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by

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Abstract

This paper argues that the life-works of Norbert Elias and Franz Borkenau can be best understood together, as they were developed in close interaction during the 1930s. Deriving inspiration from Freud, they took up the project formulated by Weber at the end of his 'Anticritical Last Word'. However, in two significant respects they went beyond the Weberian problematics. First, overcoming the centrality attributed to economic concerns, they rooted the Western civilising process in the long-term attempts to harness the violence that was escalated by the emergence and then the collapse of the Roman Empire. Second, they emphasised the crucial importance of periods of transition that follow an overall dissolution of order and that stamp the possible future course of events.

Key words: Elias, Borkenau, civilisation/ civilising process, violence, transition

Introduction

After long decades of almost complete neglect, the work of Elias recently started to receive the attention it deserves. The main aspects of his life and work are well researched and known (Fletcher, 1997, Korte, 1997, Mennell, 1992, Tabboni, 1993). However, the general assessment of his work still cannot be considered as settled. While the *Civilising Process* and *Court Society* are generally regarded as classics of historical sociology, the theoretical and methodological considerations of Elias are appreciated only among a small circle of adherents, while the work still encounters considerable resistance among mainstream, critical and post-modern sociologists.

This situation points to a series of as yet unresolved problems. These start with the reasons for the long neglect, a question that is posed in the literature on Elias since the beginning of his discovery, and that considerably bothered Elias himself. (1) Due to this neglect, the reception had a major effect on the entire course of the work. In the absence of feedback, Elias continued his work alone, developing his ideas in isolation, having hardly any publications for three decades. Therefore, the establishment of links between the work of Elias and of other contemporary social thinkers remains of vital importance (Breuer, 1994; Mennell, 1992: 284; Smith, 1997; Stokes, 1997; van Krieken, 1990).

However, one of the more intriguing aspects of the work of Elias is that, in distinction to most of those thinkers who worked alone and in isolation, his central concepts have a distinctly interactive, dialogical character. This is all the stranger as in the case of Elias, there are hardly any thinkers who are known to have exerted a major impact on the development of his ideas. Among the classics, only the influence of Freud is acknowledged. But Elias developed the ideas of Freud in a quite original manner, and can by no means be considered a Freudian. Among his contemporaries, the only name mentioned is Karl Mannheim's (Kilminster, 1993). However, Mannheim was Elias's thesis advisor, not an equal conversation partner, and even though Elias no doubt

took up some of Mannheim's ideas, the influence was by no means decisive.

All this points out a puzzle that so far has not even been formulated. Elias developed, evidently alone and based solely on his own thinking, a highly original approach to sociology that even today keeps drawing increasing attention and recruiting adherents. One of the main appeals of this approach is process thinking and the theoretical modelling of interdependence, as opposed to both methodological individualism and holism - approaches which, according to him, are based on the assumption of a 'homo clausus' (Elias, 1978). But these characteristics seem to be contradictory. A similar work simply could not have come into being under such conditions. Something is missing from the picture. Evidently, some crucial formative influences on the work of Elias has so far not yet been identified. If Elias is right, and the human being is not a 'homo clausus', then he could not have developed his ideas transcending the 'homo clausus' all by himself. But who could have been his conversation partner? Is it possible to identify a person and explain the reasons why this episode, arguably crucial for understanding the work of Elias, has so far remained hidden?

This paper argues that Elias indeed had such a conversation partner with whom Elias jointly developed his life project. He was Franz Borkenau. As the work and even the name of Borkenau is hardly known today, a few words of introduction to his life and work are due here.

Franz Borkenau: Life and Works

Borkenau was born on 15 December 1900 in Vienna (Jones, 1992: 457-8; Loewenthal, 1981; Russo, 1981; Tashjean, 1984). His family was half Jewish, the grandparents coming from Hungary and Rumania, and half Catholic. His father was a civil servant and one of his uncles achieved notoriety as head of the political police both in the Habsburg Empire and the first Republic. Borkenau was educated in an elite gymnasium run by the Jesuits but based on an

old Irish monastery, and did not know about his Jewish origins until his adult years. Such a background at that time represented a particularly explosive combination and produced a very distinct life course indeed. Still in his high school years, Borkenau became involved in the emerging youth movement that was strongly influenced by the ideas of Freud. He then came under the spell of Marxism and in 1921, as a student in Leipzig, joined the German Communist Party. He became head of the Youth Movement and then for five years worked in a secret research group led by the Hungarian economist Eugen Varga. However, he got disillusioned with the Party during its Stalinisation and at the end of 1929 was expelled.

At that moment Borkenau intensified his contacts with the Frankfurt *Institut* which resulted in his first main work, the *Transition from the Feudal to the Bourgeois World View* , published in 1934. The book, however, was very coldly received by Horkheimer and Borkenau's relationship with the *Institut* can be considered as broken. After 1933, he emigrated to Paris, in 1935-36 taught at the University of Panama, and then settled in England until the war. In his influential monograph on Pareto he was one of the first thinkers to develop a theory of totalitarianism. With the passing of the years, reinforced by his eyewitness experience of the Spanish Civil War, his opposition to Communism became ever more pronounced, almost obsessive. He belonged to the circle formed around Arthur Koestler, called the 'charismatic wing' of anti-Communism. From the late 1930s he published a series of books about the history and the contemporary situation of Communism, and also wrote many journalistic pieces. These works were characterised by Norbert Elias as showing an extraordinary skill, as they were written quickly and yet in a clear and well-structured manner (quoted in Papcke, 1985), and some of them became classics (Borkenau, 1937, 1939b). With characteristic incisiveness, he predicted the Sino-Soviet Split in 1952 - though, perhaps even more characteristically, his major analysis of 1 February 1952 remained unpublished for thirty years (Borkenau, 1983; Tashjean, 1983). During the same period he kept working on a major

manuscript dealing with the intellectual origins of the West, its central discovery being the role played by early Irish Monasticism in the transition to Europe (Borkenau, 1981), a contribution that still today is almost unrecognised.

Borkenau died suddenly on 22 May 1957 and, apart from occasional references to his classic studies on Communism, his work became all but forgotten. Some attention emerged in the late 1970s when his work became championed by a very odd couple: the conservative sociologist Daniel Bell in the United States and the ultra-radical Italian thinker Toni Negri. As a result, his posthumous manuscript was finally published in English in 1981 and in German in 1984, while translations of and commentaries on his work appeared in Italian, French and English. These works, however, failed to generate a momentum, not the least because of the difficulty of finding a proper reference point in which they could be located.

This paper argues that this missing reference point can be found in the work of Norbert Elias. The point is not simply that the works of Elias and Borkenau show a series of intriguing similarities, but that the two projects were in fact developed together.

The common experiential basis of the works of Elias and Borkenau

Even a cursory look suggests many commonalties in the lives of Elias and Borkenau. Both shared a Central European Jewish background, were in Frankfurt in the early 1930s, in Paris in between 1933-35, and then in London until the war. This parallelism was by no means self-evident, as Borkenau alone of all members of the Frankfurt school chose England as his country of exile (Jay, 1973: 38). Furthermore, during all this period they were friends and met regularly (Goudsblom, 1977: 40-1).

The commonalties, however, go beyond the surface level. The life-projects of Elias and Borkenau were developed at the same time, under highly specific conditions, and together. Therefore the 'experiential bases' of the works of Elias and

Borkenau are common, given by a specific 'figuration' whose components were the historical and biographical contexts and a mutually fertilising exchange of ideas.

The experiential basis of a thought can be reconstructed by combining the genealogical method, as developed by Nietzsche and Foucault, with the ideas of Victor Turner on liminality. Genealogy is 'gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary' (Foucault, 1984: 76). Instead of general references to the historical period or the social structure determining the content of ideas, it is concerned with the minute reconstruction of the conditions of emergence of ideas, and their lasting effects (Nietzsche, 1967: 20). Genealogy, however, is not a new name for contextual determinism. The specification of the exact manner in which elements of the background are conditioning a type of thought, giving its 'stamp' (Weber, 1948: 268-80), was a central concern for Foucault just as it was for the other thinker who attempted to develop a precise methodology on the basis of the incisive but loose insights of Nietzsche, Max Weber. Instead of arguing for a direct lineage between context, thought and lasting effect, they both singled out a crucial transmission mechanism between issues of context and the substance of thought. This is the way in which the question is posed (*Fragestellung*), or the problem is formulated (*problématisation*) (Szakolczai, 1998).

However, this still leaves open the link between this process of question formulation and the actual historical events and structures. The emphasis on the 'stamping' and the 'carrier strata' of religious experiences by Weber (1948), and on the '*practices* on the basis of which these problematizations are formed' by Foucault (1986: 11), were attempts to bring this element into the picture. It is at that point that the works of Victor Turner, especially his concept of 'liminality', provides a solution. According to this, the 'stamping experiences' that lead to a new 'problematisation', identified by Weber and Foucault, happen in a transitory, in between or 'interstructural situation' (Turner, 1967: 93) in which 'the past has lost its grip and the future has not yet taken definite shape' (Turner, 1992: 132). Thus, for a genealogical reconstruction of a

type of discursive formation or the thought of a thinker, 'context' matters not in terms of particular social, political or economic structures that determine the content of ideas, but as periods or situations that are 'liminal', especially if they are liminal in several respects, forming a complex 'figuration' (Elias, 1978). Elsewhere I have shown that this framework can be fruitfully applied in reconstructing the major formative moments in the thoughts of Max Weber and Michel Foucault, and of Durkheim, Weber and Parsons (Szakolczai, 1996, 1998). Here I will argue that it can be also applied to Elias and Borkenau, with the further claim that in their cases these formative experiences were the same. This will start by showing that 1930 was liminal periods for both Elias and Borkenau.

In the 1920s Borkenau was an active functionary of the German Communist Party. However, in 1928-9 he got disillusioned and in late 1929 was expelled. Even though associated with the Frankfurt *Institut* earlier, he had been mostly immersed in politics, and it was starting from 1930 that he began serious intellectual work (Jay, 1973: 16). Elias also moved to Frankfurt in the same year and started to work on his dissertation as Mannheim's assistant. Furthermore, their situation was not only biographically liminal but also socially marginal. Apart from being Jewish and newcomers, both of them were in a borderline position within the two opposite sociological camps in Frankfurt. In fact, these opposite camps were also in the process of formation at that moment, because Karl Mannheim became head of the Sociology Department in 1930, while this was also a moment of transition for the *Institut* as its first director, Carl Grünberg stepped down in 1929 due to reasons of health, and the new director, Max Horkheimer took charge in July 1930 (Jay, 1973: 24-5).

Finally, 1930 was also a fateful year in German history. The Great Depression broke out in 1929 and by 1930 the Weimar republic was in full crisis. There was an increased polarisation towards the Communists and the Nazis, and the militarised party troops started to make their presence felt (Fletcher, 1997: 172-3). This was the moment in which the 'undermining of the German

state from within through acts of terror, through the systematic use of violence' (Elias, 1996: 220) has started, a problematics that Elias repeatedly identified as his own, adding that this problem has not yet received a due attention (Elias, 1996: 220; 1994b: 58). Borkenau's work is rooted in the same the period and in the same experiences . They both started their first major work, *Transition* (Borkenau, 1976) and *Court Society* (Elias, 1983) in 1930 in Frankfurt and finished it around the turn of 1932/3.

All this only shows that due to a series of coincidences, Elias and Borkenau were in an identically sensitive and fertile position at the same time, and that they developed their projects simultaneously. The question now is to demonstrate that they indeed did this together. This will be done by reconstructing the underlying theoretical and methodological problematics of their work. In order to emphasise the connections and to make a strong case, their projects will be treated as sharing a common core, and the eventual disagreements and deviations will be mapped only with respect to this core.

As a final qualifying remark, it is important to emphasise that the article will not be concerned with the question of priority. Quite on the contrary, it will emphasise the interdependence, the joint development of the two projects, the manner in which 'one intellect caught fire from another' (Marianne Weber, 1986: 675). A search for priority would even be meaningless, as without the interaction none of the works could have come into being. At any rate, both Elias and Borkenau were strong personalities who already obtained a leading voice and an almost cultic standing earlier in their respective circles.

The common problematics of Elias and Borkenau

The thinker on whom both Elias and Borkenau drew most as a source of inspiration was Sigmund Freud, especially his idea that the understanding of human life cannot be reduced to purely rational explanations but must pay special and serious attention to emotions. While even this step was not at all common in social

thought in the early 1930s, the next was positively unique: instead of taking Freud's ideas at a face value, they opted for its historisation (Elias, 1994a: 484). They did so by arguing for the need of a historical reconstructive analysis of the very forms of experience, of the conduct of life, and of the forms of thought, through a historical analysis of words, categories, concepts, and texts (Borkenau, 1976: 15-9, 266-7; 1985: 97; 1987: 109-14; Elias, 1994a: 42-3, 484). In one phrase, they wanted to historicise Freud by historicising Kant - a project with close affinities to that of Michel Foucault.

Such a project, however, needed an anchorage point on its own. This was found in the works of Max Weber, especially the various essays on Protestantism. Based on the inspiration derived from his encounters with Marx, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Weber developed an approach for the historical reconstruction of changes in the way individuals conduct their life and set their life-goals (Szakolczai, 1998). Taking up some clues from the *Genealogy of Morals* , Weber put a great emphasis on the history of words, writing the 'longest footnote' in the history of social science (Hennis, 1988) about the etymology of the word *beruf* (Weber, 1995: 204-11). Though Weber did not know about Freud when writing the *Protestant Ethic* , he read Freud carefully soon after, in 1907 (Marianne Weber, 1988: 375). As the similarities between some of the key insights of Nietzsche and Freud were strong (Kaufmann, 1974: 182-3), it is not surprising that Elias and Borkenau, with their interest in Freud, found Weber's Nietzsche-inspired work particularly illuminating.

The claim that Elias and Borkenau took up the problematics of Weber must be taken literally. They evidently were not satisfied with the rather vague formulations contained at the end of the *Protestant Ethic* (Weber, 1995: 182-3), and went after the much more precise definition of the project given at the end of the 'Anticritical Last Word' (Weber, 1978b). There Weber identified his interest as being concerned with the 'great process of development which lies *between* the highly *labile* late medieval developments toward capitalism and the *mechanisation* of technology, which is so

decisive for capitalism in its contemporary form' (Weber, 1978b: 1128, italics as in original German). This set the problem for both Elias and Borkenau, though Elias laid the emphasis on the exact dynamics of this process of development, while Borkenau was more interested in the role of the mechanisation.

Weber identified as a crucial element of this process, the target of his immediate attention and the '*prerequisite* ' for its emergence as 'the creation and diffusion of the rationalist and antitraditionalist "spirit" and the entire range of behaviour (*das ganze Menschentum*) to which in practice it was assimilated' (Weber, 1978b: 1128-9). Here Elias and Borkenau again followed Weber, with the same difference of accents. Borkenau attempted to further identify this particular 'spirit' that was conducive to capitalism, finding it not only in Calvinism but also in neo-stoicism, in the Molinist version of Jesuitism, or in the philosophies of Descartes and Pascal, while Elias focussed on effective changes in life conduct (1994a: xiii-iv). Finally, Weber identified two possible projects by which such an investigation can be pursued in the most fruitful manner, a 'history of modern *science* ' and a 'history of the modern *conduct of life* (Lebensführung)', in both instances emphasising the link with the economy and making it clear that in his own work he opted for the second project. These are, indeed, the twin projects Elias and Borkenau decided to take up, with the usual differences of accent. Elias followed Weber by chosing the second project, while Borkenau put the emphasis on the first. However, and much more than Weber, both attempted to extend their work to the relations between the two axes. Elias made frequent remarks on the history of science and planned to write his *Habilitation* on the origins of modern scientific thinking in Florence (Elias, 1994b: 41, 98). Borkenau was even more ambitious. The *Transition* contains an analysis of the common mechanistic world-view underlying modern science and the practical mass morality which rendered modern capitalism possible.

The argument can be made even tighter by bringing together the relevant segments of Weber's definition. The project of Elias

can be defined as being concerned with uncovering the exact dynamics of the 'great process of development' that led to the emergence of a type of *Menschentum* that is associated with the taken for granted modern forms of the civilised *Lebensführung* ; while the project of Borkenau was to identify the 'spirit' that became the 'prequisite' at the same time for modern science and the 'mechanisation of technology' that was central for capitalism. (2)

If indeed Borkenau and Elias literally took up, word by word, the project as outlined by Weber, it is be explained why this connection remained so far overlooked. There are, however, simple reasons. In their first major works Elias and Borkenau were both quite explicit in their references to Weber (Borkenau, 1976: 152-9, Elias, 1983: 37-42). Borkenau even states in his review of the *Civilising Process* that Elias's work 'recalls the best traditions of Max Weber and his school' (Borkenau, 1938: 308). However, *Court Society* was not published until 1969 (in English only in 1983), and by that time Elias's strong opposition to the Parsonian version of the 'theory of action' rendered it difficult to recognise the way his work was rooted in Weber. On the other side, Weber himself failed to take up his own project detailed at the end of the 'Anticritical Last Word' and turned instead to the *Economic Ethic of World Religions* . Reinforced by his negative remarks made in the first footnote to the *Protestant Ethic* , this project fall into an almost complete oblivion until being rediscovered by Hennis (1988).

<u>Steps beyond Weber</u>

It was by following the problematics as defined by Max Weber that Elias and Borkenau channeled the inspiration derived from Freud into historically oriented and theoretically guided sociological work. However, the strong presence of Freud implied a series of significant modifications. Their approach was much more sensitive to emotions and feelings, as opposed to the Weberian emphasis on rationality. In his typology, Weber separated rational and emotional action, and although he did not

identify the process of the rationalisation of the conduct of life with a complete elimination of the emotional aspects of behaviour, he certainly implied a definite directionality (cf. Schluchter, 1996: 249). In contradistinction, Elias attributed a crucial place to the feelings of anxiety, fear, even guilt in his account of the civilising process (Elias, 1994a: xv, 449-50, 518-23). Borkenau similarly gave much emphasis to emotions. This is visible in the way he rooted the tragic view of man and the world, underlying the mechanistic *Weltbild* , in the fears and anxieties produced by the transitoriness of the 16-17th centuries, and in the subsequent labelling of transitory periods as 'paranoid ages' dominated by feelings of guilt (Borkenau, 1981: 390-402; 1987) - a concern recalling not only Freud, but also Nietzsche and Weber.

One could argue that the relative shift from rationality to emotions is only a matter of accents. For Weber, the rational, methodical conduct of life was a way of controlling impulsive, emotional behaviour. Similarly, for Elias, the civilising process represented the gradual increase of the internal as opposed to the external control of life-conduct. And if Elias and Borkenau placed such an emphasis on human emotions, Weber has not considered either the process of rationalisation an unmixed blessing. But in another sense, Elias and Borkenau made a decisive step beyond Weber, in a direction that became increasingly more relevant in this century. The first major reading experience of Weber was his encounter with Marx, and in a very deep sense Weber never left the problematics as defined by Marx. His central interest remained the economy, as shown in the titles of the major twin projects of his last decade, *Economy and Society* and the *Economic Ethic* . The major aim of these works was to pose properly the problem of the specificity of modern Western capitalism, and to lay down the groundworks for a possible answer.

For Elias and Borkenau, however, the fundamental questions were not economic. The specificity of the European line of development could not be explained by its economic characteristics alone, but had to be searched in the more all-encompassing problem of the harnessing of violent impulses. The

emergence of the capitalist market economy was only one, highly contingent answer. Any breakdowns or frictions of the economic system, however, rendered visible the darker forces that were channeled into the 'economy'. Beyond the Mmarxian problematics of the 'economy' and 'capitalism', from which Weber could never quite escape, Elias and Borkenau returned to the more basic issue of civilisation, and especially the link between civilisation and violence.

The shifts in substance with respect to Weber's position are paralleled by methodological displacements, the most important being the closer reliance on the 'genealogical method'. Weber himself was strongly influenced by Nietzsche's genealogy. His project *The Economic Ethic of World Religions* was modeled on the *Genealogy of Morals*, well illustrated by the long dialogue Weber had with Nietzsche in the *Einleitung* (Weber, 1948), while the introductory paragraphs to the sociology of religion in *Economy and Society* provide an almost textbook-like illustration of the genealogical method (Weber, 1978a: 399). However, Elias and Borkenau followed the central idea of the genealogical method in greater depth, basing on it the entire structure of their work. Furthermore, strangely enough, they did so exactly in the manner Michel Foucault would proceed some 25 years later.

The *Genealogy of Morals* has a tight structure. The first two essays introduce two separate threads. The first essay is on the origins of evaluations and revaluations, while the second on the origins of morality and law. These threads become connected in the third essay, in the figure of the ascetic priest. This model was very clearly followed in the three main 'genealogical' works of Foucault. *Histoire de la folie*, *Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*.

Given Foucault's explicit reliance on the genealogical method, this is not surprising. It is much more so, however, that the same model is followed by Elias and Borkenau. The first volume of the *Civilising Process* presents a series of changes in the history of manners. The second volume describes, as a second

thread, the processes of the modern state formation. It is the conclusion of that work, and the first part of the *Society of Individuals* that was originally intended for the same conclusion but that was withdrawn in the last minute, that brings together the two separate threads.

The genealogical setting of Borkenau's *Transition* is just as clear. Borkenau starts by describing two separate threads, the history of the concept of 'natural law' and of natural right and social contract. The last four chapters of the book, on Descartes, Gassendi, Hobbes and Pascal analyse the way these threads were connected in the works of these four thinkers (Marramao, 1984: xxix). The same arrangement can be observed in his posthumous chef d'oeuvre, with the two threads being Irish monasticism and Nordic individualism.

The claim that the structure of the works of Elias and Borkenau are genealogical must again be taken literally. The works are certainly not dialectical, as the two threads are not conceived as opposites. Neither is it a simple synthesis of separate analytical concerns, and for three reasons. First, Elias and Borkenau both emphasise that they bring together aspects that are usually considered as unrelated. But second, they do not simply make surprise connections between areas that were previously thought as independent, but argue that it was exactly the actual connections historically made between these fields that constitute the invisible, taken for granted grounds of modern society. Third, these grounds were not produced by inexorable historical developments, but by processes of thought. Therefore, the contingent character of these grounds can be rendered visible by reconstructing the historicity of the forms of thought underlying them.

The third major innovation in the works of Elias and Borkenau is that by placing the accent on periods of transition, they managed to fill a crucial gap in the thought of Weber, and even of Foucault, by 'discovering' the missing link between experience, problematisation and thought. Stretching the facts a bit, one can

even trace this concern to Weber, as in the definition of his project at the end of the 'Anticritical Last Word' quoted above, he underlined the word 'between' (Weber, 1978b: 1128). This, however, remained just a hint.

The problem of transition was clearly at the centre of Borkenau's interest. The word is contained in his book title and the concept is omnipresent in the book. Periods of transition, howwever, were important for Elias as well (1994a: 56-8, 178, 309, 514-8; 1983: 115, 156, 214, 235). Furthermore, far from taking periods of transition as a simple element of the historical context, Elias recognised the particularly fruitful, creative potential inherent in such periods of perpetual fermentation (Elias, 1994a: 58, 514). This interest in 'periods of transition' can be traced to Carl Grünberg, the first director if the Frankfurt *Institut* , who probably brought Borkenau in contact with the group (Jay, 1973: 16). Grünberg was an important figure in Austro-Marxism, and one of his main interests was the question of the transition from capitalism to socialism (Bottomore and Goode, 1978). In the early 1930s this issue lost its relevance, and the agenda of Grünberg was defeated at the *Institut* . Borkenau, however, recognised that it is exactly the characteristics of the contemporary situation that call for its analysis as a period of transition, though in a manner radically different from the agenda of Grünberg (see also Elias, 1994a: 309).

Moments of transition, periods in which both social structures and discursive rules of formation are suspended and lose their grip create tensions and contradictions, produce special opportunities both in actual reality and for thought. In socio-political language, this is the time of political tensions and social struggles. In his 1934 book, Borkenau indeed connects class struggles to periods of transition as opposed to crystallised form of domination. But from the perspective of a thinker, such periods also offer special opportunies for reflexion as well (Elias, 1994a: 517-8). Elias and Borkenau connect these two instances, and this is where their analysis becomes the most powerful. Major historical periods of transition are not only an occasion for political struggles

in the past and an opportunity of reflection in the present. These two concerns are tightly linked at the very moment of transition, as such periods render visible the fundaments, are occasions for questioning certainties, the evidence of the taken for granted forms of behaviour (Borkenau, 1976: 21, 149-51, 190; 1985: 106; 1987: 113-4; Elias, 1983: 110-3, 214; 1994a: xi, 44-5, 518), the time to pose new questions (Borkenau, 1985: 98; Elias, 1994a: xv-xvii). In moments of transition, the dividing lines between reality and thought break down, reflection becomes a pragmatic activity, as the joint dissolution of socio-political and personality structures renders both individuals and societies malleable. An 'effective history of thought', a history not simply of the doctrines and ideas trying either to represent reality or to provide normative or ideological guidelines, but a history of the forms of thought that are the conditions of possibility of experiences must focus on such moments of transition, as these - and only these - are the moments where, just like in actual rites of passage, reflection is immediately transformed into action, words gain power and thought becomes reality.

A study of moments of transition, however, cannot start with the passage itself. Intuiting the sequences of rites of passage as established by van Gennep (1960) and later by Turner (1967), Elias and Borkenau both agree that a study of transition must start with the rites of separation, or a dissolution of the previous order of things. Thus, the study of absolutism must start with the dissolution or disintegration of the medieval world order (Elias, 1994a: 282, 513; 1983: 217; Borkenau, 1976: 152; 1985: 98, 105).

In taking periods of transition seriously and in rooting them in moments of dissolution of order Elias and Borkenau were again helped by their interest in Freud. As opposed to evolutionary or Marxist readings of history, such periods of transition are dominated not by the alleged direction to which the change was taking place, but by the emotions stirred by the actual collapse of the previous order of things. Thus, far from being surrounded by an optimism and a belief in the bright future, such moments of transition are conceived in an overwhelming feeling of anxiety and

fear. These emotions sir acts of violence, leading to massive bloodshed and an overall sense of tragedy, pessimism and despair.

Starting the analysis by the dissolution of the previous order helps to identify the key actors of the transition period, the Weberian 'carrier-agents' (*träger*) of the transition process, and also its overall framework that stabilised the fermentation of liminality and in which these actors can be situated. Concerning the first, the analyses of Elias and Borkenau are again amazingly close. Concerning the second, however, they radically part way.

Elias and Borkenau both identified the social agents playing a crucial role in the transition period as an "in between" class, combining temporal and spatial liminality. The crucial role these concepts played in their first books has been recognised in the secondary literature. In the *Court Society* , Elias developed the concept *Zweifrontenschicht* (dual-front strata) (Elias, 1983: 262-7) that, according to Pieter Spierenburg, "can become an important contribution to the theory of stratification" (Spierenburg, 1977: 364). In opposition to standard class theories emphasising clear positions of superiority and inferiority and/ or the dialectics of class struggle, the concept shifts emphasis to groups that are caught in a situation of tension between strata above and below themselves. The paradox of their situation is that 'they run the risk of undermining the ramparts protecting them from the pressure from below if they undermine those securing the privileged position of higher-ranking classes' (Elias, 1983: 264).

Borkenau proposed a very similar formulation when defining the *gentry* in a rather unusual manner, not simply as a particular group in Britain, but as an in-between strata that is both a leader of the bourgeoisie while nevertheless still belonging to the old ruling classes, possessing feudal privileges (Borkenau, 1976: 172-9). As a result, it always remained external to the capitalistic world, while 'for the individual of the *gentry* ... politics [became] his profession (*Beruf*) and therefore his life destiny (*Lebensschicksal*)' (Borkenau, 1976: 176). Though Borkenau made it clear that he used the term *gentry* in this special technical sense, the word

choice was unfortunate, as even Febvre pointed it out immediately in his otherwise enthusiastic review (Febvre, 1962: 750-1), and it was also strongly attacked by Grossman (1987). No doubt due to these criticisms, Borkenau not only never used again the word, but also gave up on the concept. This was mirrored by Elias who would similarly drop the term 'dual-front class'.

The fact that after their first effort, both Elias and Borkenau abandoned the conceptualisation of 'in-between' classes shows that though this was a potentially fertile idea, it was not central to their endeavour. Much more so was the overall figuration that emerged as an answer to the transitional period of the 16-17th centuries, and that left a stamp, or mark, on reality lasting till the present. In the identification of this figuration, carried in the titles of their first main work, however, they also diverge. For Elias, the central concern was the court, or the formation of a 'court society', while for Borkenau it was a specific, general 'world-view'.

Elias on courts

The recognition of the importance of the court of the 17th century for modernity is a genuine discovery made by Elias. The absolutist court was considered to be an institution that in its characteristics, as depicted in the famous memoirs of Saint-Simon, epitomised the irrational nature of absolutism, and was thought to have disappeared without a trace. Neither Marx, nor Weber studied courts, and it is only very recently that historians started to develop a serious interest in them (Bouvier et al, 1984; Starkey 1987).

Elias presented three types of arguments concerning the significance of courts. The first is historical. A study of the court is relevant for modernity as it renders explicit certain forms of conduct that by our days became invisible, taken for granted. This is very close to the genealogical arguments of Foucault. The second argument is more sociological and, as it has been recognised by Mennell (1992: 85), is close to the perspective of Goffman. According to this, the absolutist court functioned as a

special kind of total institution. In modern society, as Goffman (1961) showed, individuals are assigned to total institutions only in exceptional cases. This is associated with a complete suspension of rights, various repressive measures, and a strictly one-directional chain of command in which the supervisors do not belong existentially to the settings. Courts were also total institutions, though in a different sense. Membership was in a way voluntary, certainly not compulsory, and there was no absolute dividing line between the inmates and the supervisors. But courts were also all-encompassing, as a certain number of individuals were constantly living together there, in a relatively closed place, under the scrutiny of all the others. Intriguingly, of the five type of total institutions listed by Goffman (1961: 4-5), courts ressemble most closely monasteries.

Under such conditions, special ties of interdependence were developing between all members of the court. One of the most important arguments of Elias is that the king, far from being an arbitrary master free to do anything he pleases, was just as caught in these webs of interdependences as any courtier (Elias, 1983: 117-45). These interdependences were certainly not forming simply ties of identity and community. Quite the contrary, these were ties dominated by intense competition, rivalry and intrigue. However, due to the closed institutional and personal space, such rivalries had to be kept under strict control, both in terms of the immediate control of emotions, and the long-run coexistence of the rival factions. In this way, the 'courtisation of warriors' did not simply represent an external inforcement of a repressive type of control, but the 'civilised' habitus was formed as part and parcel of the everyday regular interaction. It was exactly this character of the court, the interdependencies formed due to its character as a total institution, that it left a lasting mark on contemporary Western society.

The third major point concerns the spread of these civilised forms of conduct from the small circle of the court into the entire social body. Here the argument of Elias again has two facets. On the one hand, making use of elite theory and mass psychology, he

argued. in the footsteps of Borkenau (1936). for the gradual dissemination of these forms of conduct by an imitation of the life-style of the upper classes (Elias, 1994a: 460-65). On the other hand, however, even here Elias used his distinct type of sociological reasoning and claimed that the process was not unidirectional but one of mutual interaction: '[i]t is one of the peculiarities of Western society that in the course of its development this contrast between the situation and code of conduct of the upper and lower strata decreases considerably. Lower-class characteristics are spreading to all classes.' (Elias, 1994a: 461). In this way, elite theory became connected to Elias's theory of 'functional democratisation' (Elias, 1994a: 503).

Borkenau on world-view

The question formulated by Borkenau was identical to the way Elias posed the problem: in the insecure period of transition that was the 16th century, due to the collapse of the medieval world order, what was overall 'figuration' that provided a control and release, leaving a lasting mark on the entire subsequent course of Western history? However, the answer given in the 1934 book was different, less sociological and more philosophical. It was not the court as a total institution, but the emergence of a new world-picture or world-view (*Weltbild*).

A fruitful way to introduce this idea might be by contrasting it with the related concepts of *Weltanschauung* by Dilthey and *episteme* by Foucault. Dilthey was indeed the thinker with respect to whom Borkenau developed much of his ideas (Borkenau, 1976: vi, 153). *Weltanschauung* for Dilthey is an overall synthetic category that sums up how, in a given period, the ultimate sense of our existence is approached. It is therefore oriented toward content. *Weltbild* , however, has to do with form. It is concerned with certain axiomatic views and basic perspectives that render possible certain types of knowledge, value or philosophy. It is therefore close to Foucault's ideas concerning the historical a priori. Even *episteme* and *Weltbild* can be considered as

complementary concepts. If Foucault's interest was in the prior assumptions about how to gain valid knowledge, Borkenau's was more in the reasons why the search for knowledge changed direction and modality.

According to Borkenau, periods of transition following a dissolution of order, like that of the 16-17th centuries following the dissolution of the Middle Ages, re-pose as a problem (in the language of Foucault, *problematise*) all the basic relations between god and man, society and nature. The ideas about the harmonious order of the world by Aquinas and the scholastics, embodied in the concept of 'natural law', was no longer tenable. The god of providential harmony became a hidden or hiding god, a *deus absconditus* . The optimistic view about the goodness of human nature that Aquinas opposed to the earlier, ascetic views that were themselves rooted in the conditions of a previous period of transition and dissolution of order, the collapse of the Roman Empire and the emergence of feudal Europe, yielded its place to the pessimistic anthropologies of Calvin and Pascal about the utter depravity of man. The society of orders and natural law was also replaced by the Hobbesian picture of *homo homini lupus* . Under such conditions, while political thinkers from Machiavelli to Hobbes attempted to restore order, the main task of philosophy became to establish the very possibility of an ordered existence. While for Aquinas, the ordered character of man's soul became the basis of the recognition of an order in the world - that is why he could transfer the legal concept of a 'natural law' to the external world -, for Descartes it was the security of the mathematical and mechanical character of the events of the external world that provided hope in a world where belief in the harmonious order of human existence could no longer be maintained. The mechanical world-view, on which the later advances of capitalism and modern science were based, was therefore itself a historical a priori, a form of theodicy. (3)

Comparison and contrast

Though Elias and Borkenau differed therefore in identifying the aspect of the 16-17th centuries that stamped our culture in this crucial period of transition, they agreed in its most important lasting effect, the particular 'individualism' and 'subjectivism' of modern culture. Individualism, both as a central value and as a methodological assumption, just like the type of identity formation characteristics of the modern subject, are considered as self-evident, taken for granted in a matter of fact way. Following Weber and anticipating Foucault, Elias and Borkenau thought otherwise. Their work intends to explain the reasons for this individualism and subjectivism of modern culture, making use of their version of historicising Freud.

Far from being a universal given, the individual self represents a precarious balance between realities located outside and above - the external world and the culture into which one was born and raised, and which is taken for granted until being questioned in its elements; and forces inside and below - the impulses, forces or passions rooted in the unconscious. Any attempt by a single individual to reject the rules and norms would only leave one subjected at the mercy of violent passions, a state of anomie. Individualism therefore cannot be an autonomous process. Individualisation as a mass phenomenon can only start with an opposite event, the collapse of the established order of things, a dissolution of order. If modern individualism can and must be traced back to the 16-17th centuries, this is because it was rooted in the collapse of the medieval order (Borkenau, 1985: 98, 105; 1987: 111-2; Elias, 1994a: 310).

The central characteristics of mass individualisation are not much different from those of individual anomie, but are now produced on a large scale. The collapse of the stable frameworks of everyday existence produces anxiety and fear in which everybody can only rely upon oneself, men becoming each other's wolves (*homo homini lupus* , the term used by Hobbes, is used frequently by Borkenau), and aggressive and violent behaviour became a

rule, not as an exception. Furthermore, the general collapse of standards not only leads to an escalation of violence, but also renders problematic even the most trivial and banal aspects of behaviour (Elias, 1994a: 58, 518).

Due to the graveness of the 'situation' (Gadamer, 1975: 268-9; Jaspers, 1951: 9-35), produced by the collapse of the world order, merely political or legal answers were insufficient. Beyond the consolidation of political authority or the erection of new laws, it becomes necessary to reconstruct the modalities of everyday behaviour, almost from scratch, to provide models for a proper conduct of life (*Lebensführung*). This entailed a charismatic renewal (Elias, 1983: 122), guided by a new elite who would manage to spread a more peaceful type of conduct of life for the entire population. Borkenau and Elias again agree in the way the question should be posed, the crucial problem being the education of the masses of atomised individuals, the ending of the dissolution of order by the development of a new mass morality. They only differ in the way they saw the solution provided. For Elias, this was the work of the courtly aristocracy, the taming of violence by the courtisation of warriors, and he emphasises the continuity of the process since the 11-12th centuries. Borkenau, however, placed emphasis on the break and followed more closely Weber in emphasising the importance of religious factors and general anthropological preconceptions.

In conclusion, for both Elias and Borkenau, the birth of the modern subject, or modern individualism, does not represent a liberation, the realisation of the true nature of the self, but is the result of a very specific kind of 'social engineering'. (4) This recognition, however, is not an occasion for generalised criticism or deconstruction. Quite the contrary, their careful reconstruction of the historical context, not in terms of stages of evolution, social structure or forces of production, but in the sense of the transitory or liminal conditions provided by a general dissolution of order, precludes any easy rhetorics. However, both of them are quite critical of a mentality, characteristic of those main sources of modern thought like Cartesian rationalism, British empiricism and

German idealism, that considers the contingent answer given to a concrete liminal situation, the 'homo clausus', as a natural or universal given.

It is difficult enough to render visible any aspect of conduct that has become taken for granted. It is even more difficult if it concerns not just a particular attitude or behaviour but the very construction of the self. However, in case of the peculiar individualism that is characteristic of modern Western societies, there is a further complicating factor. This type of conduct, and this form of self, looks natural due to its mechanical character, based on the confrontation of interests that are assumed to be objectively given. Still, as Borkenau's 1934 work has shown, this anthropology is contingently based on the 'historical a priori' of the mechanical world-view.

Elias also had an interest in the study of science. Some of his first publications after his long silence were about the history and theory of science (Elias, 1972, 1974), and he kept up his interest even after (Elias, 1982). However, if Borkenau anticipated much of the post-modern interest in social constructivism, Elias certainly did not follow him and continued to use mechanic explanations at a face value. This is visible in their use of language. For Borkenau, the mechanic worldview is the main targets of analysis. Elias, however, defined his interest in the original Preface to the *Civilising Process* as 'the nature of historical processes', or 'what might be called the "developmental mechanics of history"' (Elias,1994a: xvi), and argued in the Conclusion that historical change follows *'an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it'* (Elias,1994a: 444; see also pp. 287 and 513). Furthermore, in identifying the major sources of these processes of change, Elias relies upon the very mechanistic forces of mass individualism, especially the pressure of population growth (Elias,1994a: 288), that Borkenau (and elsewhere even Elias; see Elias,1994a: 310) identified as the outcome of a dissolution of order.

This different assessment of 'mechanism' or 'mechanical forces' is reflected in a divergence between Elias and Borkenau

concerning ultimate ethical attitudes - ethical being defined here as related to the proper conduct of life, especially changes in it the conduct of life, implied by the findings. If the mechanical forces of interdependence, due to population pressures and relations of intertwining (*Verflechtungszwängen*) (5) in which the interest-governed calculative behaviour of the modern type of individual is caught are natural or universal, if the modern legal state and the capitalist market economy '*together form the lock joining the chain by which men are mutually bound* ' (Elias,1994a: 514-5), then the ethical consequence of the identification of the roots of modern individualism is the Stoic facing of this unavoidable fact. If, however, this entire line of development is a contingent response to a concrete, historical dissolution of order, then the individual can do more than resignate himself or herself to this fact. Thus, in the last page of his book Borkenau reiterates the 'existentialist' attitude of Rilke, calling for changing one's life (*das Leben zu verändern*) (Borkenau, 1976: 559).

In the footsteps of the *Civilising Process*

The direct links between Borkenau and Elias and the joint development of the common problematics of their work is restricted to the 1930s, with considerable chronological precision. It was for this reason that so far the analysis was only extended to their works written in the period, with occasional references to later works only to indicate continuity. With the outbreak of W.W.II, their fates became separate. Though both were interned as enemy aliens, Elias was sent to the Isle of Man, while Borkenau to Australia. There is not much sign of their encounter after that date, until Borkenau's early death in 1957.

However, it does not mean that their works became disconnected after the 1930s. Quite on the contrary, Borkenau's chef d'oeuvre on which he worked much of the last two decades of his life, published posthumously in 1981, presents the first, still untapped and arguably most significant, use made of the *Civilising Process* . As it is well-known, the reception and English publication

of this classic work presents two major problems. First, it remained almost unknown for about three decades, only to be rediscovered in the late 1960s (Goudsblom, 1977, Mennell, 1992: 18-9). Second, the English publication disconnected the unity of the work (Mennell, 1992: 32-4), publishing the two volumes in separate years, under different titles, the American edition of the second volume carrying a title different from the British, and even the joint 1994 publication of the two volumes separated the Table of Contents. Borkenau, however, was not only one of the first readers of the book, immediately recognising its significance, but the effect the book had on him much depended on the fact that he read the two volumes separately.

Borkenau read the first volume of the *Civilising Process* when the second was not yet available. It made a huge impact on him, was a genuine "reading experience". It built up in him a huge expectation, an intellectual tension. At the end of his review, he stated that for a full assessment of the underlying theoretical question, it is necessary to wait for the second volume (Borkenau, 1938: 311). This volume, however, as Goudsblom (1977: 42) emphasised, did not fully satisfy Borkenau. But it did not mean that he turned away from the problematics. Quite the contrary, it was this combination that made him launch his major life project. It was the *Civilising Process* that genuinely 'projected' Borkenau into starting *End and Beginning* .

Borkenau took up and developed further Elias's work in three significant respects. First, a civilising process assumes 'barbarians' at its starting point, for which the Europe of the 16th century does not qualify. Borkenau took therefore a further step and started his account with the 'barbarian' origins of the West, the times of the collapse of the Roman Empire and the Frank conquest, the 5-7th centuries. He also anticipated anthropological criticism by arguing that the "barbarian" is not a *sui generis* category. "Barbarians" only exist at the margins of a civilisation (Koselleck, 1985). By connecting the collapse of Roman Empire, the barbarian invasions and the emergence of the civilising process, Borkenau

identified a situation of dissolution of order as the figuration in which the Western civilising process can be safely rooted.

Second, a civilising process needs techniques and agents. Elias found the solution in the courts and talked about the 'courtisation of warriors'. This, however, leaves open the question of how the court itself, consisting at first of the barbaric Frankish and Germanic chieftains, became itself civilised. While Elias did not put much emphasis on the role of religion and the Church in the civilising process, Borkenau identified as its main agents the monasteries, especially Irish monasticism (Borkenau, 1981). Finally, Borkenau took up the importance of the 'I-form of speech', a theoretical guiding idea that Elias pursued throughout his career but never elaborated historically, and found its origins in early fifth century old Norse inscriptions (Borkenau, 1981: 133-5). The claim that the dual origins of the Western type of conduct of life is given by the combination of Nordic (Viking or Norman) individualism and monastic (Greco-Roman and Christian) subjectivism is still a strikingly novel idea, and it was experientially rooted in the reading of Elias by Borkenau.

Habent sua fata libelli

This article argued for the very close relationship between the central problematics of Elias and Borkenau and the significance of this joint development both for the life-works of each and for social theory in general. Given that all this was so far almost completely overlooked, some arguments must be presented concerning the reasons of this neglect. Unfortunately, such remarks can only be speculative. One can proceed by analogy, emphasising certain character traits. On the one hand, it is quite well known that Elias could become almost prohibitive concerning some of those people with whom he had been on closest terms, like Karl Mannheim or Ilia Neustadt - indeed the two persons to whom the *Civilising Process* and *Court Society* were respectively dedicated (Kilminster, 1993; Mennell, 1992: 285-6). On the other hand, Borkenau was an extremely secretive person, continuously

on the guard (Tashjean, 1984: 289), that is not surprising given his Communist background and the at once marginal and liminal status he had throughout his life. As they were non-central members of the opposite and opposed towers of the Frankfurt scene, they could have good reasons not to be explicit about their intellectual relationship. Furthermore, in the 1950s Borkenau was associated with radical anti-Communism (Hochgeschwender, 1997), who in many circles almost till our days evoked animosity. But perhaps the most important reason could be the extremely heavy fate that came upon both relevant major books of both thinkers.

Court Society was finished in 1933. However, for decades it only circulated in typescript copies, read by a few friends (among them no doubt Borkenau), and was published finally in 1969. The fate of the *Civilising Process* is well-known. Only a few copies of the first volume got printed in 1937 (one of them was given again to Borkenau), the two volumes finally appeared in 1938-39, but actual circulation was very limited. Borkenau had a similar luck. *Transition* was published by the Frankfurt *Institut* in 1934 in German in Paris. However, Horkheimer marked a distance from the book already in his Preface and published in the *Zeitschrift* a very negative, and most unfair, critical review of the book by Henryk Grossman. Still today, the book is mostly known through this criticism. *End and Beginning* was left unfinished when Borkenau died in 1957. It was only published almost a quarter of a century later, in 1981. Even though there is a vague awareness about its existence, it never received a proper appreciation.

The reaction of Walter Benjamin to the first major published works of both thinkers can be considered as symbolic of the entire reception. The manuscript of the *Transition* was given to him in January 1933 as his first major assignment from the *Institut* (Benjamin, 1994: 400). However, after a year and a half, all he could do was to state that he finally gave up narrowing 'the orbit from which I have circled this fat tome' (Benjamin, 1994: 459). Elias did not fare better. Benjamin was among those to whom he sent a copy of the first volume of the *Civilising Process* , repeatedly

expressing his hope that Benjamin would write a review in the *Zeitschrift* (Schöttker, 1996). This, however, never happened.

Concluding remarks

Though in the past decades, Elias became a classic of sociology, the assessment of his contribution, especially for social theory, is still not uncontroversial. Part of the problem concerns the lack of connections established with the work of other social thinkers, both concerning its formative phase and contemporary reception. This article argued that Elias's work was not developed in isolation, but closely together with another major social thinker of the century, Franz Borkenau, by taking up and developing further the problematics outlined by Max Weber, all of them being inspired, to varying degree, in the background by the major 'heretical' ideas of the 'shadowy' figures of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud. By rendering explicit these connections, one not only gains a better understanding of the works of Elias and Borkenau, but also helps to link these to the analogous project of such an important figures of social thought as Michel Foucault. The bringing together of all these authors promises to provide a better understanding of one of the most intriguing questions of social thought today: the specification of the exact mechanisms by which the identity of the modern type of subjectivity, or the modern self, is formed, and the reason why the power exercised by modern societies is rooted not in external constraints, mechanisms and institutions, but exactly on these identity formation mechanisms, or 'techniques of self'.

However, Elias and Borkenau were not simply sociologists who took up Weber's ideas better than 'Weberian sociology', or predecessors of Foucault. In a very significant sense, both of them went further. As opposed to Weber, who - no doubt due to reasons of personal biography - always stayed rooted in a problematics focused on the economy and capitalism, and as opposed to Foucault, who - again due to similar reasons - was drawn to a problematics defined around sexuality, they safely rooted the

source of the European process of rationalisation, subjectivation and civilisation in the problem of harnessing violence, escalating in major periods of transition produced by a dissolution of order. Given the escalation of violence so characteristic of our century, a problem that is gaining increasing attention in our days, the common problematics underlying the work of Elias and Borkenau, complemented with the theoretical, methodological and historical analyses of Weber and Foucault, promises a particularly powerful approach to understanding the processes in which we are being caught.

Notes

(1)   As a telling sign, when in a summary 1985 interview about his life-work Elias was offered the possibility of asking the first question, he turned to this problem of reception (Elias, 1985: 1).

(2)   It is of considerable interest and support that Eric Voegelin and Alfred Schutz, another important example for philosophical friendship in the century (Voegelin, 1981; Wagner, 1981), also developed their projects jointly and on the basis of Weber's work (Weiss, 1997).

(3) Borkenau's approach explains much the heat of current debates related to 'revisionism' in the history of science. The defenders of the orthodox position are not simply arguing for the independent value of science and the search for truth, but hang on to the belief that a mechanistic world-view automatically solves any problem of theodicy.

(4) Apart from Weber and Foucault, similar ideas were elaborated by Oestreich (1982) and Hirschman (1977). Oestreich (1982: 32) knew the work of Borkenau and had a high regard for it.

(5) This is the word that has been changed by Elias in the English edition of the *Civilising Process* as 'figuration'.

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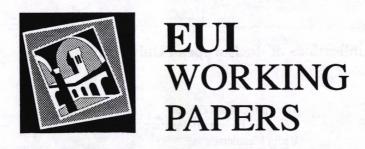Weber, Marianne (1988) *Max Weber: A Biography* . Oxford: Transactions Books.

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