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Historical Sociology in the Netherlands

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Sociology in the Netherlands is at once quite influential and rather unpopular. Even before World War II sociologists were involved in policy consultation, in the selection of farmers for the newly reclaimed polders, in designing settlement policies for transients. After 1945 they were part of the effort to integrate Moluccan families and subsequent cohorts of foreign workers and Caribbean immigrants, and helped design public housing schemes and policies for the prevention and control of drug abuse. Sociologists held very visible positions as big city mayors, cabinet ministers, and as newspaper columnists. At one point, in 1969, 6.5% of all freshmen chose sociology as their major. But a price was paid for this influence in the lay public's hearty disdain of sociologists' expiating about a society of which most citizens feel that they themselves have first hand experience and first class understanding.

The method of Dutch sociology has been mainly descriptive — sociology, a particular school of meticulous empirical description founded by S. R. Steinmetz, dominated the discipline until the fifties. And al-

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Subjects and Processes

Stephen Mennell
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Reading Eli Zaretsky's "Note on 'Identity'" and Barbara Laslett's "Thinking about the Subject," prompts me to press again the claim of Norbert Elias to the continuing serious attention of comparative-historical sociologists. Philip Abrams in his widely-read *Historical Sociology* (1982: 230-1) spoke of Elias's work as probably "the most remarkable recent attempt to contain the social and the individual within a unified scheme of sociological analysis." Like Zaretsky and Laslett, Elias found much of value in Freud, most obviously *Civilization and its Discontents*; but his thinking continued to develop productively until his death only two years ago, and his late works are still in course of publication (see the appended list of his books).

Two main themes in Elias's work seem to me to be especially relevant to problems of "identity" and "subjects:" first, the connections he makes between the formation of group identities and personal identities; and secondly, his stress on the historically contingent character of processes of identity formation. Space allows me to suggest only a few relevant points.

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though classic German and French sociologists remained the recognized intellectual forebears, the field was on the whole atheoretical, unphilosophical, ahistorical, and socially uncommitted, although closely associated with the several denominational and political "pillars" of Dutch society.

Historical research remained the exception in social science until the early seventies, when interest was kindled by a marxist revival among students and intellectuals. But marxist scholars themselves produced very few historical studies. What caused historical sociology in the Netherlands to flourish was the intellectual impact of Norbert Elias, much reinforced by the efforts of Johan Goudsblom who introduced Elias' work and assembled a circle of students around him in Amsterdam in the early seventies.

Norbert Elias, who died in 1990 at the age of 93, is widely read on the European continent, but less well-known in England, where he lived from 1935 until 1975, or in the United States. Elias' magnum opus, *The Civilizing Process*, appeared in 1939, a most inauspicious publication date: even so, the work was noted and — also in Holland — favorably reviewed by some outstanding scholars. (Goudsblom, 1977; Mennell, 1989).

Elias' main work relates the process of European state formation and the concomitant monopolization of violence to the emergence of more civilized canons of conduct and of a more "self-steering" mode of personality formation. His students in the Netherlands picked up the "psychogenetic" and psychoanalytic strands in his oeuvre first, aiming their research at transitions in the modes of everyday experience and interaction.

This confronted them with a critical question: as contemporary mores seemed to be loosening up, had the civilizing process changed its course? Early on, Cas Wouters (1986) introduced the term "informalization" to characterize the changes in behavior that occurred in the seventies; In 1979, De Swaan (1990) described this transition as a shift from management by command to management by negotiation. This concern prompted the search for diachronic sources that could document private and intimate aspects of life: Brinkgreve and Korzec had analyzed the equivalent of

"Dear Abby" columns in a Dutch women's weekly over a forty-year period; Rineke van Daalen studies complaint registers of the city tramway authority and the public works commission; Ali de Regt wrote a study of workers' families and workers' civilization, using among other sources, reports by lady visitors on "anti-social" families. Wouter Gomperts carried out a sophisticated quantitative analysis of protocols for the "Thematic Apperception (four picture) Test," a standard instrument for psychologists since the thirties, in order to assess whether an earlier and much diminished social preoccupation with status and deference survived in some individuals of a later generation as a private and inexplicable anxiety: a "social phobia," analogous to the reproduction by individual agoraphobics of the social restrictions on the appearance of women in public in earlier generations.

But the Elias circle widened its scope: Nico Wilterdink had written his thesis on changes in the distribution of wealth in the Netherlands; Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh (1988) submitted a dissertation on nuclear rivalry among the great powers; De Swaan (1988) published a comparative historical study of the emergence of welfare states; and recently Johan Goudsblom (Engl. ed. forthcoming) completed a major study on the control of fire throughout the ages as a civilizing process.

In an early phase some of Goudsblom's students founded a journal, *Het Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, still the most lively and readable of Dutch social science reviews and a forum for comparative historical social science studies in the Netherlands.

In the mid-eighties yet another university reform in the Netherlands created the opportunity to found small institutes or networks for training Ph.D. candidates (who, once appointed receive a salary for a four-year period). Surprisingly, two initiatives from the field of sociology — one of the more loosely organized disciplines — were the first to be funded: a school for rational choice studies in Utrecht and a school for comparative and historical sociology in Amsterdam, which was quickly expanded to include anthropology and political science, and recently has joined with the center for Asian studies to form the Amsterdam School for Social Research. Among the anthropologists, Anton Blok, a former student of Elias, represents the historical orientation with his studies of infamous occupations and banditry. Recently, Jojada Verrips, a champion of marine anthropology, published a historical study of inland shipping in the Netherlands. The political scientists share a

social historical approach to Dutch politics, Catharina Lis (1979) having published extensively on poverty in Europe in the Modern Era, Piet de Roy on fin de siècle racial theories, Sipe Stuurman on 19th century liberalism, and Hans Righart on the Industrial Revolution. A historical approach to the sociological study of South and East Asia, initiated by W. F. Wertheim (1974), is continued by Jan Breman with a series of studies of colonial repression.

The early circle's almost exclusive focus on the (very wide ranging) works of Norbert Elias has been replaced in the Amsterdam School by a broader perspective: William McNeill's world historical (and interactionist) approach has been adopted in Goudsblom's studies of the "very long term," and Charles Tilly has become a guiding light in many ongoing Ph. D. projects on state formation.

The creation of a school for Ph. D. students that serves a nation-wide function, combining the three social science disciplines and covering both Western and non-Western areas, but adopting a distinct, comparative-historical, perspective, has turned out to be productive. It allows the seventy-odd students and two dozen (part-time) faculty to transcend rather sterile disciplinary divisions and overcome the somewhat parochial isolation of local universities, while maintaining a paradigm community that facilitates scholarly interaction. It also provides an adequate basis for international co-operation, for example in yearly workshops for the supervision of Ph. D. theses in related fields. As its most recent initiative, the Amsterdam School is setting up an English language graduate course program for comparative historical social science to accommodate the growing numbers of foreign students from Asia, Eastern Europe, and the United States.

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(Mennell
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(1) Discussing the development of social standards governing outward bodily propriety in Western Europe over several centuries, Elias showed how many matters were removed "behind the scenes" not only of social life, but also of mental life, as thresholds of shame and embarrassment advanced. This is highly relevant to current debates about, for instance, Victorian sexuality and gender, and about the emergence of adolescence as a distinct phase of life. Elias set this firmly in the context of power ratios and competition between social groups — and in a more definitely sociologically researchable way than Foucault.

(2) Especially in his discussion of the "art of observing and being observed" among early modern courtiers (Elias, 1983), he depicted a mode of self-experience as one-in-relation-to-others that is intermediate between the medieval and modern. In effect it was an historicization of Goffman *avant la lettre*; it serves as a usefully concrete question mark against the assumption that the formation of identity or self-conception has always taken place in the fashion depicted by Freud and Mead. (Elias, however, would always stress that there was no zero-point in the sense of individuality.)

(3) Elias contended that spreading webs of interdependence tend to be associated with relatively more equal power ratios and "functional democratization," meaning more and more reciprocal controls between more and more social groups. Less abstractly: "more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people" (Goudsblom, 1989: 722). This produces pressures towards greater consideration of the consequences of one's own actions for other people on whom one is more or less dependent, and there tends in consequence to be an increase in "mutual identification." This idea is not new to Elias — it was expressed very clearly by Alexis de Tocqueville in his remarks on the "softening of manners as social conditions become more equal" — but it has a very direct bearing on matters of violence and cruelty. Abram de Swaan's *In Care of the State* (1988) develops these ideas in a novel way in relation to the growth of the welfare state.

(4) Elias's most detailed discussion of the formation of we-images (note the plural and the contrast with self-image) is to be found in *The Established and the Outsiders* (Elias and Scotson, 1965), a study of relations between two working-class groups in a contemporary English community. But in a later essay (1976), he extends the notion of established/outsider relations to changing power ratios between not just classes, status-groups, and parties, but also between immigrants and host communities, colonizers and colonized, homosexuals and heterosexuals, men and women, parents and children.

If Elias had not been such a chaotic workman, he might also have gone further to meet Barbara Laslett's demand for a more gendered approach to the study of identity and subjects. For in the 1950s and 1960s he wrote a whole book entitled *The Changing Balance of Power between the Sexes*; in a tragi-comic episode, he left all versions of it on the floor of his room at Leicester, and they were consigned to the incinerator by the cleaner. Years later, he did reconstitute the first chapter, dealing with Ancient Rome, from memory (1987). It is also worth reading his discussions of the position of women in the age of the Minnesinger (in volume 2 of *The Civilizing Process* and in *The Court Society*). The work of Van Stolk and Wouters (1983, 1987) reflects their many conversations with Elias about these matters, and though their studies are not historical, they may be enough to suggest historical angles.

(5) In 1993 Polity Press will be publishing Elias's *The Germans* in English. Here Elias makes most explicit the connection between personal and collective identities: how power struggles, national achievements and national failures become sedimented in the collective makeup of the members of a whole nation.

Sociologists face a task here which distantly recalls the task that Freud began. He sought to show the connection between the outcome of the conflictual channeling of drives in a person's development and their resulting personality habitus. But there are also analogous connections between a people's long-term fortunes and experience and their social habitus at any time in the future. At this stratum of personality structure too — let us provisionally call it the "we-stratum" — there are often complex symptoms of disturbance at work, which are scarcely less than the individual neuroses in strength and in capacity to cause suffering. (1989: 27)

Underlying all Elias's work was his rejec-

tion of the Cartesian/Kantian tradition in Western philosophy. The single, adult, private "individual" "subject" assumed by that tradition was not a human universal, but rather one manifestation of a mode of self-experience (or subjectivity) which had been historically constructed from the Renaissance onwards. It was, in fact, one product of the European civilizing process. This mode of self-experience also entered fundamentally and unquestioned into modern sociological thinking, in the form of the homo clausus assumption which Elias repeatedly denounced. In his view all the variants of the action/system, agency/structure, "individual"/"society" issue which run through sociology

from Weber and Durkheim through Parsons to structuralism and poststructuralism were tedious, sterile, chicken-and-egg debates, based on a mistaken static mode of conceptualization. They are all derived from that old philosophical chestnut, the problem of free-will versus determinism, and as Elias remarks, "it is usually forgotten that there are always simultaneously many mutually dependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one's scope for action" (1978: 121; cf. Mennell, 1989: 274-5n.). (Once that is recognized, the question becomes one of how much - to be answered not conceptually or philosophically, but through empirical comparative sociological investigation.)

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