

Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory

Dennis Smith



NORBERT ELIAS
AND MODERN
SOCIAL THEORY

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NORBERT ELIAS AND MODERN SOCIAL THEORY

DENNIS SMITH



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PREFACE

Intellectual exploration is a ‘serious game’. A game is most exciting when there is something at stake. What should be at stake is ‘getting things right’ which is different from ‘making other people see the world as you do’. The game of intellectual exploration is most productive when the personal honour of the players is not tied to the particular model of reality they bring to the game. When honour is tied to defending a particular model, then learning new things is very difficult. Some may win and others lose but the game itself will be intrinsically worthless.

We should all be prepared to revise any aspect of our thinking at any time if this is demanded by new evidence or new ways of seeing existing evidence. That means keeping our minds receptive and the ‘game’ open. Thinking about the world should be an adventure, a continuing search for clues about how things work and what can be done to make them better or at least more bearable.

In this game the ultimate enemy is any obstacle to clear thought that exists inside oneself. The part played by a thinker’s distinctive ‘vision’ is important. A vision can impel a writer in a particular direction, possibly leading him or her to look in new areas and have original thoughts. But if the thinker loses detachment from the vision, becomes the servant of the vision, then this vision becomes a form of blindness. At worst, it may become an obstacle to clear thought. In practice, this possibility is even more likely to arise among the followers or disciples of a thinker, be they Parsonians, Marxians, Durkheimians, Freudians, Eliasians or whatever.

Norbert Elias was a very creative player in the serious game of intellectual exploration. He was engaged in it for a very long time. He was gripped by a very strong vision of how the world worked from an early stage in a career that endured for most of the last century. For Elias, I believe, this vision was, in part, a way of restoring unity to his fractured experience as a German Jew. At its best – in *The Court Society* (Elias 1983), *The Civilizing Process* (Elias 1994a) and *The Germans* (Elias 1996) – Elias’s writing has an excitement that comes, in large part, from his struggle to cope with the tension between his Jewish identity and his German identity.

Elias is the most Jewish of names, inherited by the son of a textile manufacturer in Breslau (now Wrocław in Poland). By contrast, Norbert is a name that is strongly associated with the propagation of the Catholic faith among the Poles in the twelfth century. The most famous Norbert in the German branch of Christendom is St Norbert. He was originally from

an aristocratic family in North Germany. St Norbert became Archbishop of Magdeburg, a major headquarters for stamping out heresy among the Slavs.

Elias – Jewish, German, European and global – devoted a lot of time and energy to exploring the connections between two things: our complex sense of identity and broader social processes. Those social processes shape that identity and they are, in turn, influenced by the ways we act out that identity. The key word is ‘exploring.’ Elias was an explorer. It is the sense of it being an unfinished search that is the most attractive aspect of Elias’s work. It gives it an openness, a feeling that it is part of a larger adventure that others can join in on equal terms.

This book is not just about Elias. It is also about Talcott Parsons, Michel Foucault, Zygmunt Bauman and Hannah Arendt. All of these writers are most interesting when they are in ‘search mode,’ when they are becoming gripped by a strong sense of what matters in the world or how the world ‘is’, but have not resolved matters to their own satisfaction or become the agents for a formula. In truth, it is usually some of their followers who make this last move rather than the thinkers themselves.

Foucault was searching all his life, constantly reinventing himself. That makes him fascinating. The same is true for Zygmunt Bauman whose metamorphoses continue. Parsons never again wrote a book as exciting as *The Structure of Social Action* which ends with his ‘discovery’ of the voluntary theory of action. After that he was busy assaying his treasure and the excitement goes out of the project. Hannah Arendt’s book *The Origins of Totalitarianism* has a wonderful ‘unfinished’ character. In it she is still reaching towards the more polished philosophy of *The Human Condition*.

Perhaps it is time to rescue some of these writers from some of their followers. There is a perpetual danger that ‘social theory’ may become an accumulation of closed ‘approaches’ – Parsonian, Foucauldian, Eliasian and so on – whose disciples talk past each other. What I have tried to do here is to open up these approaches so that they may, so to speak, spill into each other.

I have not attempted to integrate the results into a ‘big theory’. It was, briefly, a temptation and, indeed, there is nothing intrinsically wrong with big theories, especially when they are grounded in real-world research and lead back towards it. Big theories are good to have around, especially when no single theory dominates in an unchallenged way. It is also important to have a strong culture of open-minded empirical enquiry that is always ready to doubt received wisdom.

However, I decided to resist the temptation to ‘tidy up’ the outcomes of the four comparative chapters in this book that juxtapose Elias with, in turn, Arendt, Parsons, Foucault and Bauman. To use a metaphor from the game of pool or snooker, I have left the balls on the green baize table where they came to rest after my shots had been played. There is a certain pattern in the way they lie which I sketch out in the final chapter but that is

not an attempt to 'integrate' my 'findings'. Instead, I have drawn on the insights produced to explore two questions: what is the sociological significance of the European movement? And what is the nature of humiliation and shame?

These questions and these comparisons feed into a larger enquiry which is to investigate the character of the developing global society. This agenda can only be stated here, and then only in a very preliminary way, in the opening and closing chapters of the book. It will be taken further in other work.

I am grateful to many colleagues who have commented on various aspects of the argument. I do not think of myself as an 'Eliasian.' However, I have benefited from the warmth and friendliness of 'Eliasians' including Johan Goudsblom, Richard Kilminster, Cas Wouters, Stephen Mennell, Willem Mastenbroek, and Ad van Iterson. Elizabeth Foulkes was kind enough to share her memories of Elias with me.

My thinking has been helped by the astute comments of Tim Newton, Marja Gastelaars, Teresa Whitaker, Sue Wright and Tanya Smith. In this and other work, my approach has been greatly influenced by the insights of Evelin Lindner. Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues at the Department of Social Sciences of Loughborough University.

PART 1

MODERNITY AND ELIAS

1

THE SOUND OF CANON-FIRE

Modernity and Elias

Norbert Elias, the sociologist of the civilizing process, is worth reading because he is one of the important resources available to us in trying to make sense of our human condition in late modernity: not the only resource by any means but an important part of the repertoire of key ideas produced by scholars during the twentieth century.

Elias has a powerful vision of how human beings and societies inter-connect and develop. At the centre of this vision are these ideas:

- human beings live and exist together as part of complex networks (Elias called them '*figurations*') linking people, groups and institutions;
- these figurations are shaped by social *processes*: long-term, and largely unplanned, processes which have a pattern, structure and direction that can be discovered by patient scholarly investigation looking at empirical data and interpreting them carefully;
- figurations and processes have a powerful shaping effect upon the psychological make-up [or '*habitus*'] of individuals and groups and upon their capacity to exercise *control*: control over themselves, control over others, and control over nature;
- sociologists can help people increase their capacity to exercise control in a rational and reasonable way by providing them with *knowledge* about the social processes and figurations that shape their social existence; and
- a central characteristic of European social development during the last millennium has been a tendency towards increasingly dense and complex figurations with relatively *stable power monopolies* associated with increasingly high levels of control in all respects. These are key features of *the civilizing process* that has occurred, interwoven with significant *de-civilizing* tendencies.

Elias haunts this book on every page. However, this study is not just about Elias and his ideas. At the heart of the book are a series of systematic comparisons between Elias and, in turn, Michel Foucault, Talcott Parsons, Hannah Arendt and Zygmunt Bauman.

However, the book is not just a critique of Elias and four other social theorists.¹ It is also about the Western experience of modernity in the twentieth century. The theorists are important because they give us grappling irons to seize hold of a runaway world, conceptually at least. This is an important step towards the understanding we need for more effective practical interventions. These theorists help us understand the past that shaped our present: for example, the decline of Europe's empires, the rise and fall of fascism and communism, and the changing balance of power between Europe and the United States. They also help us come to terms with the global society coming into existence which seems likely to bring intensified consumerism, sharper polarization between rich and poor, increased fear and uncertainty and the extension on all sides of surveillance-based management techniques.

Elias's work is an important resource. It can be used to confront the challenge of making sense of modernity. Contrasting Elias with Foucault, Parsons, Arendt and Bauman helps to identify Elias's strengths and weakness. It also throws light on the strengths and weaknesses of the four others. Are their strengths complementary and do they compensate for the weaknesses that they all, inevitably, bring to the table? My answer is yes.

Elias's ideas will make an important contribution to the future of modern social theory. However, they will not do this by displacing all rivals. Elias has very valuable insights but these are accompanied by blind spots such as his lack of attention to large-scale business corporations or the particular dynamics of post-Schumpeterian capitalism.² In fact, Elias's work is useful for two reasons.

One reason is that Elias confronts the nature of Western modernity in a way that makes strong links between large-scale social processes and transformations in our psychological make-up and ways of seeing, thinking and feeling.³ The second reason is, quite simply, that Elias was born in 1897 and died in 1990. In other words, because Elias lived so long and kept working, he has been part of the intellectual life of two successive generations. Parsons (born 1902) and Arendt (born 1906) come from the same generation as Elias (born 1897). Bauman (born 1925) and Foucault (born 1926) come from the generation that followed.

Creative interplay between Elias's ideas and those of two generations of contemporaries can help us move towards a focused understanding of the structure and significance of the processes that have shaped Western modernity. This will contribute to a larger task, which is to discover what can be salvaged from the recent experience of *Western* modernity to help us survive and, perhaps, civilize *global* modernity in the new millennium.

America and Europe

Western modernity is a transatlantic phenomenon⁴ and two of the five writers discussed (Parsons and Arendt) were American citizens. The saga of American modernity was the big story of the twentieth century. The world watched as Americans survived the Great Depression of the 1930s, re-ignited the engine of capitalism through the New Deal and war production, and then grew fat on a diet of abundance and anxiety. The biggest story of all, a story not yet over, is race.

Gunnar Myrdal's words from the early 1940s still ring true, even though some of his terminology is now 'politically incorrect': 'To the great majority of white Americans the Negro problem has distinctly negative connotations. It suggests something difficult to settle and equally difficult to leave alone. It is embarrassing. It makes for moral uneasiness . . . To many . . . [it] takes on the proportion of a menace – biological, economic, social, cultural, and, at times, political. This anxiety may be mingled with a feeling of individual and collective guilt. A few may see the problem as a challenge to statesmanship. To all it is a trouble' (Myrdal 1962, lxxvii).

Who knows what the next instalment of the American story will be? Meanwhile, there is an equally gripping European story still to be told. While Americans struggle with the issue of race, Europeans are smarting from the psychic pain caused by the loss of their position of imperial pre-eminence throughout the world.

This has been difficult to speak about directly, a delicate subject in a democratic age. After all, European global dominance was based upon domination over subject peoples who were denied rights and often exploited and victimized. However, European reactions to imperial decline are complex. The most complex emotions, eclipsing the others, are shame and humiliation. Europeans have hardly begun to confront these emotions and the social mechanisms associated with them, despite their importance in national identity and national politics. The social and psychological processes that shape the experience of humiliation and shame, collective and individual, in the modern epoch need to be studied and understood.

The decline of empire is intimately related to the rise of the European Union. A notable fact about the EU is that its leading members consist of the old 'headquarter societies' of the European empires, now almost completely shorn of their colonies. The European Union has provided a new home, a new political centre, for the political establishments of Paris, London, Bonn (and, more recently, Berlin), Vienna, Brussels, the Hague, Madrid and Lisbon.⁵ All the old imperial capitals of Europe are represented there – except for Moscow.

The case of the European Union is a fascinating one because it apparently offers a potential model for the development of supranational polities elsewhere in the world. Is it a possible prototype for other regional organizations and, perhaps, a guide to future developments at the global level?

A critical examination of the work of Elias can contribute to our understanding of the themes just mentioned: the loss of empire, the postwar European movement, and the role of humiliation and shame in modern European (and, more broadly, Western) society. However, before approaching those themes, Elias's work needs to be located within the broader context of the on-going debate about the nature of modernity.

The Organization of this Book

The book is organized in three parts. The first part, entitled 'Modernity and Elias', examines the issues raised by Elias's entry into the canon (Chapter 1). It goes on to discuss the biographical origins of Elias's particular intellectual concerns and his decision to explore them by developing a distinctive approach to sociology and modernity (Chapter 2).

The second part of the book, entitled 'The wider debate', compares Elias's approach with those taken by Arendt (Chapter 3), Parsons (Chapter 4), Foucault (Chapter 5) and Bauman (Chapter 6). This part of the book covers a number of related aspects of the shaping of modernity including the causes and character of the Holocaust, the nature of German society, the dynamics of intellectual change, the development of sexuality and the implications of the decline of the European empires. The analyses in these chapters indicate a number of points of convergence and complementary emphases between the five scholars as well as some obvious points where they diverge.

The third part of the book is called 'Towards global modernity'. Elias, Parsons and Arendt are drawn upon to explain the sociogenesis of the European Union and identify the issues at stake in its further development (Chapter 7). In the next chapter, the ideas of Bauman, Foucault and Elias contribute to an investigation of the part played by humiliation and shame in modern social, political and organizational life (Chapter 8). Finally, the theoretical findings of Part 2 and the empirical explorations in Part 3 are drawn together in an argument about the need for social theory to orient itself to the issue of global modernity (Chapter 9).

Elias, Foucault, Arendt, Parsons, Bauman

Bauman and Foucault are among Elias's admirers⁶ and their interests overlap to a high degree. For their part, Parsons and Arendt, like Elias, were greatly influenced in their youth by the intellectual conflicts raging within the German universities; indeed, all three spent time at Heidelberg University in the 1920s. On the face of it, the basis for a fruitful intellectual interchange exists – and indeed it does.

This fact has been obscured by a number of factors: the hostility of Foucault towards 'the discourse on modern sexual repression' (Foucault

1978, 5) which seems to include Elias as well as Marcuse; Bauman's criticism of Elias in *Modernity and the Holocaust* (Bauman 1989);⁷ Elias's dismissal of Arendt's work; and, finally, Elias's repeated direct attacks upon Parsons. For their part, Arendt and Parsons paid no attention to Elias, in print at least.⁸ However, all this evidence of hostility, *froidueur* or indifference should not disguise the fundamental sympathies between these writers.

Why should we pay any attention to what Elias, Foucault or the others say? What effect do their formulations have upon how most ordinary people behave or how they feel, think and judge things? How important are intellectuals in shaping our intellects and imaginations compared with the slow, anonymous processing of shared experience in the household, at work, in battle, and so on?

There are strict limits to the influence of intellectuals, either as individuals or collectively. Professional thinkers only make a real difference at the level of everyday life when their formulations are backed by power and the capacity to transmit ideas effectively through time and across space. It may be true, for example, that the medieval concept of the soul owed much to Augustine just as Freud shaped the twentieth century's view of the mind and body. However, Augustinian theology was vigorously enforced by the medieval Church. Freudian theory was energetically promoted by a well-organised and dominant branch of the psychiatry profession. To take a more recent example, Mao-Tse-Tung's thoughts did not become current throughout China in the 1960s because of their intellectual power and poetic expression. It was because Mao's 'little red book' was carried by all members of a violent mass movement which crushed all opposition.

The subjects of this book could not, and would not, claim to be *makers* of modernity in the sense just described. However, they are all thoroughly expert and highly persuasive *witnesses* to modernity. Their authority flows from the success of the appeals they make to our reason and imagination. There is no need to assume any one of them has the final and definitive 'answer' to the question 'what is modernity?' However, taken together, their writings and experience make up an important body of evidence with respect to that issue. This is because each writer has been picking up signals, so to speak, from different parts or aspects of modernity. The spread is both geographical and historical. They come from two successive generations and four different national societies (Germany, France, Poland and the United States) all deeply involved in this century's battle over modernity's nature and direction.

In the first half of the century Germany played the key role in this struggle, both politically and in the world of ideas. German philosophy – Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and so on – made a deep impact throughout Europe, especially in France. However, during and after the Cold War, three things happened. Firstly, French and German ideas permeated intellectual life in Britain and the United States. Secondly, Europeans paid more attention to American life and ideas. Thirdly, as the barriers between East and West grew weaker there was increased understanding of

how the Soviet Union and Central Europe had undergone the experience of modernity.

Artists and Surveyors

Elias and the four other writers being discussed have all operated primarily within a transatlantic context although all have intellectual, moral or professional interests in the wider world.⁹ Four of the five were born in Europe although one of these (Arendt) became resident in the United States. Only one of the five is female. Three out of the five are of Jewish origin. All five are white.

This limited spread or, to put it another way, this high degree of overlap, has both disadvantages and advantages. The disadvantage is that none of the writers can report directly on the experience of being a non-white and/or non-European victim (or, indeed, beneficiary) of European and American modernity. Nor are the experiences of major civilizations now emerging as competitors to Europe and the United States, such as China and Japan, represented here. Indian, African, Arabic and Latin American perspectives are not in evidence either. We have to bear these facts in mind when our writers make generalizations about the human condition. This is a very important issue and I hope to return to it in other work.

However, the other side of the coin is that the relative homogeneity of our witnesses, combined with their dispersion across transatlantic space and time, gives us the advantages of triangulation. In other words, we get sightings of the same or closely related phenomena taken from a range of positions. They are, in a sense, like a team of surveyors.

Another image also springs to mind, one which recognizes the different preoccupations of our witnesses, the differences not in what they are looking *at* but in what they are looking *for*. Imagine that Cézanne were joined in the South of France by Renoir, Picasso, Magritte and Edward Munch and they all set about painting Cézanne's beloved Mont St-Victoire. At the end of the day you would get five distinctive and highly individual pictures of the same mountain.

The evidence provided by our key witnesses lies somewhere between the surveyors' notebooks and the artists' pictures, each one expressing a specific 'vision'. The challenge is to find a way of interpreting the dense and detailed 'reading' of modernity which their work provides. That involves, among other things, taking account of each writer's particular vision.

Visions of Modernity

In this context, a writer's vision is the expression of his or her capacity to intuit in a creative and original way how the world fits together socially and morally, how human beings fit into it, and what scope there is for acting within and upon that world.¹⁰ By 'intuition' is meant a strong sense of or

feeling about the nature of existence which is not initially derived from either logical deduction or empirical research. Intuition may be regarded as insightful when it draws attention to previously unconsidered or rarely considered possibilities.

Schumpeter wrote that

the strongest achievements in science proceed not from observation or experimentation and orderly logic-chopping but from something that is best called vision and is akin to artistic creation . . . In every scientific venture, the thing that comes first is Vision. That is to say, before embarking upon analytic work of any kind we must first single out the set of phenomena we wish to investigate, and acquire 'intuitively' a preliminary notion of how they hang together or, in other words, of what appear from our standpoint to be their fundamental properties . . . [This] preanalytical cognitive act . . . supplies the raw material for the analytic effort. (Schumpeter 1986, 41, 113–4, 561–2; emphasis in original)

To exercise the capacity for vision an author does not have to feel the earth move. They just have to be receptive to hunches, including small ones, about 'the way things work' in the area they are interested in. Vision is stimulated by challenging experiences under conditions in which the person involved is receptive to new ways of thinking and feeling.¹¹ The real-life challenges posed by modernity for individuals produce a range of reactions from fear and anguish to boredom and frustration. Whatever their particular form, involving and meaningful experiences may produce intuitions which are usually 'wrapped up', so to speak, in emotion. Vision works upon these intuitions and organizes them within the imagination. As a result the person concerned may come to 'see' certain aspects of the world as being particularly significant. Things may seem to fall into a specific pattern that had not been noticed before.

These processes do not happen to authors only. They are part of the accidents of life that occur to many people. Human beings react to these events in the imagination in many ways. They may, for example, take up painting, join a resistance movement, compose poetry, give all their wealth to the poor or commit suicide. It so happens that in the cases we are examining the people concerned eventually wrote books to be read by other intellectuals.

This is not all they did. Elias helped to found the group analysis movement.¹² Arendt campaigned for a Jewish army.¹³ Foucault fought the police and struggled on behalf of prisoners.¹⁴ Parsons tried to influence the attitudes of the US government towards the use of propaganda and the reconstruction of Germany after World War II.¹⁵ Bauman served with the Red Army and later rose to be a high-ranking military officer in the Polish Army before turning himself into a sociologist during the 1950s.¹⁶ All these writers were, to a significant degree, moved by a sense of special insight and fired by a determination to elaborate and communicate the contents of their vision.

Even Talcott Parsons, who has rightly acquired a reputation for writing impenetrable texts, strongly conveys through his prose in *The Structure of Social Action* (Parsons 1968), his greatest work, the sense of having been

inspired to penetrate further and deeper than others into the nature of things. He could barely disguise his delight at having seen that sociology was, as he put it, 'a special analytical science on the same level as economic theory', a view that 'runs counter to the bulk of methodological tradition on the matter' (772).

Parsons felt he was building on the 'sound insight' of Simmel. However, the arrival of 'an analytical sociological theory' had been forced to 'wait upon a relatively full development of the generalized theory of action' (773–4). To do this it had been necessary to 'dig deep enough' and get beyond 'the more superficial levels'. Parsons had been the man with the imagination and intellect to do this, so the text implies. His pride beats like a mighty drum beneath the words, barely restrained by the modesty and good manners that were, it may be surmised, second nature to this son of a Congregationalist minister from Ohio.

Parsons claims that his investigation had revealed 'a great deep stream of the movement of scientific thought' (774–5). This visionary phrase occurs on the very last page of Parsons's last chapter. It is reminiscent of the verse that begins the last chapter of *Revelation*, the last book of the Bible: 'And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb' (Revelation 22, v1). Parsons's father, the Congregationalist minister, checked the whole book for its prose style. He may well have picked up the Biblical connection.¹⁷

To return to the main argument, and put the matter slightly more formally, all five writers set the intellect to work on the intuitions organized by vision, and produced texts containing substantive accounts of various aspects of modernity.¹⁸

To anticipate the argument, the writings of Elias, Arendt and Bauman, the later work of Foucault (especially *The History of Sexuality*) and the early work of Parsons (including *The Structure of Social Action*)¹⁹ all share three characteristics.

- They all incorporate a powerful sense of long-term processes, extending over generations and even centuries.
- They all focus upon the tension between forces engendering conflict and tendencies towards order.
- They all express approval for polities which permit an orderly if passionate dialogue between competing approaches to life.²⁰

These themes will be taken up in more detail in the course of the following chapters. In the meantime, back to Norbert Elias.

Scenes from the Life of a Sociologist²¹

SCENE ONE: a park or garden on a sunny day in 1906 or thereabouts. A boy about nine years old, dressed in a sailor suit, lies on his side, supported on

one elbow. The young lad smiles up at the camera, shielding his eyes against the sun. He is grasping a tennis racket. Behind him stand two women: his mother, hair in a bun, and his nanny. The youngster is Norbert Elias. The photograph was probably taken near his home in Breslau, now Wrocław in Poland, or on holiday, perhaps at Ostend or Scheveningen.²²

SCENE TWO: near Peronne, in Northern France, 1915. Norbert Elias is speaking, remembering: ‘Because we had the heavy rolls of wire, the heavy Morse apparatus and a lot of equipment, we were taken close to the front on a vehicle . . . Someone was singing. And then far away we saw flashes of light. It was *Trommelfeuer*, a barrage, from a battle to the west . . . We were a telegraph group, a corporal and eight men, all specialists, who could be attached here and there. And as I drove with my comrades through the night, towards the incessant flashes and the *Trommelfeuer*, someone next to me was playing the mouth-organ – it probably was a horsedrawn wagon we were riding on. Then we arrived just behind the front, where there were lots of dead horses lying around. And dead people. The whole scene, the bodies, the gunfire, the flashes of light, the sentimental songs, the nostalgic sound of the mouth-organ – that picture is very vivid in my mind’.²³

SCENE THREE: Frankfurt during the early 1930s. Ilse Seglow recalls: ‘I heard that Mannheim and Elias had come to . . . my home town and given the University Department . . . a “facelift.” . . . I was increasingly drawn into its “inner circle” where there was little formality . . . In our case we had the coffee-house, mixed company, University staff and students sitting and talking together on an equal footing, whereas the traditional departments had the *Gasthaus*, male company of students (apart from excursions to women of another class) and staff and students joining socially only on formal occasions . . . I remember once Paul Tillich, at one o’clock in the morning, finishing a discussion with the sociologists in their favourite coffee-house, the Cafe Laumer, with the words: “Now you can go to your structure, I go to bed”’.²⁴

SCENE FOUR: an alien internment camp in Huyton, near Liverpool, 1940. An ex-inmate remembers: ‘The camp was located in an unfinished housing project, taken over for the occasion. The half-built houses, only partially fitted with windows and doors, were supplemented with army tents; the gentle English rain quickly turned the tenting area and unpaved roadways into mudflats and rivulets. Food was scanty, consisting mostly of a watery soup in which swam an occasional disintegrating piece of fish or meat. For a 17-year-old it was all great fun; for most other inmates it was a disaster. Most of them were Jewish refugees from the Continent; the camp commander was quoted as saying that he never knew so many Jews were Nazis . . . Many lapsed into despair; a few took their lives . . . In this context, a choir practice or soccer game acquired life-giving qualities. Some groups . . . gathered to listen to lectures . . . When the sun was out, the

listeners sat “outside,” drawn up in a semi-circle around the lecturer . . . One day, a Prof. Elias, drawing lines and crosses on a dirty piece of paper which served as a blackboard, spoke of how a person is born into the world not as a pristine and isolated individual, but as a nexus in a social network. It was a simple idea, but it changed my way of thinking about social phenomena’.²⁵

SCENE FIVE: Ghana in the early 1960s. A balding Norbert Elias, Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana, is standing before the latticed windows of his dwelling flanked by his cook and his chauffeur. Elias, dressed in white shirt and tie and wearing heavy glasses, is beaming with pleasure. The picture is strangely reminiscent of the photograph, taken half a century before, of young Norbert in his sailor suit attended by his mother and nanny. It conveys the same sense of happy security.

SCENE SIX: Leicester University in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Norbert Elias is walking across Victoria Park towards the Sociology Department. Members of staff on the right side of the Attenborough Building can see him making his steady progress across the park, just like yesterday, just like tomorrow. He always appears at about the same time, head leaning slightly to one side, always with the same regular, shuffling pace, almost always briefcase in hand.

SCENE SEVEN: A lecture room in a German university during the early 1980s. Elias, now a spritely eighty-five, is in full flight, making a telling point. One arm is pointing towards the ceiling, the other holds a piece of chalk. Elias is wearing a fisherman’s sweater and his jacket is lying crumpled on a nearby bench.²⁶ He is in his element.

These are glimpses of Elias captured at odd moments during a long life. We see him observing the world around him: a world in which he was thoroughly, sometimes dangerously, involved; a world from which he was also remarkably detached. We see him restlessly exploring and expounding his vision in good times and bad.

I was one of the lecturers who used to glance out of the window in the morning and see Norbert Elias making his way across Victoria Park. Like the neighbours of Immanuel Kant in Königsberg, we could set our watches by the footfall of Elias. I am not sure that Elias would have appreciated this comparison.

I only knew him very slightly. However, that was enough to convince me that he had a considerable intellect and a strong belief in the importance of his own ideas. The Leicester department was very large and was, for a while, the most important training ground for sociologists in Britain. Within the department Elias had a circle of admirers and a small number of disciples. To me at least, at the time, his message was not very clear. His