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van Daalen, R.; Kuipers, G.

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Everyday practices and long term-processes: Overcoming dichotomies with the work of Norbert Elias

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Rineke van Daalen and Giselinde Kuipers

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One of the unique contributions of figurational or process sociology is its capacity to resolve – or rather: dissolve – oppositions like structure and agency, individual and society, micro and macro. Rather than artificially separating individual action from social process and looking for causal relations between two ‘levels’ in what really is the same occurrence, process sociologists look to see how social process happens in interaction, and how everyday relations and conversations make society. Drawing on the work of Elias, researchers can ask questions that seem quite impossible using other – more conventional – sociological paradigms: How do everyday interactions and long-term or large-scale processes interact? How can they be connected in one sociological story or analysis? How to look at both, without prioritizing one over the other?

This special issue of *Human Figurations* presents five articles centrally concerned with such questions. These articles cover a range of topics, periods, geographical areas, and ranges – from a Dutch classroom to the global world of halal production. But they all touch on the same questions: how to connect the small with the large, the daily relations between people with long-term processes and global networks. In doing so, they all draw on the work of Elias and other figurational sociologists.

These articles were first presented at a conference held in Amsterdam in June 2012, entitled 'Reinventing Elias'. During this conference Norbert Elias' capacity to incorporate two sides of sociological dichotomies into a single sociological perspective or ‘story’ emerged as one of the key elements of figurational sociology appealing to sociologists working today. This aspect makes the work of Elias not only theoretically appealing, but also empirically fruitful. As the contributions to this issue show, figurational sociology offers both theoretically and

practical inspiration for research that is just as diverse as the French courts, German fraternities and British suburbs.

As we – the editors – were reminded again during the conference, Elias has more to offer than an encompassing theoretical paradigm. What is striking about the work of Elias is his power to provoke interest and to stimulate the sociological imagination: Elias makes you see everything in a sociological light. This is maybe even more visible in the essays or the smaller monographs, where he elaborates – one would almost say: improvises, in the manner of a jazz musician – on ideas and themes often closely related to the the ‘big books’ like *On the Process of Civilization* or *The Germans*. Here, we see Elias thinking out loudly, enabling the reader to observe how his ideas are developing and progressing. He moves forward step by step, gradually elaborating his thoughts; starting again, almost from the same position, repeating his thoughts, but at the same time making a small step forward, or a step to the left or the right. In the next stage, you see him collecting the threads, knitting them together, again and again repeating and starting anew, circling around a central topic, always widening the circles of his thought. Elias’ writing is not as polished as the texts of contemporary scholars, whose innumerable versions disappear into their computers’ ‘recycling bins’. The advantage for us is that the process of reasoning by Elias is not concealed – and thus can set off processes of sociological invention and imagination in the reader’s mind. This sometimes arduous ‘thinking out loud’ gives Elias’ sociology a certain freshness: if you have the patience to read his texts, it is easy to pick up his ideas in many different ways, using separate smaller insights or fundamental principles, taking his theoretical approach as a paradigm or combining it with other approaches. Thus, the authors in this special issue have found Elias an inspiration in a wide range of places and sociological subfields: violence, classrooms, migration, halal food, and the life of Elias himself.

In the first article, 'Sublimating Resentment', Nathalie Heinich overcomes the opposition between individual and society by analyzing Norbert Elias' work in relation to his biography, in particular his experiences as a Jewish outsider in German society and German Academia. She sees Elias' renewal of sociology as a sublimation of his social exclusion as a Jew. For Elias, being a Jew in a non-Jewish, even anti-Semitic society was simultaneously a social problem and a personal issue. The understanding of his personal experiences went hand in hand with the will to construct knowledge out of it. That intention led him to a fundamentally new conception of sociology. Heinich’s approach to this subject matter is also quite personal and in the style of ‘thinking aloud’. It was for these reasons that the managing editor, Dr. Liston, encouraged us to support Nathalie’s distinctive writing style in her contribution. This work is also the closest to the original vibrant conference form.

The next three articles foreground the relevance of people’s interpretations of social processes. In different ways, they combine in-depth studies of everyday experience with long-term and large scale processes. In *Outside the Moral Circle* Marta Bucholc expands the analytical framework of *The Established and the Outsiders*. She analyzes the creation of an established-outsiders figuration in the case of Polish refugees, who fled to Norway because of Communist repression during the Martial Law period of 1981-1983. These refugees are successful, pleased with their material position and certainly not marginalized. Yet, they have difficulties in understanding and accepting the different character of the personal networks, the ‘moral circles’ of their new Norwegian compatriots. These networks differ in the number of people that are included, who these people are, the emotions and the standards of behavior that apply to objects and persons inside and outside the moral circle. The Norwegian moral circles are closed to the Polish refugees, who therefore internalize an outsider’s habitus. Simultaneously, they borrow the status of established from their experiences in the massive Polish social movement of the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which revolved around friendship, commitment, trust and

identification. This results in a hybrid habitus, showing how, in contrast with Winston Parva, culture and social imagination may also contribute to processes of exclusion and inclusion.

The past is also omnipresent in 'Classroom preoccupations: the shadow of the past in Dutch vocational training'. In this article about contemporary interactions in a school of lower vocational training in the Netherlands, Rineke van Daalen defends the thesis that knowledge about the long-term past is necessary to understand what happens in the classroom today. In the educational order, in the set-up of the school and the curriculum, in the interactions between students and teachers and in their preoccupations, we can still perceive the contours of the industrializing class society in which secondary education got its first shape. Ideas, symbols and culture of the past remain alive as social memories, and are employed and reconstructed in daily practices. In this article the figurational approach, in particular elements from *The Symbol Theory*, are related to the micro-interactionism of Erving Goffman. Process sociology and interactionism complement each other and, Van Daalen argues, need to speak to each other.

That understanding is also the starting point of the theoretical approach of Don Weenink, who investigates how combination of Eliasian notions and micro-sociological theory may provide a fruitful conceptual framework for enhancing our understanding of youth violence. How do young people arrange zones where they can indulge in impulsive, decontrolled bodily behavior? In analyzing the emotional dynamics of these 'violent moral holidays' Weenink confronts the conceptual considerations of Norbert Elias and Randall Collins with detailed descriptions of two cases of decontrolled behavior. Combining notions of (de)civilisation and Collins' theory of violence, Weenink observes that the attackers are attracted to 'seduced' into, rather than pressed to engage in the violent group action. Feelings of group membership are at play: a shared mood makes the participants 'decontrolled in solidarity'.

In 'The postliberal politics of halal: new trajectories in the civilising process?' John Lever takes the efforts of the Malaysian state to dominate the international halal market as a case to explore the interweaving of everyday practices and long term-processes. Lever relates recent changes in the role of states to changes in the position of Muslims in Europe. National governments can no longer deal with the rapid rise of outsider groups, while neoliberalism blocks the development of transnational social policies. Malaysian postliberal halal strategy must be understood within this frame of reference. The Malaysian ambitions are related to changes in the position of Muslims in Europe. New waves of Muslim emigration into European states went hand in hand with Muslim attempts to reinforce their identity in response to wider global pressure, and with the growth of halal consumption in Europe. In this process halal no longer is only about religious piety. It becomes aligned to alternative food ethics, corporate social responsibility, and scientific discourses related to health and hygiene, and shifts in transnational powerbalances, thus directly influencing the future trajectory of the civilizing process.

These five very different case studies highlight the enduring relevance of the work of Elias, and its power to connect different 'layers', 'levels', or even 'categories' and 'classes' of sociological phenomena thought incompatible in most sociological frameworks. But these articles show most powerfully the strength of the sociological imagination, and the inspiration that figurational sociology can offer. After reading Elias, sociology is everywhere – and everything is sociology.

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