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Nico Wilterdink reviews Richard Kilminster


Richard Kilminster’s *Norbert Elias* is the third book in English, after the introductions by Stephen Mennell (1989; new edn 1998) and Robert van Krieken (1998) that not only deals with the whole range of Elias’s work but also has the same, sober and simple main title. What makes this new book distinct from the other two?

The shortest answer can be found in its subtitle, *post-philosophical sociology*, which summarises the book’s central proposition. Elias’s sociology is post-philosophical, argues Kilminster, in that it deals with problems commonly defined as philosophical and is at the same time a radically new way of approaching these problems by breaking with philosophy itself. ‘For Elias, philosophy was part of the problem, not part of the solution’ (p. 13, italics in the original). The solution was sought in what may be called the sociogenesis of Elias’s thinking. Kilminster makes a fruitful use of recent studies of parts of Elias’s biography – including his participation in the Zionist youth movement and of the cultural and political life in the Weimar Republic in general. As a student in philosophy, Elias absorbed what was then the dominant mode of theorising in the German university establishment: neo-Kantianism, with its focus on epistemological questions of truth and validity and basic categories of knowledge and thought. This was the philosophy Elias came to oppose, and which he continued to attack during the rest of his life. In his opposition he was not alone. Neo-Kantianism itself moved in the direction of a more historical and ‘relational’ approach, particularly in the work of Ernst Cassirer. Besides, there was a sharp revolt against neo-Kantianism among younger philosophers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, who substituted ontology for epistemology and pointed out that the world of lived experience was very different from the Kantian categories of the mind. Kilminster speculates that these philosophers must have made a strong impression on the young Elias, helping him to develop a more informal and less abstract style of writing and reasoning. From a very different perspective, Marxists also gave priority to the ‘real world’, and they too brought Elias nearer to sociology. This broad intellectual movement in the Weimar years, Kilminster argues, was related to wider social transformations, notably the political turmoil of the time and the wave of formalisation that Elias later observed for this period.

The more direct influence came from Karl Mannheim, the sociologist with whom Elias had a long relationship of personal friendship and whose assistant he was in Frankfurt in 1930–1933. In a separate, extensive chapter on their relationship, Kilminster shows the many similarities between Mannheim’s writings from the 1920s to 1940s and Elias’s later work. While Elias made the transition from philosophy to sociology independently from Mannheim, the latter helped him to articulate ideas that supported this move. Mannheim’s sociology of knowledge, with its insistence on the *Seinsgebundenheit* or social embeddedness of all knowledge, fell with Elias on fertile ground. It represented a definite break with traditional epistemology, which Elias carried further in his later work. Kilminster notes that, apart from an enthusiastic commentary in 1929, Elias never acknowledged his indebtedness to Mannheim. On the contrary, in his autobiographical *Reflections on a Life* (1994) he ‘distances himself erroneously from what he sees as Mannheim’s total relativism’ (p. 49). One may add that Elias had already implicitly done so in his essay ‘Sociology of Knowledge: New Perspectives’ (1971) where he attacked ‘philosophical absolutism’ and ‘sociological relativism’ as the two polar and equally biased approaches that dominated the study of knowledge. Kilminster is undoubtedly right in pointing out that Mannheim should not be simply put in the camp of ‘sociological relativism’. Yet I also think that there are many formulations in Mannheim’s work that come close to this ‘caricature’ (p. 46), and that Elias in his sociology of knowledge came to a very different position by focusing on the question how to explain *progress* of human knowledge as part of a long-term social trend.

Another important influence on Elias in the 1930s is of course that of Freud, as becomes apparent in *The Civilising Process*, where Elias ‘profoundly sociologises Freud’ (p. 90). In discussing the wider human, moral, perhaps...
even philosophical significance of The Civilising Process, Kilminster sees in this work a ‘retrieval’ of our forgot-
ten past that corresponds to the hidden
part of our individual selves; the his-
torical past is within each of us. The 
book’s implicit message is therefore a 
rejection of hodiecentric feelings of 
superiority: ‘In Elias’s deeply historical 
conception of human society there is a 
profound sense that people in the past (for example, medieval warrior knights) 
can be salvaged from present ideologi-
cal devaluations and condemnations of 
their existence and behaviour, informed 
by present standards of conduct’ (p. 
98). I agree. Yet it is noteworthy that 
the criticism that The Civilising Pro-
cess has evoked since the 1980s among 
social scientists and particularly anthro-
pologists (from Anton Blok to Jack 
Goody and Hans-Peter Duerr) goes in a 
very different, even opposite direction: 
namely that the theory reveals a naïve, 
unwarranted belief in progress and an 
ethnocentric bias in favour of our own, 
present-day Western society. Kilminster 
does not even hint to this kind of criti-
cism, which could have given his own 
interpretation more sharpness.

In the next chapter Kilminster returns 
to fundamental problems of knowl-
edge formation in his discussion of 
Elias’s conceptual pair ‘involvement and 
detachment’. With these twin con-
cepts Elias purported to overcome the 
philosophical, Kantian dichotomies of 
subject versus object and facts versus 
values, and to revise Weber’s prescrip-
tion of scientific value-freedom based 
on these dichotomies. Elias replaces 
them by a dynamic sociological view in 
which groups of people vary in the 
degree to which their perception of the 
world is ‘involved’ (emotion-laden, 
subject-centred) or ‘detached’ (emo-
tionally controlled, object-centred). 
The long-term trend from involve-
ment to detachment, as can be seen in 
particular in people’s perception of 
‘nature’, is part of and conditioned by 
wide civilising processes. Elias views 
the emergence of relatively autono-
mous scientific fields as a late stage in 
this development. Within these fields 
‘autonomous’ evaluations (rather than 
non-evaluative or value-neutral obser-
vations) increasingly take the place of 
‘heteronomous’ ones.

Here Kilminster stresses again how 
Elias develops a radically post-philo-
sophical sociology, taking distance 
not only from the philosophy of phi-
losophers but also from philosophical 
elements in the work of sociologists 
like Weber. Yet we may wonder if 
Elias solved all the problems posed by 
Weber and other methodologists. As 
Kilminster points out, the involve-
detachment continuum is not one clear 
dimension in which more detachment 
and better science always go hand in 
hand. Science requires ‘involvement’ of 
a specific kind, which Elias came to call 
‘secondary involvement’ and Kilmin-
ster terms ‘involved detachment’. What 
exactly makes this kind of involved 
detachment different from the ‘involved 
involvement’ of, for example, magi-
cians or religious believers? And what 
is the place of moral evaluations within 
the sciences if these are not ‘value-
free’? Are such evaluations by defini-
tion ‘heteronomous’? More generally, 
are the boundaries between ‘autono-
mous’ and ‘heteronomous’ evaluations 
not always contestable, contested, and 
changing over time?

Kilminster suggests such a change in 
arguing that Elias’s strong emphasis on 
detachment as a precondition for scien-
tific progress reflects a stage in the civi-
ising process in which a strong super-
ego suppresses forbidden emotions. In 
a later stage, the control of emotions 
becomes more ego-dominated; emo-
tions are recognised rather than for-
bidden or denied, and allowed to be 
expressed in controlled and socially 
acceptable ways. This informalisation, 
Kilminster suggests, is reflected in 
today’s social sciences, which tend to 
be methodologically less rigid, more 
flexible, more tolerant toward ‘lay’ 
knowledge such as ‘literary knowledge, 
folk knowledge, … gay, lesbian and 
ethnic knowledges, concern with moral-
ity and so on …’ (p. 128).

This interesting thesis raises a number 
of questions. The first question is, of 
course, whether such an overall trend 
in the social sciences really can be 
observed – which Kilminster himself 
seems to doubt. A second question is 
whether this development – if and to 
the extent that it takes place – is desir-
able. Did, for example, postmodern-
ism’s advocacy of ‘anything goes’ and 
its relativistic interpretation of scientific 
knowledge as just a narrative among 
others deserve our warm support? 
Anyone inspired by Elias’s sociology 
will deny this.

Elias’s emphasis on a high degree of 
detachment as essential to any mature 
science, and his observation that the 
social sciences are lagging far behind 
the natural sciences because they are 
still in a stage of high involvement, 
may indeed be seen as somewhat time-
bound. But rather than connecting his 
view to an earlier stage in the civilising 
process (Elias’s intellectual style is, 
after all, informal rather than formalis-
tic, and bears the stamp of informalisa-
tion processes that took shape from the 
1920s onwards, as Kilminster suggested 
in an earlier chapter), a simpler and 
more plausible interpretation is, I think, 
to connect it to the dramatic events 
and changes in Germany in the period 
of and between the two world wars, 
when most social scientists were driven 
into partisanship. The subsequent Cold 
War and the opposition movements of 
the 1960s probably confirmed Elias’s 
idea that the social sciences still had to 
emancipate from political and ideologi-
cal group alignments. This lesson is 
still relevant today, but younger genera-
tions have indeed different experiences. 
As political and ideological contrasts 
diminished, the pull of party alliance 
and emotional engagement became 
weaker. For many social scientists 
today the more pressing problem is 
perhaps to find emotionally satisfying 
meaning and engagement in their pro-
fessional work. The recurring dilemmas 
for social scientists to which the con-
cepts of involvement and detachment 
refer take different forms in different 
times.

Kilminster devotes the last chapter 
before the conclusion to Elias’s last 
theoretical essay, The Symbol Theory, 
which the author completed in its first 
draft when he was ninety-one years 
old. Richard Kilminster was the editor 
of the book, which was published a 
year after Elias’s death in 1990. The 
Symbol Theory is presented here as a 
grand finale in which different motives 
come together, now placed in the broad 
framework of evolutionary theory.
In this essay, Elias again attacks the conception of reality in static dichotomies, such as body/mind, matter/spirit, nature/culture. ‘Mind’, ‘spirit’, ‘culture’ refer to emergent properties that gradually evolved in the process of hominisation, the evolution from apes to humans, which included the emergence of the uniquely human capacity for creating, learning, using and understanding symbols. The symbols, while at the core of a new level of reality (the human sociocultural world), are not simply ‘immaterial’; they are ‘also tangible sound patterns of human communication’ (p. 140). In this way, Elias moves ‘beyond the traditional alternatives of idealism or materialism (even though his work possesses an affinity with materialism generally)’. He ‘overcomes the traditional nature/culture and structure/culture dualisms … by dipping them into the stream of continuity from the evolution of the human species through to the development of human societies as a level of integration sui generis’ (p. 141). Kilminster points out that Elias’s argument is similar to and draws upon the ‘modern synthesis’ in evolutionary theory represented by Julian Huxley, among others. He could have added a reference to George Herbert Mead, who in Mind, Self and Society also stressed the importance of symbol use (‘vocal gestures’) for humans and placed its emergence in an evolutionary framework.

In the concluding chapter Kilminster remarks that ‘Norbert Elias may be seen to have delivered the fourth blow to human narcissism, beyond Copernicus, Darwin and Freud – the sociological blow’ (p. 154; italics in the original), which consists in the basic insight that human individuals are part of and dependent on social figurations that none of them can control. Kilminster’s formulation expresses some hesitation (‘may be seen to have delivered …’), which is understandable. The ‘fourth blow’ can be and has been attributed to sociology in general, just like the break with philosophy. Elias shares his basic insight with many others before or after him, though we could perhaps say that he is more explicit, radical and consistent in his critique of the illusions of individual autonomy than anyone else. This leads to a final question: How unique and exclusive is Elias’s sociology? And how should it be used – in an exclusivist or a more eclectic way? Kilminster goes far in the direction of exclusivism. Following Elias, he remarks at the end of the book, means that we have to ‘unlearn much of our sociological education. … We have to move beyond conventional sociological dualisms; abandon philosophy, Marxism, the leading concept of “modernity”, critical theory and the fashionable “social theory”’ (p. 152). ‘Whole disciplines are to be abandoned, or at least placed at arm’s length. Political and moral values are to be suspended in favour of a significant transfer (through secondary involvement) of a person’s affective motivation and life meaning into the mission of developing, against enormous odds, highly detached sociological knowledge of the social dynamics that thwart people’s plans like forces of nature’ (p. 153).

This sounds quite heroic, and accords well with Elias’s own life and work. But in making use of Elias’s insights, we cannot, need not, and should not become like Elias. My position differs somewhat from Kilminster’s exclusivism. I regard the Eliasian, figurational, or processual perspective as sociology at its potential best: a perspective which contains basic sociological insights that have been formulated in different ways by different authors, and are open to correction and refinement. The figurational perspective has, above all, a critical function in my view; it may indeed ‘act as the conscience of the discipline’, as Kilminster puts it in the last sentence. This does not mean that one should reject or abandon ‘whole disciplines’, not even philosophy. Rather than isolating itself from other disciplines or other sociological perspectives, figurational sociology should stay in an open relation to them, criticising and correcting misconceived ideas, selectively incorporating useful insights. Despite my reservations, I think Richard Kilminster has written an excellent book. It is well written and well argued, and based on impressive scholarship. While being relatively silent on, in particular, the empirical side of Elias’s work and several specific topics, it uncovers layers in his work that were hidden and unexplored until now.

Anyone who is seriously interested in Elias’s sociology should read this book.

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Helmut Kuzmics reviews Cas Wouters


For a long time – indeed since the late 1970s – the concept of ‘informalisation’ has been inseparably linked to the name and person of Cas Wouters. From an appendix to this volume (a twin to Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West 1890–2000 published in 2004), we learn in more detail how this label came to be formed. It emerged from the interaction between Norbert Elias and Cas Wouters, with the former conceding only reluctantly that the loosening of affective controls, all too visible in the post-war Euro-American world, could be more than a short backlash in the civilising process. But while it seems that Elias was convinced that this development also meant a real – though possibly short-lived – decrease in self-control or self-restraint, Wouters recounts here (p. 10) that as early as 1976 he thought the opposite was correct: ‘Less formally regulated manners placing greater demands on self-regulation.’