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Spaces of informalization: playscapes, power and the governance of behaviour

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Spaces of Informalization: playscapes, power and the governance of conduct

Abstract

Geographers have contributed a great deal towards an understanding of social control across different spaces and the ways in which power is exercised in the interests of elite groups to the detriment of marginalized 'Others'. Little attention however, has been given to *de-controlled* spaces: spaces where the standard of conduct expected of previous generations is no longer as rigid and formalized as it once was. This paper draws on the work of Norbert Elias and Cas Wouters in exploring how previously prohibited behaviours become admissible within particular social situations, groups and settings: a process known as *informalization*. The informalization thesis posits that a *long term* perspective can elucidate the ways in which gradual changes in expected standards of behaviour are linked to corresponding changes in social habitus and the power differentials that characterize the social relations between elite and outsider groups. The paper contends that a revision of the sociological concept of informalization, emphasizing spatial context and difference can contribute a great deal to debates in human geography. It is argued that the spatialization of Elias' work could provide a useful theoretical framework with which to enhance the geographer's understanding of the relationship between group identities, power, social change and governance. Conversely, a focus on the *spaces* of informalization may also advance the theory from a sociological perspective. The theory is applied to specific playscapes and highlights the uneven, problematic nature of contemporary governance projects and the related problem of social misdiagnoses in the quest towards the 'non-antagonistic' city.

Key words: informalization; playscapes; governance; social change; manners; power.

Introduction

The extensive works of the German sociologist Norbert Elias (1897-1991) have received little attention in human geography to date compared to those of other sociological thinkers[1] – Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman, Pierre Bourdieu, Emile Durkheim, Michel Foucault, Anthony Giddens, Karl Marx.[2] This paper attempts to take an exploratory step towards the utilisation of Elias' work in geography by drawing on the theory of *informalization* - 'the trend towards diminishing formality and rigidity in the regimes of manners and emotions and towards increasing behavioural and emotional alternatives' (Wouters, 2007, p.8) - and applying this to prominent debates within the discipline. The concept has been developed by Cas Wouters from Elias's seminal work *The Civilizing Process* (1939).

While geographers have contributed a great deal to our understanding of the appropriation of, and social control within, different spaces in the name of capital and consumption (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hannigan, 1998; Harvey, 1973; Katz, 2001; Lees et al, 2008; Mitchell, 2001; Smith, 1996) and the outcomes of this in terms of marginalisation and stigmatisation (Halfacree, 1996; Sibley, 1981; 1995;), the gradual relaxation in self and social controls at particular times and in particular spaces has not been as comprehensively researched. This paper suggests that the *informalization* thesis can provide a theoretical grounding from which to address this gap. The concept has been developed by Wouters (1986; 2007) to refer to particular phases in Western societies where the standards of conduct and regime of manners are relaxed and more behavioural and emotional alternatives are admissible. Informalization processes are discussed in the context of human geography concerns such as the control and governance of human behaviour within certain spaces, and the liminal spaces of the carnivalesque in an effort to show the relevance of Elias's approach

[1] Space does not permit an exploration of the reasons for this. For a fuller discussion of the resonance and influence of Elias' work see Arnason, 1987; Goudsblom, 1987; and Kilminster, 1998.
[2] In a book chapter titled 'Social theory and human geography', which explores the relationship between the two, Derek Gregory (1994) makes reference to many social theorists who have influenced human geography to varying degrees. Elias is noticeable by his absence.

to the discipline. Conversely, the paper also emphasizes the importance of spatial context in furthering our understanding of informalization processes from a sociological perspective: the difference that place and space make to these processes in terms of their relative pace and intensity.

The Civilizing Process is an extensive, empirically based theoretical work charting the long-term, gradual transformation in human standards of conduct and manners with reference to the development of wider society in Western Europe; the long-term dominant trend being towards the refinement of manners from the medieval period onwards. The process of informalization takes place within this overall civilizing process and Elias posits that a long term perspective can elucidate the ways in which gradual changes in expected standards of behaviour - a 'softening of manners' - are linked to corresponding changes in social habitus and the power differentials that characterize the social relations between elite and outsider groups. In response to these changes social commentators, the media and policy-makers are often quick to point to a malaise within society and single out the specific groups and spaces to be "acted" upon (Powell and Flint, 2009), yet in some cases understanding of the complex processes which have precipitated these perceived changes appears to be lacking. The result of this selective understanding is a targeting of particular groups and social strata deemed to be operating outside the norms of the society which can result in inter-generational and group conflict. Further issues are raised where such responses lead to pervasive and sometimes oppressive attempts at governing and civilising specific spaces and behaviours (see Flint, 2009). Elias' theory however, is applied at a society-wide level and while informalization lends itself to inquiry into behavioural changes at the micro level, Wouters (2007) focuses only on national differences. This paper therefore seeks to explore the enormous potential of applying Elias' work to *different* spatial contexts.

At the same time however, the concept of informalization is problematized. It is argued that informalization is not an even, all-embracing process and that a general societal approach (such as that of national trends provided by Wouters) serves to mask inequalities and geographies of exclusion and in particular, the varying impact that governance responses have on certain groups and spaces. Thus, as well as attempting to show the relevance of Elias's (and Wouters') ideas to debates in human geography the paper has two further aims. The first is to develop the theory of informalization by problematizing the concept from a spatial perspective and drawing attention to specific spatial correlates. The second aim is to show how this approach can highlight the uneven and differentiated nature of governance projects which can be seen, to some extent, as responses to informalizing processes. Situating contemporary changes within the framework of informalization enables a fuller appreciation of attempts to (re-)formalize behaviours; and emphasizing spatial context highlights the targeted nature of governance projects aimed at realigning the conduct of specific groups perceived to lack the 'respect' of previous generations.

The paper begins with a brief outline of some of the key aspects of Elias' theory of civilizing processes before setting out the theoretical concept of informalization in more detail. Emphasis here is placed on the relationship between changing power relations and corresponding relaxations in the code of manners. The relevance of informalization to debates in human geography is then explored with reference to two examples of 'playscapes' which have concerned geographers and which could be argued to be *spaces of informalization*: the Western beach and the spaces of the urban night-time economy. The space of the Western beach provides an example of a universal and constant space used by different groups and classes over many generations and therefore reflects changes in standards of behaviour over time and levels and forms of self and social control. The spaces of the night-time economy on the other hand, provide a setting for the exploration of more specific

contestations and are sites of more *formal* controls characterised by increased surveillance and regulation. It is suggested that these examples represent spatial manifestations of the *'emancipation of emotions'* (Wouters, 2007) and the related processes of *functional democratization* and the alteration of conduct; in short, *informalization*. Through this discussion the resonance and relevance of Elias' work can be discerned and it is argued that further engagement with Elias' ideas on the part of geographers could offer fruitful avenues for inquiry into power relations, group identities, social change, contemporary governance and resultant geographies of exclusion.

The Civilizing Process

The theoretical framework underpinning Wouters' concept of informalization is Elias' seminal work *The Civilizing Process* (and to a lesser extent Elias' theory of established-outsider relations) which charts the development and refinement of Western European manners from the medieval period onwards. *The Civilizing Process* is a lengthy and detailed study and space here does not permit a thorough explanation of this in-depth theoretical framework (see Elias, 2000; Kuzmics, 1988; and Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998). Rather, this section outlines the aspects central to Wouters' subsequent theory of informalization, in order to aid an understanding of its emergence and origins.

Elias (2000) focuses on human behaviour, power and habitus and what his empirical analysis shows to great effect is that the gradual movement towards a more refined standard of conduct in Western European societies[3] is the result of social competition and growing social

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[3] The focus on Western European societies should not be taken as Elias making normative judgements about the relative degrees or stages of 'civilization' reached by different societies, nations or parts of the world (see Powell and Flint (2009) for an appreciation of this). Elias' conception of civilization differs from notions of 'adaptive capacity' and modernization at the political and economic level as instead, Elias considers the changing behaviour of individuals and specifically 'the social modelling of affects in everyday life to be the most important explanatory issue in the process of civilization' (Kuzmics, 1988, p.151), which owes much to Freud (2004). Elias' focus was on Western Europe and there is certainly the need for further research on civilizing processes beyond this, which we are

interdependencies across society as a whole. This long-term trend towards more civilised

conduct is simultaneous to the development of the complex absolutist state and the growing

integration and differentiation of social functions within a pacified society. Elias's concern

was with the ongoing *process* of civilization: the ways in which the increased social

differentiation and interdependencies within society (sociogenesis) relate to the

internalization of expected standards of behaviour within the individual which become

"second nature" (psychogenesis). Prevalent processes from the medieval period onwards

such as the monopoly of taxation and violence and the resultant internal pacification of

society are prerequisites for the Western European civilizing process. These wider societal

developments impact upon the individual in gradual and subtle ways as social control

through the fear of violence gives way to an internal self-control: 'being civilized means that

the emotions become rationalized and "psychologized"' (Kuzmics, 1988, p.153) as 'more

people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people' (Goudsblom,

quoted in Mennell, 1990, p.209). In Elias' words social constraints are converted into self-

constraints within the individual passed down from one generation to the next through the

process of socialisation, such that expected standards of behaviour become "second nature".

There is also a corresponding increase in the scope for *mutual identification* and 'mutually

expected self-restraint' (Wouters, 1986) as negotiating through everyday life becomes a more

calculable experience with violence and the threat of violence removed 'behind the scenes' of

social life. As Elias notes: '*Not abruptly but very gradually the code of behaviour became*

stricter and the degree of consideration expected of others became greater. The sense of what

to do and what not to do in order not to offend or shock others became subtler' (Elias, 2000,

p.69). There is a key role here for emotions in terms of the way in which rising thresholds of

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perhaps seeing the start of now (see Mennell, 2007). Yet, though the context of civilizing processes
differs across different nations and regions of the world the central tenet, that is, the monopolization of
violence and pacification of society, may be achieved by different means than the development of the
absolutist state in Europe but is still a process undergone in most societies (Mennell, 1990).

shame and embarrassment serve to keep individual's behaviour in check: the fear of loss of

social standing and prestige acts as a powerful force driving behaviour.

The stricter and more rigid control over emotions is part and parcel of the dominant long-term civilizing process as certain behaviours which in previous eras were acceptable become

sanctioned as 'inappropriate' or 'bad manners'. For instance, as well as the gradual occlusion

of violence from the public realm as a result of a growing repugnance towards it as

pacification takes place at a deep level within society, certain bodily functions are also

removed behind the scenes of social life consistent with the rising threshold of shame and

embarrassment.[4] 'Put briefly, in the course of a civilizing process the self-constraint

apparatus becomes stronger relative to external constraints. In addition, it becomes more

even and all-embracing' (Elias, 1996, p.34). This trend is more discernible over a long-term,

historical period and indeed, viewed in a short-term perspective may not be apparent at all.

Informalization

Within this overall civilizing process however, there take place tides and counter currents of

informalization; and in extreme cases '*decivilizing processes'*.[5] As Elias notes: 'The civilizing

process does not follow a straight line....On a smaller scale there are the most diverse criss-

cross movements, shifts and spurts in this or that direction' (2000, p.157). As a mis-reading

of phases of informalization 'people can frequently see nothing in these changes other than

degeneration into disorder. It appears merely as an expression of a loosening of the code of

behaviour and feeling, without which a society must fall into destruction' (Elias quoted in

Goudsblom and Mennell, 1998, p.245). Such a reading has implications for the way in which

society responds to these perceived changes and raises questions about the increasingly

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[4] Elias draws on a wealth of empirical documentation and goes into great detail about the gradual changes in sensibilities which have come to sanction public behaviours such as spitting, urinating etc
[5] The focus here is on informalization but for a fuller discussion of decivilizing processes see Mennell, 1990; Fletcher, 1997; Pratt, 1998; and Wacquant, 2004..

pervasive governance of conduct across many aspects of social life.[6] On closer inspection

however, what empirical evidence (Wouters, 1986, 2004, 2007; see also studies listed in part

2 of Kranendonk, 1990) actually shows is that changes in the social codes regulating

behaviour reflect a shift in the decision-making process; from parents or teachers for

example to an increased social pressure on self-regulation by young adults - a 'thrust towards

individualization' (Elias, ibid, p.245). Kilminster (2008) highlights the need for detachment

(see Elias, 1956, 1987) in understanding waves of informalization and warns against the

blurring of our understanding and a potential mis-diagnosis of social problems as a result of

our own moral views and ideologies - a criticism he levels against Christopher Lasch's work

on the *Culture of Narcissism* (1980). He argues that Lasch's analysis is essentially 'an

ideological description of what he intensely dislikes about society' (Kilminster, 2008, p.140)

underpinned by his conservative interpretation of society and history. Consequently, Lasch's

'involved' thinking (he grew up through the 'permissive society') rendered him blind to

complex informalization processes taking place such that his interpretation is one of a

degenerative society. Such short-term, 'involved' views and diagnoses of society's problems

can also be discerned in policy discourses such as the Respect agenda in the UK.[7] An

appreciation of informalization processes could therefore help bring a degree of clarity to

ongoing debates around the 'politics of behaviour' (Powell and Flint, 2009). Indeed, such an

approach could help shed light on the uneven, targeted governance mechanisms which

disrupt the legitimate cultural and leisure practices of marginalized groups.

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[6] For instance, the current governmental focus on parenting and family intervention in the UK (e.g. parenting orders; punishing parents for their children's truanting) can be seen as an ambitious and *targeted* response by government to realign the conduct of particular 'deviant' youths through the 'responsibilization' of parents and communities. This approach however, is not problematized and is based on short-term considerations shaped by the romantic image of the disciplined nature of previous generations. There is an inherent contradiction here: while society celebrates the advancements in terms of children's power and rights as a hallmark of civilised society, it also vilifies young people and parents for the perceived degeneration of the social order.

[7] In 2006 the UK government established the Respect Task Force aimed at delivering the 'Respect Agenda'. This agenda has resulted in a broadening, deepening and furthering of governmental interventions and ambitions through which the scope of anti-social behaviour policy in the UK has extended to a wider attempt to address general incivility within society and to bring about 'cultural shifts' in targeted sections of the population (Powell and Flint, 2009).

These progressive shifts are easily misunderstood when considered in a short-term, contemporary perspective. If one takes a processual approach however, emphasizing the power relations and struggles precipitating these changes, it becomes apparent that these transformations are associated with a shift in power relations between generations and sexes bringing about a relative equalization (i.e. less unequal power differentials). Thus, the changing nature of the parent-child, Teacher-pupil, husband-wife[8] relationship in terms of the increased power, self-constraint and individualization experienced by the latter (i.e. functional democratization) is a key consideration in understanding the perceived 'relaxation' in social standards. As Kilminster points out de Tocqueville was one of the first to grasp the idea that 'manners are softened as social conditions become equal' (quoted in Kilminster, 1998, p.149) and this neatly captures Elias' notion of *functional democratization*. Not to be confused with the political idea of democratization, Elias's concept refers to the 'long-term, unplanned process of the lessening of the power gradients and social distance between interdependent groups in societies that have become increasingly differentiated' (Kilminster, ibid, p.151). Increasing chains of interdependence and integration across society, involving enemies as well as allies, contributes to an overall structure of interdependence that gradually becomes more polyarchic (Kilminster, ibid). This complex structure then impacts upon differences in behaviour between different social strata: there is a decrease in behavioural contrasts and an increase in varieties (Elias, 2000). That is, as 'outsider' groups rise and the power balance between them and the 'established' is lessened there is a greater leniency in the sense of the range of behaviour deemed admissible in particular social settings. Consequently the conduct of behaviour between different social groups converges

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[8] These are of course general trends towards equalization at a societal level, with many individual exceptions and should be viewed in long-term perspective. Kitchens (2007) provides a good summation of trends in family life contrasting 'earlier times when a rigid discipline and complete agreement to parents' wishes were the order of the day….with family life in the modern era, in which the power of the patriarch is weakened and the rights of women and children are proclaimed' (pp.460-461).

but the nuances within this standard are greater. This is not a smooth process however whereby controlled behaviours and spaces become 'decontrolled' (and vice versa in the case of re-formalization processes). On the contrary, one of the strengths of the concept of informalization is its ability to capture the *tensions* inherent in social changes and behaviours and the complexities of social processes and relations in a constant state of flux. An appreciation of temporal and spatial differences can therefore further enhance our understanding. For instance, some changes are more gradual and represent wider cultural alterations (e.g. changes in child rearing or class habits) and some populations and spaces appear to experience more rapid changes and responses (e.g. the recent concern with, and attention to, anti-social behaviour in the UK).

A central aspect of informalization then, is the breaking down of formalities as rising outsider groups experience a relative increase in power and the rigid (and sometimes oppressive) regimes of the elite are challenged. Given the corresponding social integration and emancipation processes (of groups and emotions), that go hand in hand with informalization and the use of terms such as leniency, relaxation, admissible, permissive, loosening etc. it would be easy to read informalization as a straight forward process of liberation. This conception is inadequate however, as the trend towards decreasing contrasts and increasing varieties as a result of increased contact between different kinds of people brings with it an increase in the demands on self-regulation which represents a cost to the individual in the form of the inner struggle over the control of impulses and emotions: 'when spontaneity is replaced by strategy there is a trade-off between the uninhibited joy of the moment and the security of controlled planning' (Kuzmics, 1988, p.155). The emancipation and integration of outsider groups implies a decrease in the social distance between different people and social strata and a corresponding widening of circles of identification (de Swaan, 1995). Thus, while more alternative (and less formal) behaviours are permitted the range of behaviours

and increased attention to others in different social situations is extremely demanding on individuals. Informalization processes are thus far more complex than notions of a temporary release or 'letting go'.

Wouters (2007) builds on Elias' (2000) rich empirical base (which only covered the first third of the 20th century) to explore changes in the regimes of manners in four Western countries over the last century – Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain and the USA - and specifically the shift towards greater informality in everyday personal interactions over the course of the twentieth century. He replicates Elias' use of etiquette books as a means of charting the changing expectations with regard to social conduct and self-control in a range of different settings and between different social groups. Wouters' concept of informalization is derived from Elias's concept of *'the controlled decontrolling of emotional controls'* (2000). This emphasis on *controls* draws attention to the fact that informalization is very much part of the civilizing process and is made possible by the strong mastery over emotions and affect controls which characterise today's civilised society. Wouters summarizes informalization as the 'trend towards diminishing formality and rigidity in the regime of manners and emotions, and towards increasing behavioural and emotional alternatives' (2007, p.8). He extends the analysis of Elias and suggests that informalization became dominant at the end of the nineteenth century with particular 'accelerated' periods observed in the 'Roaring Twenties' and the permissive era of the 1960s and 1970s. Within this overall trend Wouters' empirical evidence shows how alternating short-term phases of informalization can be discerned as part of a wider long-term process of social emancipation and integration. It is worth articulating these processes with reference to two examples utilised by first Wouters and then Elias.

Firstly, in observing and detailing the increased leniency in the code of manners over the twentieth century, Wouters (2007) notes one significant exception: displays of superiority and inferiority increasingly becoming taboo. This example serves as a helpful illustration of the connection between trends towards social integration and equalization and the corresponding shift in emotions and conduct. Up to the late nineteenth century the fear of social contamination helped to explain avoidance behaviour on the part of social superiors, but avoiding those who might put ones own self control to the test was also a significant motive. Wouters (2007) argues that excessively arrogant displays of superiority came to be felt as embarrassing because previously their function was to counter the 'fear of falling': the threat from below from social inferiors and/or rising 'outsiders'. However, through social mixing and closer contacts the fear of falling had diminished, 'these displays lost their function; and without them, the code of manners lost some of its rigidity and stiffness. Thus, the range of accepted behaviour expanded: a spurt of informalization occurred' (Wouters, 2007, p.49). And Wouters continues 'avoidance behaviour was internalized, turning tensions *between* people into tensions *within* people' (2007, p.54) – a further illustration of the increased demands and psychological costs imposed on individuals.

Secondly, Elias (1996) uses the example of courting in Germany focusing on the relationship between men and women and between older and younger generations, as a 'particularly clear' illustration of the spurt of informalization taking place at the time. The etiquette previously expected in young courtships represented a strong external social constraint which could guide behaviour:

'...one bowed, kissed their hand, danced with them in the prescribed way, kissed them when they allowed it, called, when necessary, on the parents – in short, contact with them was ruled by a quite well-established, strictly formalized code of behaviour' (Elias, 1996, p.35)

The subsequent emancipation from the conventional rituals and formalities which had previously regulated courting behaviour was simultaneous to a significant growth in power

for young, unmarried women. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century such women's

lives were controlled and formalized to a large extent by older people (parents, church, state)

which was consistent with the dominant social relations of the time between the generations

and sexes. The shift in the power balance allows for the process of informalization as

expected standards of conduct for young women are gradually altered with more and more

alternatives admissible: courting became a more individualized experience (Elias, 1996) as

the decision-making process was increasingly left to young women. These two examples

capture the interplay between power, emotions, and increasing social differentiation and

interdependence which run alongside the subtle changes in human behaviour. In the absence

of prescribed (but unwritten) rules of conduct and rituals of behaviour for young people the

state and other actors have attempted to fill this vacuum through the increasing regulation

and *codification* of rules and behaviour (this issue is addressed in more detail below with

reference to the night-time economy). It is within this theoretical framework that the

following examples are examined in an attempt to show the potential of an Eliasian approach

in furthering an understanding of the changing social relations - and their implications -

within spaces in which the social norms governing behaviour appear to be relaxed.

The centrality of self-control to the concept of informalization resonates, to some extent, with

Foucault's notion of governmentality which has received significant attention in geography in

recent years. It is worth noting, albeit briefly, some key similarities and differences with

regard to the focus of this paper. Indeed, Elias and Foucault share many common themes and

concerns: the body, the development of self-control, power relations, their sense of

detachment, and their analysis of historical change in understanding present society (Dolan,

2010). However, as Dolan notes Elias's processual approach emphasizing the long term,

gradual nature of social processes is one marked difference and represents a significant point

of departure. For Elias and Wouters changes in the power relations within society are

simultaneous to the development of social processes such that they are able to identify 'the temporal structure of social change and the continuities underlying differences across time' (Dolan, 2010, p.15). As well as time there are also differences pertaining to the treatment of space. Foucault is concerned with the closed institutional spaces of the prison or the asylum but for Elias spatial change is again related to the long term development of society. While Foucault's governementality can also contribute to our understanding of the issues raised here I believe that the theoretical tools developed by Elias, and subsequently Wouters, are better equipped to capture the relationship between changes in power relations, social processes and the resultant impact upon standards of behaviour and conduct. The next step then, is to explore the relationship of these processes to specific spaces - to spatialize the notion of informalization.

Spaces of Informalization

Given that much of the theory developed by Elias (and subsequently by Wouters) is often applied at a society-wide level it is difficult to appreciate the extent to which the processes they describe are taking place within particular settings at the micro-scale or how these processes may differ from one place/space to the next. Elias did emphasize the importance of the national habitus, and his work illustrates the specificity of national contexts in understanding the long term differentiation and integration of society and the corresponding affect upon manners and conduct (see Elias, 1996). Little, however, is said of informalization processes in terms of differences *within* national societies or how variations may be apparent among different groups and across different spaces. It is useful therefore, to apply this body of work to specific localised contexts both as an aid to understanding the processes affecting the development of social relations within particular sites, and as a means of revising and developing the theory of informalization empirically.

Wouters (1986; 2007) shows that informalizing processes permeate social behaviours across society but the contention here is that geography can help to understand those enclaves where variations occur and if/where specific spatial correlates exist. Expectations with regard to conduct are obviously dependent upon spatiality: behaviours taken for granted and accepted in one spatial context may be deemed socially unacceptable in another and bring about shame and embarrassment.[9] For instance, abusive behaviour towards opposing fans at a football match can be seen by some as an integral and valued part of the spectator experience but one would normally be surprised and uncomfortable when encountering similar conduct in the shopping mall. The proposition here is that geography can contribute to an understanding of difference in terms of the loosening of self-constraint across particular spaces, the factors which contribute to this and its outcomes. The remainder of this paper, then, briefly examines accounts of what might be termed *spaces of informalization* and suggests areas for further research which could build on the foundations laid by Elias and Wouters and enable a more nuanced and differentiated understanding of informalization processes and their more localised outcomes. It should be noted however that these examples are illustrative: they serve to articulate the potential of the informalization thesis in contributing to debates on social change and space. There are of course many other spaces which may be studied along these lines; settings where self-controls appear to be relaxed both gradually over the long term and more rapidly. Such areas for exploration might include: leisure spaces such as music festivals and football stadia (see Flint and Powell, 2011); settings and sites in which groups are centrally implicated in processes of informalization such as the spaces within which child-rearing is enacted and increasingly informalized (see Ktchens, 2007); or public spaces in which generational conflict is prominent and the boundaries of acceptable conduct are challenged (e.g. public parks and city centre spaces).

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[9] Spatial dimensions will also interact with temporal ones such as the time of day/night or stage in the life course. For instance, observing someone drinking alcohol in a train station may invoke a different reaction at 9am than it would at 9pm.

The beach as a space of informalization

One spatial context which is often characterised as a permissive space and which has received attention in geography is the beach. [10] The notion of liminality and the carnivalesque has been applied to Western conceptions of the beach (Shields, 1990, 1991; Preston-Whyte, 2004) in attempts to understand the unique image and social relations attached to it. It is posited that the mixing of categories (e.g. private/public, child/adult) creates liminal zones characterised by ambiguity and discontinuity (Sibley, 1995) and that liminality represents 'a liberation from the regimes of normative practices and performance codes of mundane life because of its interstitial nature' (Shields, 1990, p.47). That is, the beach is viewed as 'a socially defined zone appropriate for specific behaviours and patterns of interaction outside of the norms of everyday behaviour, dress and activity' (Shields, 1990, pp.40-41). For Shields the beach represents a space of 'freedom from the constraints of social position (both high and low) developed in the permissive atmosphere of a resort town' (1990, p.39); while for Preston-Whyte beaches are 'spaces of heightened sensibilities that are temporary, personal and elusive' (2004, p.349). The resonance with informalization is clear.

Shields' (1990) historical exploration of the changing nature of Brighton beach and its social relations is a useful complement to the theoretical analysis presented above as it exhibits some of the key processes inherent in informalization: the dissemination of manners and social conduct from elite groups to society more widely; the abandonment of standards of conduct and the expected performance of social rank; the contestation of spaces reflecting the power struggles between different groups within society; and the 'social constraint towards self-constraint' which enables the relaxation in manners and conduct while at the same time

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[10] I draw upon examples here of the contemporary Western beach but the same may be true of other beach spaces, though this is not to deny the heterogeneity of the term or its different symbolic meanings across different societies and to different groups (see Preston-Whyte, 2004).

maintaining an overall 'civilised' standard. There is a key distinction however, between the notion of liminality and carnival applied to the beach on the one hand and informalization on the other, which is that of temporality: 'During the time of Carnival, existing forms of coercive social relations are *temporarily* suspended' (Jackson, 1988, p.225 - my emphasis). The transgressions and inversions of liminal spaces and the carnivalesque are thus conceptualised as temporary (Cresswell, 1996) while informalization processes are more deep-rooted and longer lasting. What this paper suggests however is that processes of informalization can be accentuated and quickened by the spatial context in which they take place. What geographers might call liminal or carnivalesque spaces such as the beach or the music festival which harness a looser relaxation in the codes governing conduct can act as precursors to wider changes across society or among particular groups. This conceptualisation resonates with the idea that carnival as resistance is not temporal but more continuous and can 'erupt' (Stallybrass and White, 1993). Certainly informalization processes are not as clearly discernible as this characterisation of the 'eruption of carnival' but they are prone to counter-currents and reversals, as manifestations of the continuing struggles within society. In this context events such as Carnival and places like Brighton beach can be seen as sites where underlying informalization processes come to the surface: spaces where changes in the regimes of manners and the emancipation of emotions are more discernible.

As Shields (1990) notes, an important development in the history of Brighton beach is its emergence as a destination for the working class in the second half of the nineteenth century and therefore as a place where classes as well as sexes would mix quite freely giving rise to social integration - a key aspect of informalization as outlined above. The ritual of season and the focus on the medicinal benefits of sea-bathing popularized by George IV were no longer the sole social base of Brighton but now the 'structuring codes of the nineteenth century had

been removed' (Shields, 1991, p.86). To say they had been removed is perhaps too bold a statement, rather these codes were being transformed and the beach was at the forefront of these changes. Shields argues that it was around issues of manners – the sort of suitable attire, the mixing of the sexes – that 'the struggle between personal freedoms and social morality clashed' (Shields, 1991, p.86). Again, this resonates strongly with the informalization thesis which stresses the link between changes in manners and wider social transformations. Furthermore, Wouters cites the post WWI era known as the 'Roaring Twenties' as a particular 'accelerated era' of informalization. This timescale corresponds to what Shields calls: 'the specific position of Brighton as a 'dirty weekend' destination' (1990, p.40); and what Cohen (2002) calls 'Greene's Brighton' which involved an 'air of menace that surrounded the razor gangs and the race-course battles of the twenties and thirties' (p.17). Shields also points to the disturbances at Brighton beach between the mods and rockers in the 1960s as another key 'carnivalization of social relations' feeding into the construction of Brighton as a liminal space. Again, this corresponds to the dominant phase of informalization during the permissive era of the 1960s and 1970s. As Wouters notes of this era:

'Many modes of conduct that had formerly been forbidden were now allowed, particularly in matters of sexuality, and conduct and emotions became less formally regulated in such spheres of behaviour as the written and spoken language, clothing, music, dancing, and hairstyles' (Wouters, 2007, p.3)

The previously forbidden modes of conduct were only 'allowed' after the struggles and contestations against the formalized conduct which they replaced. The codes and styles of the mods and the rockers were perhaps symbolic of this and these groups were at the forefront of challenges to the formalized etiquette of previous generations (see Cohen, 2002). As well as these changes being clearly discernible in certain 'spheres' of behaviour however, they are also apparent in particular spaces such as the Western beach. What this suggests is that Shields' analysis can only understand part of the picture. Wouters (2007) points us towards the widespread changes in power relations which were taking place during these

periods for a better understanding of the longer lasting transformations in standards of

behaviour which have emerged from the struggles and contestations across these spaces.

Within the framework of informalization the 'dirty weekend' tag attached to Brighton in the

'Roaring Twenties' can be viewed as part of a wider societal process involving the changing

gender relations (a decrease in the power differential between men and women) in the post-

war period. And again with reference to the mods and the rockers, inter-generational

relations (a decrease in the power differential between young people and parents, teachers

etc) were shifting and individualization processes becoming dominant allowing young people

more and more of a say in decision-making. That is not to deny the specificity of place or the

importance of Shields' work in emphasizing the centrality of place-images. Brighton beach

appears to be a location at the forefront of informalizing processes where challenges to order

are expressed through 'we-images' attached to identifications with this or that cultural

signifier (be that a vesper or a motorcycle) often in opposition to others.

Rhys Evans's (2000) account of the changing nature of Wreck Beach in Vancouver also draws

on similar concepts – permissiveness, liminality, the carnivalesque - as that applied to

Brighton.   Central to Evans' recent history however is the prominence of Wreck Beach as a

nudist space and the contestations that ensued over the use of that space. Throughout the

1970s events led to Wreck Beach being considered a site of conflict and resistance which

began with the arrest of nudists followed by various protests for and against intervention on

the beach before the establishment of a 'clothing optional' zone in 1983 (Evans, 2000). A

protest against the 'immorality' of the beach led by a fundamentalist preacher epitomizes the

inter-generational conflicts of the time as the sexualization of the beach is experienced and

imagined differently: as a liberation for youth; and as a degeneration into disorder on the part

of older/established groups.

There are numerous other examples of the contested beach space that deserve more attention than space allows here. These examples support the notion of the Western beach as a space of informalization; where behavioural codes are relaxed or challenged allowing for a freer expression of impulses and emotions. For instance, Towan beach in New Quay in the UK was subject to a dispersal order from May to September 2008 in a bid to curb outbreaks of violence and anti-social behaviour there (BBC News, 2008b). Beaches in Cornwall in the UK and Australia have also been sites of conflict between surfers over the scarce resource of the beach. The issue of space and its control then becomes centred on notions of territoriality and identity (Preston-Whyte, 2004, p.354). Moving beyond the Western focus, a British couple were recently sentenced to three months imprisonment in Dubai for having sex on a public beach. This example provides an illustration of the conflicts that can ensue between tourists and locals with very different perspectives and expected standards of behaviour relating to sexual life. Conservative Islamic values in Dubai act as a strong formalizing mechanism ensuring that sexual life stays 'behind the scenes' whereas in Britain the beach is very much a sexualised space: "Effectively sex on the beach in isolated places is allowed, so long as there is a reasonable expectation of privacy - which someone engaging in such an activity would be expected to prove." (Ministry of Justice Spokeswoman quoted in BBC News Magazine, 2008). The spatial constraints of the beach as a resource involving competition between different users appears to accentuate the more informalized behavioural expectations and responses. These behaviours are not *only* to be found at the beach however, rather, the contention is that they are expressed more freely within Western beach spaces.

 (Re-)formalization versus self-regulation in the spaces of the night-time economy
Other spaces such as those of the night-time economy may also serve such functions in terms of harnessing a looser self-restraint and a relaxation in social conduct manifested in challenges to the formalized behaviours of the dominant order. The difference in the spaces

of the night-time economy however is that they are often regarded as 'sites of criminality, violence and debauchery, worthy only of containment and surveillance' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, p.55).

The night-time economy also draws attention to the uneven nature of contemporary governance projects based on a rationale associated with the 'perceived crisis of incivility within public spaces' (Flint, 2009, p.129) - an issue which is implicit in the work of Wouters. Flint (2009) draws attention to a myriad of policy responses unified by the common perception that the British state needs to intensify its efforts to regulate the public conduct of the population. Such attempts at regulation and realigning conduct have centrally implicated the night-time economy and have tended to focus on certain night-time spaces more than others. There are noticeable differences in the way in which different night-time spaces are policed and in the mechanisms and extent of governance. The work of Chatterton and Hollands is useful here as they distinguish between different types of venues (spaces) within the night-time economy: mainstream; alternative; and residual. It is worth contrasting the governance of mainstream spaces of nightlife with those of an alternative, informalized nature. For instance, mainstream nightlife venues are predominantly marshalled by 'bouncers' from private security firms who themselves use violence in attempts to curb violence. Thus the standards of conduct expected by patrons of mainstream night-time venues are *formalized* and may even be *codified* in texts of rules and regulations stipulating appropriate behaviours such as dress and language; and demarcating spaces within the venue where other behaviours are unacceptable (e.g. "no drinks on the dance floor"). That is, there are social constraints on conduct reinforced through the threat of sanctions and even violence on the part of doormen. In contrast, alternative independent venues eschew the formal methods of 'security' and instead draw upon '*self-regulation* through customer identification with the ethos of the premises' whereby 'consumers internalise a set of *codes*,

assumptions and expected behaviours' (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, p.55 – my emphasis). This resonates with an Eliasian perspective wherein identifications and a mutually expected self-restraint serve to pacify public spaces. Social relations and governance within alternative venues are *informalized*: they take a more liberal approach to dress codes and the division between consumer and producer is somewhat blurred (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003). What is of particular interest here is the way in which such informalized spaces are considered 'deviant' even though the level of disorder and violence is, in most cases, relatively minor in comparison to the scenes in and around many mainstream venues (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003).

Notions of deviance and disorder in the night-time economy are constructed as a youth problem and a working class one, which again resonates strongly with the notion of rising outsider groups and helps to explain the selective response of elites in terms of the threat to the(ir) established order. For instance, public drunkeness is readily associated with working-class communities whereas middle-class alcohol consumption practices are more closely aligned with the 'civilised' standards of Europe (Jayne *et al*, 2008). What these governance projects under-estimate however, is the high degree of affect control that individuals are able to exercise even in public spaces where standards of propriety and 'good conduct' appear to be lacking: the playscapes discussed rarely descend into chaos and debauchery. This suggests that media and political discourses of social malaise, decivilization and the breakdown of society are wide of the mark.

Liminality and the carnivalesque have proved helpful in conceptualising the Western beach space (Shields, 1990, 1991; Preston-Whyte, 2004) and the spaces of the night-time econecomy (Matsinhe, 2009). However, these notions tend to downplay the governance and regulation (both internal and external) of such spaces implying freedom and temporary emotional

releases in which the structuring relations of society; of power and subordination are suspended. The informalization thesis in contrast, is able to account for the interplay between the relaxation in expected standards of behaviour and the associated changes with regards to social position, power and social mixing, while at the same time explaining why the 'carnivalesque' rarely descends into violence or debauchery. That is, the relaxation in the regime of manners in the social space of the beach (or the erosion of the formalized etiquette of sexual relations within the night-time economy) is only possible within a society (or, more appropriately, at a phase within the development of that society) in which the standard of self-restraint and affect control is particularly strong. Behaviour at the beach with regards to clothing was used as an example to illustrate this point by Elias himself in *The Civilizing Process.* For Elias, advances in the thresholds of shame and embarrassment could co-exist alongside changes in bathing manners - involving a more revealing, less modest attire – due to the greater and stricter control over affects than was previously the case. He says:

> '*Only in a society in which a high degree of restraint is taken for granted, and in which women are, like men, absolutely sure that each individual is curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette, can bathing and sporting customs having this relative degree of freedom develop. It is a relaxation which remains within the framework of a particular "civilized" standard of behaviour involving a very high degree of automatic constraint and affect transformation, conditioned to become a habit*' (2000, p.157).

Thus, those wearing bikinis do not feel ashamed or embarrassed and those within proximity do not feel a sense of repugnance. 'The predominance of the greater standard of shame of the 19th and 20th centuries corresponds to the standard of behaviour of the time: everything pertaining to sexual life is concealed to a high degree behind the scenes' (Elias, 2000, p.150). The beach is just one site where these standards were challenged explicitly, in conjunction with the emancipation and integration of rising outsider groups, and the boundaries and formalities gradually eroded.

Similarly, the night-time economy provides an example of the social constraints on conduct and again suggests that informalization is a more appropriate framework with which to understand social relations. Certainly, many of these spaces are informalized but informalizing processes are repeatedly challenged by the regulation and governance mechanisms employed in attempts to *re*-formalize night-time spaces. Thus, the differentiated concept of *spaces* of informalization highlights, and aids an understanding of, the targeting of specific groups and spaces. It also brings into question the short-term and 'involved' accounts of a degenerative society. In contrast, a longer-term perspective draws attention to the continuous challenges to the established on the part of younger generations expressed in changing styles, language and conduct (e.g. The Roaring Twenties; the permissive era of the 1960s).

Conclusions

This paper has sought to introduce the work of Norbert Elias to a wider audience by illustrating the relevance of his work to debates in human geography with reference to the theory of civilizing processes and informalization. The paper has used the theories applied at a national and society-wide level by Elias and Wouters and transferred them to specific playscapes in a bid to illustrate the different aspects of informalization across different spaces; and has therefore pointed towards the need for a more nuanced understanding of informalizing processes which emphasizes the specificity of spatial context.

While waves of informalization have been shown to permeate throughout the wider society, it is within particular spaces such as the beach that the collective sense of the loosening of restraint and the permissive is experienced more freely; and where the struggle to develop new behavioural codes to replace the more rigid and repressive modes which preceded them is most evident. While informalization processes are the deeper, underlying and enabling

factors operating at a higher level across the whole of society – evidenced in the changing regime of manners – the spatial and social context of the beach as a site for youth, as a sexualized space, and as a socially mixed space pushes the boundaries of conduct further. This is brought into sharp focus when attempts to govern behaviour are challenged and resisted. Conceptions of the beach as a marginal space result in its all-too-ready association with deviance and permissiveness as it is often a site beyond the reach of conventional methods of surveillance and intervention (Evans, 2000); or because it is constructed as a space of the carnivalesque or liminality in which the social norms of the mundane do not hold true or are more easily inverted (Shields, 1990). These conceptions underestimate the power of self regulation, the 'invisible wall of affects' operating within individuals. Similarly, the idea of the night-time economy as a space of 'disorder' requiring corrective intervention speaks to ill-placed notions of the 'non-antagonistic city' (Diken, 2004) in which the sanitization of consumption spaces and the regulation of alternative spaces and conduct is deemed necessary for the smooth functioning of the city and its economy (Hannigan, 1998).

This paper has argued that such spaces represent discernible *spaces of informalization*; where the social processes operating at a deep level in society are manifested more clearly and discernibly; and where changes in power relations are expressed and embodied both corporeally and symbolically in the subcultures which attempt to colonize these spaces. These processes are not temporary however and are not spatially confined to the beach or the night-time economy - the underlying changes which have facilitated a more permissive etiquette are mirrored across much of society. The difference being that the sense of the collective and liminality that these particular spaces provide results in a freer expression of emotions.

Perceived as a degeneration of society, mis-readings of social processes can result in a focus on particular sites (e.g social housing estates) and groups (e.g. working class youth) in need of 'corrective treatment'. In some contexts attempts at re-formalization, based on a preoccupation with the socially constructed political agendas of the day (e.g. 'chavs', anti-social behaviour) can be seen as 'civilising offensives' targeted at specific populations (van Krieken, 1999; Powell and Flint, 2009). This resonates with an increasing body of work in urban geography which has pointed to the governance and social control of public spaces and the privatization of these spaces in the interests of capital and consumption. A fuller understanding of *informalization* processes could help prevent the misguided social diagnoses identified by Kilminster (2008) which frequently result in the vilification and stigmatisation of marginalised 'Others'. Even a cursory glance over the last 30 years of social discourse raises questions about the adequacy of approaches towards supposedly 'deviant' groups operating outside the expected and formalized relations of the established. A reading of informalization as a decline into social malaise can have problematic consequences and accentuate the struggles and contestations during processes of functional democratization. Furthermore, attempts at changing social and cultural practices which have developed through long-term and deep-rooted socialisation processes (sociogenesis) are, at best, extremely ambitious and more likely futile. Elias and Wouters point us towards a more detached, longer term perspective which emphasizes shifting power relations and empirical observation in understanding and responding to these social changes.

Finally, the theory of informalization could also benefit from an engagement with human geography. An appreciation of the spatial contexts in which different behaviours are manifested can provide a further complement to the approach set out by Elias and Wouters. Situating debates within spaces allows for an appreciation of the symbolism of those spaces and behaviours to particular groups; the 'tensions between dominant and subordinate

groups can be found reflected in the surfaces of subculture' (Hebdige, 1979, p.3). While the temporary eruptions and symbolisms of the carnivalesque presented here represent manifestations of resistance, social struggle and the breaking down of formalities they are thus part of a wider more deep-rooted process of informalization. The task in hand is therefore to develop an understanding of how these processes - and responses to them - vary in application to different behaviours and contexts from one space to the next, and the outcomes of this for individuals and groups.

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