

The Sociology of Norbert Elias

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Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of Norbert Elias as presented in his books listed in the bibliography. A complete summary of his and other macro-social theories can be found in Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems, by Frank W. Elwell.

In the Weberian Tradition...

Elias, like Weber before him, attempts to bridge the gap between macro and micro sociology, focusing on how structural and individual personalities interact with one another in social change.

In the Weberian Tradition...

Elias's "civilization process" also has much in common with Weber's concept of rationalization, having similar origins in the changing character of interactions between social structure and individual personality.

In the Weberian Tradition...

Indeed, the civilization process is Elias's attempt to subsume rationalization in a much broader trend that includes the ever stricter control of impulses, drives, and emotions, an advance in personal shame and embarrassment regarding our animal nature (our bodies, elimination, and sexuality), and putting such "animalic" activities behind the scenes of social life.

In the Weberian Tradition...

Third, the underlying engine of change within Elias's theory is the "monopoly mechanism," an engine that is based on both the enlargement and centralization of administrative structure that parallels Weber's bureaucratization process

In the Weberian Tradition...

Fourth, and finally, Elias, like Weber, is a strong advocate of value-free sociology. He is a frequent critic of many 19th century theorists for their failure to keep their ideology, hopes, and class interest out of their sociology, and he is a critic of his contemporaries on this score as well.

Historical Sociology

Elias argues for an historical sociology that embraces the idea of long-term social processes; but in contrast to many 19th century thinkers, a sociology that is value-free, that does not confuse sociological description and prediction with the ideology, beliefs, or wishes of the investigator.

Historical Sociology

By continuing the scientific enterprise, Elias believe, the social sciences can continue to develop more realistic ideas about human societies and behavior, slowly discrediting fantasy and ideology, and thus make a real contribution to social practice.

Social Science

Science, is distinguished from nonscientific thought by its connection to the physical world. Because this accumulated body of knowledge is continually checked and replicated by others, science provides the filter to remove the “fanciful” and mistaken, and arrive at ideas, concepts, and theories that more closely approach physical reality.

Social Science

In making this claim, Elias hopes to avoid the philosophical arguments regarding what is real and what is not, and focus instead upon a theory of science that, like all theory, can be verified and replicated “by observation, and if necessary revised.”

Social Science

“At one time, people imagined that the moon was a goddess. Today we have a more adequate, more realistic idea of the moon. Tomorrow it may be discovered that there are still elements of fantasy in our present idea of the moon, and people may develop a conception of the moon, the solar system and the whole universe still closer to reality than ours...”

Social Science

“The comparative which qualifies this assertion is important; it can be used to steer ideas between the two towering, unmoving philosophical cliffs of nominalism and positivism, to keep the current of the long-term development of knowledge and thought...

Social Science

“We are describing the direction of this current in calling special attention to the decrease in the fanciful elements and increase in the realistic elements in our thinking, as characteristics of the scientificization of our ways of thinking and acquiring knowledge.”

The Civilizing Process

The idea behind Elias's key concept of "the civilizing process" is essentially Weberian. Personality and social structure are in close interrelationship—as social structure changes, so does the individual personality structure, which causes further change in social structure.

The Civilizing Process

Humans are oriented by both nature and nurture to exist only in interdependent relationship with others. It is through these interdependencies (or figurations) that individuals define the self and the world, they satisfy their needs, and orient their thoughts and actions.

The Civilizing Process

As these figurations change, individual personality structure necessarily changes as well. Like a dance, Elias writes, the figuration is independent of the individuals who make it up at any point in time; its character and form largely orients these individuals to one another.

The Civilizing Process

But the character and form of the dance itself is highly dependent upon both historical and contemporary individuals who make up the figuration. The individual and society (figurations) are therefore inseparable. That is, they are different parts of a single whole, incapable of being understood as separate phenomena.

The Civilizing Process

To support this assertion of the inter-relationship and interdependence of social and individual structure, Elias looked at changes in the habitus (personal habits such as eating, sleeping, sex, natural body functions, and bathing) of people for the Middle Ages through the 1930s by examining etiquette books.

The Civilizing Process

He finds change in the prohibition and recommendation in a specific direction, across generations, without any conscious coordination or control by individuals or social structure. This change includes the ever stricter control of impulse and emotion, first in public and then in private as well.

The Civilizing Process

The change also includes an advance in personal shame and embarrassment regarding our animal nature (our bodies, waste elimination, sleep, and sexuality), and putting such “animalic” activities behind the scenes (privacy in bedrooms, bathrooms, kitchens) of social life.

The Civilizing Process

He ultimately roots these changes in concurrent changes of social structure, and enlargement and centralization of authority structures (the state), with its monopoly on forces and taxation, and the consequent growth of interdependence fostered by the increasing division of labor.

Changes in Habitus

It is Elias's contention that forms of socially instilled conduct are part of the total way of life of a people; that the prescribed conduct for activities such as eating are a reflection of people's relation to one another, and to their whole social world.

Changes in Habitus

In the Middle Ages, people ate from a common dish, taking meat from the dish with their fingers, drinking from a common goblet, and spooning their soup from the same pot. This should be interpreted as a reflection of their relationship to one another.

Changes in Habitus

Such people are not emotionally separated from one another to the same degree as individuals in our own time. They were not socialized into relationships and behaviors that separate “one body from another,” but rather to a social world in which individuals were more a part of a homogenous whole.

Changes in Habitus

Consequently, medieval people largely lacked the instilled affective reaction against coming into contact with food that had touched someone else's mouth; had little shame of embarrassment in observing other's engaging in bodily functions (such as waste elimination or bathing), or exposing themselves thus engaged to the sight of others.

The Civilizing Process

The pattern of the civilizing process is similar across behaviors. Behaviors that were accepted as normal in medieval societies gradually became proscribed, more strictly controlled, or taboo. At first the prohibitions were given their force through appeals not to offend others, on purely social grounds.

The Civilizing Process

As we approach modernity, the restraints became a part of the socialization of children, and therefore internalized and functioning even when the individual is alone. Such behaviors became invested with learned feelings of shame and embarrassment on the part of individuals as they internalized the social proscriptions of their society.

The Civilizing Process

Elias demonstrated the civilizing process through an examination of etiquette books on the socially approved ways to perform such natural functions as the elimination of gas, excrement, and urine.

The Civilizing Process

Early works of etiquette enjoined their readers not to greet someone who is defecating or urinating (1530), to not relieve oneself in front of ladies like a “rustic” (1570), and to “not foul the staircases, corridors or closets with urine or other filth” (1589).

The Civilizing Process

On passing gas (either from above or below) early advice was to do it without noise if possible, or to try to cover it with a cough (1530). As we approach modern times such prohibitions and instructions could no longer be openly written about, nor were they needed.

The Civilizing Process

While feelings of embarrassment and shame over these issues were absent in the middle ages, the gradual development of these feelings prevented their discussion as we approach modern times.

The Civilizing Process

Like all impulse control, in the Middle Ages such proscriptions had to be openly discussed in books and taught to members of the upper class at court; only with the rise of the middle class did the family become the institution responsible for the internalization of such drive control.

The Civilizing Process

Elias also details the gradually tightening of prohibitions regarding sexuality, control of emotions, and violence. In general, according to Elias, outbursts of such emotions of joy, anger, cruelty, hatred, and celebration were much closer to the surface in medieval social life. People acted more in line with their affective drives and feelings in these times.

The Civilizing Process

It is important to note that Elias does not believe the process follows a linear path of development. There are reversals, countertrends, and sudden and rapid changes in either direction. But over the long term the direction of the change is unmistakable.

The Civilizing Process

The change can be characterized as greater and greater self-control of human drives and emotions. That the change is directional and occurring without the conscious control of institutions or individuals, is remarkable and begs for explanation. And Elias has one...

The Civilizing Process

For a more extensive discussion of the civilization process, as well as a fuller discussion of its causes and implications for understanding human behavior, refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding, read from the bibliography that follows.

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