



Eliasian Themes

Towards process-figural theory in organization studies

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Abstract. This paper outlines the significance of Elias's work as an alternative solution for many of the core conceptual problems in organization studies as well as the distinctive contribution of *The Court Society*, sketches the main elements of the ways in which his ideas have been taken up by organisation scholars to date, concentrating on a selection of studies drawing on Elias, and concludes with some reflections on the future directions that process-figural theory might take in organization studies. The core line of argument is that Elias provides a range of powerful theoretical resources to transcend many of the problems usually addressed through the work of Foucault, actor-network theory, postmodernist and post-structuralist theory, especially the supposed agency/structure problem, constituting an alternative and effective analysis of organizational life that is anchored in the relational and processual strands of classical sociological theory.

Keywords. Norbert Elias, organization, process, relation, figuration, habitus, civilizing process, power.

PREFATORY NOTE

This piece has been written in the first place for a particular readership: researchers and scholars in management and organization studies who are presumed to be unfamiliar with the work of Elias. The sections concerning the outline of Elias's ideas have, then, been excluded here, since most readers of *Cambio* will already be familiar with Elias's work, with the exception of the section on court society, which is particularly important in relation to the sociology of organizations. I took the decision to label the approach «process-figural theory» because that seemed to address the differing

¹ A shorter version, under a slightly different title, is to be published in *Management, Organizations and Contemporary Social Theory* edited by Stewart Clegg & Miguel Pina e Cunha, London: Routledge, 2019, which will include chapter objectives, a glossary, and discussion questions.

possibilities in the most economical way, and sounded like the kind of term that would appeal to organization studies scholars, as well as avoiding the kind of automatic resistance that the term «civilization» usually generates.

INTRODUCTION

Sociological theory has been characterised at least since the middle of the twentieth century by an ongoing concern with dualisms: individual/society, micro/macro, agency/structure, which have been a source of never-ending and indeed irresolvable debate. Michael Reed has observed that it is a genuine puzzle why agency/structure is such a dominant theme in organization theory. «Why», he asks, «do we keep returning to it like an old pimple or sore that we can't resist picking? Why not let it alone when we know only too well that further probing will only make matters worse?» (2005: 2). Why indeed, since it is anchored in another equally false dualism, that of individual/society (Collins, 1992). However, his answer is simply to search for more effective ways to pick at that sore (Reed 1996; 2005).

I trace the source of this ultimately artificial problem back to Talcott Parsons (1937), who placed a huge conceptual boulder in the middle of sociological theory by refusing to take Georg Simmel seriously, constructing the sociological canon around the holy trinity of Marx/Weber/Durkheim². He was succeeded a generation later by Anthony Giddens (1979; 1984) doing the same and insisting that there was a problem to do with the supposed 'two sociologies' of action and structure (Dawe 1970; 1978), to which, naturally, his theory of structuration was the solution.

The siren call of agency/structure dualism drives many of the problems in organization theory, in the form, for example, of the reification of institutions (Suddaby 2010) and entanglement within an opposition between institutional isomorphism and entrepreneurship (Clegg 2010). The current situation in (neo-)institutional theory, as Alvesson and Spicer observe, is that of a mid-life crisis, caught up in vague and tautological understandings of the core concept, «institution», resulting in «a body of research which seems to produce much more heat than light» (2018: 5). As Michel Callon and John Law (1997) have observed in relation to dualisms such as individual/collective, and as I have argued elsewhere in relation to action/structure (van Krieken 2000), the supposed valiant efforts to bridge the two sides of the dualism do what all bridges do, they keep them in their place, and the problems simply get displaced and reproduced in an endless loop³.

The theoretical move most commonly pursued to move organization theory beyond a static and reified conception of organizations has been a turn to writers such as Foucault, actor-network theorists such as Callon, Law (Callon, Law 1997) and Latour (1993), philosophers such as Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Serres, Derrida and Deleuze and Guattari, or ethnomethodologists such as Harold Garfinkel (Chia 1995; 2005; see also Weick 1969; 1995; 2012), often broadly captured under the headers of post-structuralism and postmodernism.

However, an effective alternative or complement to the postmodern and actor-network turn is Norbert Elias's approach to sociology, which provides a rich body of conceptual tools and means of orientation for organisation theory that help transcend these tired and ultimately pointless disputes in organization studies and generate significant new insights and conceptual innovations in the study of organisational stability and change⁴. His analysis of «court society» is usefully read alongside Weber's account of the rationalization process and bureaucracy; his account of the process of civilization has various linkages with both Weber and Foucault on the historical develop-

² For an outline of everything wrong with Parsons's *Structure*, see Camic (1989): Parsons's neglect of social psychology (Mead, Dewey, even Freud), politics (Tocqueville, Michels), relational thought (Simmel, that aspect of Marx), and the ahistorical nature of his understanding of human habitus, not mention 'the problem of social order', all mistakes which have tended to be reproduced in subsequent social theory, including in organization studies.

³ For a discussion of the operation of the agency/structure dualism drawing on Latour's (1993) concept of 'the modern constitution', see van Krieken 2002.

⁴ There are now a number of useful general introductions and overviews of Elias's sociology, including Fletcher (1997), van Krieken (1998), Mennell (1999), Dunning & Hughes (2013); Loyal & Quilley (2004).

ment of a disciplined psychic apparatus (van Krieken 1990); his theory of figurations is in many ways stronger than the concept of «network» in actor-network theory as well as Bourdieu's (1985) concept of «field»; he was emphasising the importance of the concept of «habitus» long before Bourdieu took it up, while his theory of power is a useful alternative to that of Foucault or Latour.

Most of the problems in social and organization theory stem from a failure to rise to the challenge of the 'relational' and 'processual' turn in science, philosophy, sociology and psychology around the turn of the twentieth century, in the work of Einstein, Wittgenstein, Cassirer, Dewey and Bentley, Simmel, to some extent Marx, a conceptual shift that Elias did pursue in a consequential way, and which underpins the power and utility of his theoretical orientation today. As Tim Newton and Dennis Smith have argued, Elias weaves together a number of otherwise disparate theoretical concerns in organization studies – power, subjectivity, networks, processes of change, subjectivity and the self, strategy and leadership, emotions, violence (Newton, Smith 2002: viii) in a single conceptual framework.

If, as Stewart Clegg and Ad van Iterson have argued, organization studies can now usefully be reinvigorated through a «creative re-reading of the sociological classics» (2013: 623), Elias's particularly imaginative mobilisation of development of sociological and psychological thought from Marx, Weber, Simmel, William James and Freud onwards is one of the better ways of engaging in such a re-reading, constituting a valuable «source of inspiration for organizational studies» (van Iterson 2009).

Many of his arguments find resonances in the work of other social and psychological theorists, indeed in some organisational theorists as well, so it is not really the case that he is the sole proponent of any of his ideas. What makes him distinctive is the way he combines a variety of important conceptual innovations. Bourdieu, for example, also thinks in terms of *habitus*, his concept of 'field' has a lot in common with Elias's figuration, and they both use the concept of 'game' to capture the dynamics of human action. But Bourdieu is not very interested in history, and leaves out the long-term processual aspects of how human habitus and fields have developed over time. Bourdieu (1985: 16-17) attributes the concept of a relational approach to the philosopher Ernst Cassirer, who Elias had read as a PhD student and whose discussion of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity has a strong influence on Elias, but for Elias it was crucial to move that idea in a sociological direction, to deal with «real events, such as power struggles between human groups, such as cycles of violence....or with long-term social processes such as state formation processes, of knowledge growth, of urbanization, of population growth and of dozens of other processes, now in the centre of process sociology, its theory, its empirical work and its practical applications» (Letter to Mike Featherstone, 15 November 1986, in Kilminster, Wouters 1995: 101) It is useful, then, to see Elias's sociology as a nodal point in the larger network of lines of sociological theorizing, not such the sole repository of a range of conceptual positions, but a distinctive and quite powerful combination of the most important ones.

Although Elias was content initially to present his approach as organised around the concept of «figuration», he grew to dislike the term «figurational sociology» and ended up preferring «process sociology». Both terms are equally important, which is why I am using the admittedly clumsy term «process-figurational» theory to come as close as possible to a convenient label⁵.

COURT SOCIETY AS AN ORGANIZATIONAL FORM

The Court Society was Elias's first major sociological work, completed in 1933 as his *Habilitationschrift* under Karl Mannheim. It was the foundation upon which Elias's *On The Civilizing Process* was built and for organizational theorists it is probably one of the better places to start reading Elias, since it is precisely about a particular mode of organizing social relations of power. There are three aspects of Elias's account of court society that are of particular significance for organizational theory:

⁵ The term should probably be 'relational-processual-figurational', but that's even more unwieldy.

- His argument for identifying royal and aristocratic courts as key social organizational units that played a vital role in the emergence of modern bureaucratic society
- The differentiation of the concept of «rationality» into two forms: a «courtly rationality» that both preceded instrumental-legal rationality and continues as an undercurrent to it
- The identification, in the dynamics of social relations in court society, of particular mechanisms of power, competition, distinction and social differentiation which continue to operate in contemporary social and organizational life.

Elias extends our understanding of the development of modern societies by highlighting the ways in which the aristocracy and its organizational setting, court society, should be understood as far more than an outmoded form of ostentatious consumption, not just a feudal relic destined for the historical scrap heap. Court society, Elias argued, was a historically significant form of social organization, with a dual relationship to the bourgeois society that followed it.

On the one hand, bourgeois morality and forms of life – the distinction between public and private life, the organisation of life around criteria of instrumental, economic rationality, and the placement of a dedication to work at the centre of human existence – were developed precisely in *opposition* to those of the courts. On the other hand, Elias saw that many features of the forms of social relations in court society also continued into the post-Enlightenment world, so that an understanding of court society also illuminates many aspects of contemporary social relations which are less visible to us precisely because we, as good citizens of the Enlightenment, believe we have left the world of *Dangerous Liaisons* and the *Ancien Regime* in the past. «By studying the structure of court society and seeking to understand one of the last great non-bourgeois figurations of the West», argued Elias, «we indirectly gain increased understanding of our own professional and commercial, urban-industrial society» (2006 [[1969]: 44).

The social process of «courtization» which underpinned the transformation of feudal society subjected first knights and warriors and ever-expanding circles of the population to an increasing demand that expressions of violence be regulated, that emotions and impulses be subjected to ever-increasing self-reflection and surveillance, and placed ever more firmly in the service of the long-term requirements of complex networks of social interaction imposing increasingly ambivalent expectations. In court society we see the beginnings of a form of mutual and self-observation that Elias referred to as a «psychological» form of perception, which is now analysed in terms of reflexive self-awareness.

Elias's analysis of court society reveals more than simply the pre-history of bourgeois society; it also reveals a deeper layer of social relations that continues to the present day. The organisation of power relations around the representation of social prestige still plays an important role in contemporary societies, despite the lack of fit with our self-image as instrumentally rational moderns. Much of the dynamics of court society can still be seen today in the day-to-day workings of any organization, with success in contemporary social life maybe more dependent on adept display, performance and representation than we are usually willing to admit. As Elias put it:

Despite their formal organizational framework based on written contracts and documents, which was developed only in rudimentary form in the state of Louis XIV, in many organizations of our time, even industrial and commercial ones, there are rivalries for status, fluctuations in the balance between groups, exploitation of internal rivalries by superiors, and other phenomena that have emerged in the study of court society. But as the main regulation of human relationships in large organizations is formalized in a highly impersonal manner, such phenomena usually have a more or less unofficial and informal character today. In court society we therefore find quite openly and on a large scale many phenomena that exist below the surface of highly bureaucratized organizations. (2006 [1969]: 152)

The roots of informal organisational structures and organisational culture can, therefore, be seen to have originated in the dynamics of court society, continuing an older form of rationality beneath the surface of the instrumental-legal rationality which modern organisations are supposed to revolve around.

Reinhard Bendix, for example, pointed to the parallels between the transformation of fighting knights into restrained courtiers and the shift from an approach to authority in the workplace framed in muscular terms of

dominance and obedience to one framed in terms of the considered, self-reflexive management of human relations. Referring to Elias's account of the «courtization of warriors», he argued that the model managerial *habitus* had come to take the following form:

The calm eyes which never stray from the other's gaze, the easy control in which laughter is natural but never forced, the attentive and receptive manner, the well-rounded, good-fellowship, the ability to elicit participation and to accomplish change without upsetting relationships, may be so many devices for personal advancement when the man is on his way up. (Bendix 1974 [1956]: 335)

As Tim Newton and Dennis Smith argue, *The Court Society* is an important case study in the 'crystallization' of other fluid networks, how the distinctive dynamics of court society, organized around language, etiquette and ceremony, drove the production of a particular kind of organizational subjectivity, that of the courtier. Elias' insights have the potential, they suggest, to inform the analysis of corporate takeovers, large-scale meta-organizations such as the European Union or the World Trade Organization (Newton, Smith 2002: ix); really, the analysis is useful for grasping the varieties of «rationality» in any organization.

ELIAS AND ORGANIZATION STUDIES

Although discussions of Elias and organization theory are often prefaced with the observation that his work has had limited impact, in fact there is now quite a rich body of process-figurational literature covering a wide variety of topics. The topics covered have included the relationships between Elias's theoretical orientation and that of Foucault in relation to organizational subjectivity (van Krieken 1990; 1996; Kieser 1998), the comparison of Weber and Elias in relation to organizations (Breuer 1994), transformations of the NHS and the medical profession (Dopson, Waddington 1996; Dopson 1997; 2001; 2005), the longer-term history of organizational forms, emotional management, and management discourses (Mastenbroek 1993; 1996; 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2005) the Lillehammer winter Olympics, and the Sydney 2000 Olympics (Lesjo 2000 and Frawley 2015), shame and humiliation in organizations (Smith 2001; 2002), the film industry (Blair 2003), Elias' concept of «survival units» (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008), a critique of governmentality approaches in relation to urban regeneration (Lever 2011), talent management (Lever, Swailes 2017), medical unionism in Belgium (Gourdin, Meul 2013), gossip in organizations (Soeters, van Iterson, 2002), corporate governance (Stokvis 2002), Elias's and Wouters' concept of *informalization* (van Iterson, Mastenbroek and Soeters 2001), the wine market in China (Smith Maguire 2017), firms' online communities (van Iterson, Richter 2017), corporate responsibility and unintended outcomes (Vertigans 2017), organizational learning and complex responsive processes (Stacey 2003; 2012) and violence in organizational life (Costas, Gray 2018).

In what follows the focus, albeit brief, will be on the following five bodies of work to clarify exactly what process-figurational theory contributes to organization studies: (1) Tim Newton's theoretical arguments about how Elias's work can be mobilized in relation to organizations, (2) Wilbert van Vree's analysis of how meetings shape the dynamics of organizational life, (3) Ralph Stacey's theory of complex responsive processes, (4) Paddy Dolan and John Connelly's critique of institutional theory and (5), Stewart Clegg and Ad van Iterson's use of Elias to analyse increasingly fluid and liquid organizational forms.

Tim Newton – Power and subjectivity

One of the first organization theorists to examine how Elias's work could be drawn upon was Tim Newton, who from around 1998 onward has drawn attention to the importance of the relationship between interdependency, power, and subjectivity in organizations, partly in the context of a critique of Foucauldian approaches to power and subjectivity. Over the course of his engagement with the question of Elias and organizations, Newton has argued for a number of points of contact with questions such as organizational strategy, emotions and violence, and discursive change, making the following points.

First, that Elias's analysis of the broader social forces driving the historical formation of subjectivity within asymmetrical relations of power and interdependence is crucial for any linkage of the study of organizations and behaviour within organizations to their changing social contexts, with his relational theory of power deserving as much, if not more, attention in organization studies as Foucault's account of the relationship between power and freedom in his theory of governmentality. Elias thus helps to place shifts in organizational life in context of broader lines of social transformation – the process of civilization, changes in *habitus*, and the shifts from external to internal compulsion, with our relationship to time a key dimension of the longer-term shift from external to internalised restraint. Newton suggests that it is important to place any discussion of corporate culture in the context of a changing balance between collectivism and individualism (1999: 432) and he sees *The Court Society* as a highly instructive case study of how emotions and subjectivity constitute the heart of the exercise of power in organizational settings.

Second, that there are strong parallels and connections between Elias's critique of the *homo clausus* conception of human beings as well as his concepts of interdependence and figurations and the understanding of networks in the work of actor-network theorists such as Callon and Latour. Michel Callon, for example, notes how the arguments of Elias, Granovetter and actor-network theory all share a critique of the «person closed in on himself - *homo clausus*, to use Elias' expression» (Callon 1999: 185), with John Law commenting that «the explanatory attitude of [actor network] writers is not so different from that of Norbert Elias» (Law 1994: 113). As Newton argues, «there is a close correspondence between the Eliasian emphasis upon interdependency networks/chains and *Homines aperti*, and that observed in actor network theory. Both question the sovereignty and independence of the individual actor, since the actions of any actor are seen continually to condition, and be conditioned by, the wider networks in which they operate» (1999: 428). However, Elias's particular concept of figurations of interdependent actors, in *The Court Society* and in his game models, adds sensitivity to the dimension of asymmetrical power relations, alerting us to «the likelihood that actor networks will be characterised by social hierarchies» (1999, p 429).

Third, that his critique of the *homo clausus* conception of human beings, his emphasis on the interdependence of human action and his stress on the frequent disjunction between planned action and its outcomes is enormously important for the understanding of how and why organizational change take place and how we should approach the concept of 'strategy'. As he puts it, «strategic change is always likely to be a fraught process because strategic 'outcomes' often represent the interweaving of action and argument between numerous 'players', such as competitors, clients, suppliers, different professional groupings, government agencies» (2001: 482), rather than being the rational result of strategic action driven by decisive actions of especially insightful and effective managers and CEOs. This does not mean, however, that the relationship between strategies and plans is entirely opaque, merely that it is complex; thus, his analysis of different types of game configurations (2012 [1978]) aims to provide a range of models for how the analysis of strategic action can be undertaken.

Wilbert van Vree – the meetingization of society

Wilbert van Vree's (1999; 2002; 2011) work on meetings in organizational life is another especially important contribution to process-figurational theory in organization studies. He points out that studying meetings is a strategic means of grasping the inner dynamics of organizations. The everyday activity in all forms of organizations is dominated, observes van Vree, with, if not actively taking part in meetings, preparing for them or processing their results (van Vree 2011: 242). Meetings are an essential aspect of lengthening chains of interdependence, constituting the means by which interdependent interweaving actions are realised and negotiated (van Vree 2011: 245). Looking at the long-term history of meeting behaviour, he draws attention to gradually changing standards of behaviour expected of meeting participants, especially the restraint of violence and outbursts of emotion. When one sees opposing politicians in a legislative assembly break out in physical assaults on each other, these cases are especially notable because they are exceptions to the rule of the enormous number and variety of meetings that take place around the world in an entirely pacified way – usually to the point of tedium.

Van Vree highlights a particular historical shift, from «parliamentary» to «professionalised» meeting styles. The parliamentary style, which dominated meeting styles from 1750 to 1950, is highly rule-governed, with rules and formal codes designed to restrain highly oppositional adversaries within a workable framework of regulated debate, decision-making and action, orientated to the principles of democratic politics, with clear voting procedures and decision-making rules. An important part of the courtization of warriors, then, was also their «parliamentarization» (van Vree, Bos 1989), where courtiers had to extend their regulation of their emotions in the interests of peaceful negotiation of all the issues underpinning the exercise of governmental power and authority, such as taxation, military service, education, health care, social welfare, police, the regulation of property rights, and so on. It was this parliamentary meeting style that then served as the template for a wide variety of other types of meetings through society, of civil associations and business firms.

Looking at manuals for associations and meetings, rules of order and meeting textbooks (such as Zelko, 1969 [1957]), van Vree observes that these meeting manuals show that meeting manners have shifted significantly over the last 50-60 years. Rather than deliberative assemblies, «more differentiated, especially professional and business meetings; from formal rules to informal codes; from debating to discussing; from majority decisions to consensus; from the attitude of parties, administration and opposition to the behaviour of individual meeting participants; and from a chairman's function to the duties of ordinary meeting participants» (2011: 255). Organizations now require a different kind of habitus and a different, more professionalised and business-like meeting style, orientated towards efficiency and effectiveness rather than due process and democratic decision-making. As van Vree puts it, «[c]ompared with parliamentary-like meetings, company-like meetings demand more knowledge and abilities, more team spirit, more mutually anticipated self-control and flexibility» (2011: 258). Referring to Elias's and Cas Wouters's (1986; 1999) theory of informalization and the development of a «third nature», he highlights how it is no longer just a matter of internalising social rules but also of developing a highly strategic, flexible understanding of how the rules are to be mobilized, perhaps in fact broken or adjusted, in particular circumstances and local conditions. As networks of interdependence become larger and broader and power differentials decrease, the role of meetings in social coordination becomes increasingly significant, «an ever increasing precise, more equal and more embracing regulation of impulses and short-lived affects» (2011: 259), exactly what Elias analysed as the long-term process of civilization.

Meetings are «the frontline of civilization» and the obligation to attend meetings «has become the fate of civilized people» (2011: 250), because «the development of meeting behaviour is a process in which people constrain each other towards control of their mutual relations and thus also of themselves, by orientation to ever-longer, more permanent, and more differentiated chains of action» (2011: 245). Indeed, given the globalisation of organizational structures, van Vree also refers to meetings as «the trailblazers of contemporary, continental and global, integration processes». (2011; 257). He draws the obvious parallel with court society, observing that:

Courtiers gathered in set places and at set times to perform specific acts according to exact rules. They bitterly complained about these useless rituals, but went through them again and again. The court etiquette endured as a 'ghostly perpetuum mobile' (Elias 2006 [1969]: 95) because of the current power relationships between the most important social groupings. The slightest modification of a ritual might have been interpreted by a group or faction as an attempt to upset the shaky social power balance. In the same way contemporary organization men seem to be socially fated to meet and to meet again with the same colleagues at set places and set times to perform similar acts every time (van Vree 2011: 253).

We saw earlier how Bendix noted, with the spread of meeting activities in business firms, the emergence of an upper class of 'moderate' managers, «even-tempered when others rage, brave when others fear, calm when others are excited, self-controlled when others indulge» (Bendix, 1974 [1956]: 332). Today it is those individuals who are most skilled in this management of emotional style who are most successful in organizational life. Being a successful manager, then, means being 'good at running meetings', having a high tolerance for their tedium and repetition, being skilled at managing the emotional dynamics of a smaller or larger group of members of the organization. Van Vree, agreeing with Bendix, notes the historical emergence of an 'upper class' of professional chairmen (and increasingly chairwomen) functioning at the top of a wide variety of organizations, part and parcel of the

phenomenon of interlocking directorships and the ‘revolving door’ between management positions in government, the public sector and private corporations.

Ralph Stacey – complex responsive processes

Ralph Stacey begins by questioning the notion of organizational learning, observing that «the claim that organisations learn amounts to both reification and anthropomorphism» (2003: 326; also 2012: 1). However, it is also incorrect to say that only individuals learn, since this overlooks social processes and social interdependence, making it necessary to reject the separation of individual and group/organization/society. Stacey then argues for a way of thinking in terms of paradox in which individual and group/organisation are aspects of the same processes of interaction between people (Stacey, 2001), finding that he can derive this way of thinking from the work of G. H. Mead (1934) and Elias, where self and other are interwoven with each other, in mutual interaction (2007: 294). In contrast to Aristotelian logic, where $A \neq \text{Not-}A$, Stacey proposes thinking in terms of a Hegelian dialectical logic of paradoxes, «in which two diametrically opposing forces/ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated».

Stacey (2005) engages with Elias’s *On the Process of Civilization* not so much with regard to changes in *habitus*, but more as a source of methodological inspiration, to illustrate that Elias, with his incessant macro-micro linking, has also dealt with ‘global patterns’ and ‘local interaction’, which are Stacey’s central conceptual concerns. Agreeing with Elias’s conception of power as a relationship, and in contrast to the tendency «to talk about an organization as a living thing, a living system just like the systems in nature» (2007: 298). Stacey thus defines organizations as «patterns of power relations sustained by ideological themes of communicative interaction and patterns of inclusion and exclusion in which human identities emerge» (2003: 329). For Stacey there are clear resonances between Elias’s concept of unplanned order and the constant interweaving of the actions of interdependent individuals, and the understanding of self-organisation and emergence in complexity theory (2007: 295-6), as well as his own theory of «complex responsive processes» (2012: 2).

Stacey (2005) calls upon Elias’s essay on involvement and detachment (Elias 2007 [1956]) to affirm that mainstream organizational literature and development programs are still promoting «magico-mythical thinking» concerning the possibility of control, predictability and rationality, with managers «always calling for practical ‘tools’ and techniques so that they can achieve success», usually presented as «a list of actions or behaviors, for example, the seven habits of effective people, and the ubiquitous two by two matrix» (2007: 297-8). To think about organizations in terms of inspired and strategic leadership and design and confers an ‘illusion of control’ and is thus a far cry from a rational, detached mode of thinking recognizing the elusiveness of such control, and here he sees Elias’s arguments for a dialectic between the «involvement» that manifests itself in the pursuit of rational control and the «detachment» of Elias’s concept of unplanned order as a useful way to counter that illusion.

John Connolly and Paddy Dolan – beyond agency/structure

In a number of articles since around 2010, John Connolly and Paddy Dolan have significantly developed a process-figurational approach in organization studies, with a particular focus on two Irish case studies: the development of the Gaelic Athletic Association from the late nineteenth century to the present and the changing approach to advertising and marketing amongst the management of the Guinness brewery between the 1880s and the 1960s (Connolly 2016; 2017; Connolly, Dolan 2011; 2012a; 2012b; 2016; 2017; Dolan, Connolly, 2017). There is not the space here to discuss their close analysis of organizational change in these two settings but it is possible to identify the key conceptual points that they make. First, they draw attention to the continued heavy reliance in institutional theory on dualisms such as structure/agency, individual/society and micro/macro, dualisms which essentially misperceive social reality, failing to grasp the multi-polarity and multi-directionality of power relations, the long-term historical processes within which organizational change is always embedded. In relation to Arthur

Guinness and the company's approach to advertising, for example, they argued that changes within the organization need to be understood in relation to shifts in class relations in England, a «changing power ratio between bourgeoisie and those above (the aristocracy and gentry) and those below (lower class groups)», which «shaped, propelled and constrained opportunities for innovation across a myriad of social spheres» (Dolan & Connolly, 2017: 142). In relation to the professionalisation of the GAA, they argue that the changes which took place can only be properly understood in relation to Elias's conception of a broader process of civilization, in the sense of lengthening chains of interdependencies underpinning increased requirements for foresight and management of one's emotional life.

Second, while Bourdieu's concept of *field* has frequently been turned to in order to resolve the problems besetting the structure/agency dualism, they point out that *fields* are relatively constrained and closely-defined social spaces – art, education, sport – and the concept is less suited than figuration to capture the overlapping of fields, as well as the social spaces between fields (Dolan, Connolly 2017: 143). They illustrate the difference between Elias's emphasis on long-term processes and the ways in which institutional and organizational change is usually explained by contrasting Rao, Monin and Durand's (2003) account of the shift towards nouvelle cuisine in France from the 1970s onwards – focusing on how the nouvelle cuisine movement was driven by the anti-authoritarian ethos of the May 1968 student movement – with the way Elias would have approached the same question, by suggesting the geological metaphor of change resulting from an earthquake (in this case, May 1968), to change resulting from the much slower and more gradual movement of tectonic plates – in this case, gradually shifting power balances between different social, professional and consumer groups (Dolan, Connolly 2017: 145). While Dolan and Connolly do not mention this, a striking absence in Rao et al's account is the diner, and their explanation is framed almost entirely in the 'great man' terms of the culinary concepts, norms and orientations of activist chefs, a *homo clausus* type of explanation which ignores the broader figurations – linking them with diners, food and alcohol producers, hotels, cafés, food journalists – and the changing competitive logic of these various intersecting figurations – as a Bourdieusian would say, *fields*.

Stewart Clegg and Ad van Iterson – liquid organizations

For Stewart Clegg and Ad van Iterson (2013), agreeing with Tim Newton, Elias's analysis of the place of habitus and subjectivity within power relations has significant implications for organization theory, both over the long term and with respect to the arguments concerning *informalization* in the civilizing process. They are especially concerned with an understanding how self-regulation has been transformed within the long-term shift from 'iron cage' organizations such as monasteries, armies, factories and Weberian bureaucracies to the de-differentiated, de-specialized, decentralised, organic and networked organization characteristic of 'liquid modernity' (Clegg 1990; Clegg, Baumeler 2010; Clegg, Cunha 2010). They examine aspects of Elias's arguments in relation to the question of the salience of proximity versus distance in relations of interdependence, as well as reflecting on the tightness of the connection between lengthening chains of interdependence and the forms taken by self-regulation. For Elias, longer and more complex interdependence chains lead to greater self-regulation, but Clegg and van Iterson point out that it is possible that this depends on proximity and visibility. To the extent that interdependence and its supposed constraints remain invisible, it may be that the effect is the reverse, lessening self-regulation. They refer here to Mouzelis's (1995) and Newton's (2001) critical accounts, arguing that it appears that «not all interdependence leads to a conversion in self-regulation and subjectivity. The hypothesized relation has to be tested everywhere, in various time periods, to assess whether a connection exists, and, if so, to assess its exact nature and form» (Clegg, van Iterson 2013: 629; see also Breuer 1991: 407, who makes the same point).

On the one hand, then, they agree that non-hierarchical relationships do require higher levels of informalized self-regulation – Wouters (2011) would use the term «third nature» – to function effectively (van Iterson 2009: 337-338; see also van Iterson, Mastenbroek and Soeters 2001). In loosening organizational structures and making them more flexible and fluid, there is an effective transfer of the regulatory mechanisms from the organi-

zational structure to the level of self-regulation – exactly what Elias was referring to in the shift from external to self-restraint. «Postmodern organizations thus represent increasingly lengthy and complex webs of interdependency that require people to take each other into greater consideration», and de-specialized workers have to be as proficient as ‘network players’ as were the courtiers at Versailles, needing to juggle «anxious, disciplined behavior and relaxed, informal behaviour» (Clegg, van Iterson 2013: 629).

On the other hand, the opposite effect can also be discerned, given how abstract and purely functional the organizational constraints have become. «Why be concerned», ask Clegg and van Iterson rhetorically, «with people whom you only see once a week or month? ... with people with whom collaboration will end in the very near future? ... with people who hardly understand what you can do or what you actually do?» (Clegg, van Iterson 2013: 630). The potential for increased rather than decreased violence of various sorts – bullying, abuse, anger – is then as much part of liquefied organizational relationships as increased self-regulation and it remains an open question exactly how the two possibilities are balanced out. They conclude by indicating an important line of future research in organization studies drawing on process-figurational theory: the possibility of working to «unravel the dynamics between the two faces of civilizing processes» (Clegg, van Iterson 2013: 631).

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

I would like to conclude with some reflections on the points raised by Paddy Dolan and John Connolly towards the end of their 2017 *Cambio* paper. They suggest a number of explanations for what they call the invisibility and marginality of Elias in organization studies, referring to Richard Kilminster’s (2007: 152-3) arguments concerning the possibility of a «commitment to an Eliasian perspective», including «the abandonment of philosophy, Marxism and fashionable social theory, the suspension of political ideologies, developing a distance from economics, history and psychology, and the realisation that one’s reputation and academic career could be stalled» (*ivi*: 146). It is possible, however, to see things differently. It is not obvious to me, in principle, why one would need to ‘abandon’ all the approaches and disciplines Kilminster lists, nor why an organization scholar could not approach an engagement with Elias as a route towards enhancement of one’s reputation and academic career. Maintaining that an engagement with Elias is by definition a fatal career move strikes me as a sure-fire way to ensure that his marginality is sustained forever and a day. A central point made by Tim Newton, for example, concerns precisely the overlaps between actor-network theory (doesn’t get more fashionable) and Elias’s concepts, so the problem is not one of choosing the latter over the former, but of drawing attention to the connections. Relational and process-oriented approaches are also fashionable enough, and what Elias brings to the table is the combination of the two and linkages with a range of other, equally important, theoretical concerns. For me Elias captures a particular orientation to sociology that was in fact quite widespread at the turn of the twentieth century, but which got buried in the Parsonian turn, with the latter given new life by Giddens and others, and his writing is the most thorough and systematic representation of that orientation, but not the only one. In my view, it is not necessary to commit to an Eliasian perspective to the exclusion of all others, but precisely to develop the connections and overlaps between Elias’s approach to sociology and an array of very similar, but otherwise disconnected, endeavours to solve the same conceptual and empirical problems.

My aim in this paper has been, then, to provide some useful reflections on the various ways in which Elias’s process-figurational theory might be equally, if not more effective, in overcoming the main theoretical problems in organization theory. Elias provides a conceptual toolbox well suited to overcoming stubborn theoretical difficulties, dissolving, indeed rendering meaningless, the supposed agency/structure problem. The absence of discussions of power is already an important problem in organization theory, as Stewart Clegg has been arguing for some time now but in addition to turning to theorists such as Foucault and Latour, Elias’s theory of power is also a valuable theoretical resource. His work helps address the question of how organizations have been transformed from rational, mechanistic forms to networked forms (Clegg 1989), their anchorage in surrounding social dynamics and relations and above all, the constantly increasing interdependence of human action. His ideas constitute a powerful

critique of much management thinking as ‘magico-mythical’ (Stacey, 2007) and constitute theoretical foundations that make it possible to see a range of different things about organizational life and change, as well as seeing things we are used to, more clearly, that otherwise become caught up in tired and irresolvable conceptual disputes.

It should also be said that the relationship between Elias and organization theory is most productive when it is critical and two-way, when a clearer focus on the organizational dimensions of social life might enhance Elias’s analyses, perhaps nudge them in new directions. It is true that Elias’s often placed the institutional form taken by social relations and processes very much in the background of his account and his emphasis on the unintentional, unplanned nature of social order often underplayed the ways in which intentions are in fact realized (van Krieken, 1990). It is not, then, simply a matter of looking at organisations in terms of process-figurational theory but also of reading Elias through an organisational studies lens.

There are a variety of possible directions into which organizational research drawing on Elias might travel, including:

- How Elias’s account of the structure and dynamics of court society can be used to analyse contemporary organizational forms, the performative dynamics of organizational culture.
- How the concept of figurations can be used as an alternative to the agency/structure dualism, to analyse what writers like Karl Weick (2012) term the ‘impermanence’ of organizations.
- How Elias’s concept of unplanned order as the interweaving of intentional action by figurations of interdependent individuals and groups can be used to analyse the emergence of new organizational forms such as Google, Facebook, and Uber.
- How Dolan and Connolly’s close analysis of the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Guinness brewery can be drawn upon to develop similar analyses of other organizations, using process-figurational theory.
- The broader implications of Wilbert van Vree’s account the ‘meetingization’ of society, how decision-making processes in different organizations revolve around the formation of particular kinds of habitus and psychological disposition. Judith Brett (2002), for example, drawing on van Vree, highlights how the disjunction between the parliamentary and professional styles of meeting affect how the realm of politics is perceived and how it might play a role in the declining legitimacy of political parties and governments.
- How Elias’s theory of power-in-figurations can provide alternative explanations to those dependent on theorists such as Foucault.
- How changing forms of the organization of work can be analysed with an emphasis on long-term processes, figurational relations, and the changing formation of habitus. Elias’s conceptual approach would generate a range of new insights into, for example, the emergence and spread of «McDonaldization» (Ritzer, 2013) and the «deformalisation» of organizations in the «Uberfication» (Fleming, 2017: 34) of forms of work.
- The ways in which the expression of various forms of violence and emotions more broadly are both continually re-shaped in organizations and also continue to play a important role, the dialectic of civilizing and decivilizing processes, and informalization.
- The impact of social media on organizational dynamics, power relations and the formation of subjectivity both within organizations and linking with broader social relations.
- The ways in which the connections between process-figurational and actor-network theories – so far only lightly observed – can be developed into a more robust dialogue with empirical applications.
- How networked, postmodern organizations balance the opposing tendencies generated by postmodern organizations. Clegg and van Iterson, for example, note that «[h]ow the tension between discipline and expression in postmodern organizations will affect organizational members’ disposition is an intriguing issue for further study» (Clegg, van Iterson 2013: 631).
- In terms of methodology and possible research projects, Clegg and van Iterson point to the possibility of following Elias’s own method and examining etiquette manuals and their equivalents over time, management texts, as well as surveys and interviews, and ethnographies. One could add to those empirical sources studies of ‘how to succeed’ books, Ted talks, the organizational rules and norms built into popular culture (*Mad Men*, police dramas, films, and so on), the discursive performance and impact of public figures such as Jordan

Peterson, Donald Trump, as well as the narratives around celebrity CEOs, the likes of Richard Branson, Elon Musk, etc.

The potential of Elias's process-figurational theory for organizational analysis is really only in its early stages, and hopefully this paper has sketched the basic contours of how Elias's sociology can contribute to both theoretical development and empirical research in organization studies.

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