 22 At the 1980 Balliol conference, Richard and I had discussed the need to explain Elias to the sociological world, and had informally agreed that I should concentrate on setting out how the various aspects of Elias's work were linked to each other, and he would concentrate on the harder task of tracing the intellectual roots of his thinking. It took us until 1989 and 1998 respectively.
- 23 A later version of the argument, in English, can be found in chapters 2 and 3 of Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History* (1996).
- 24 At the time, I had no idea that Eric Dunning and I would have to take on the English translation of the book.

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