

Marco Santoro

**Norbert Elias, The Genesis of the Naval Profession.  
Edited and with an Introduction by René Moelker  
and Stephen Mennell. Dublin: University College  
Dublin Press 2007. Pp. xii + 172**

(doi: 10.2383/29576)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2009

**Ente di afferenza:**

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.  
Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

**Licenza d'uso**

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda  
<https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

## Book reviews

**Norbert Elias, *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*. Edited and with an Introduction by René Moelker and Stephen Mennell. Dublin: University College Dublin Press 2007. Pp. xii + 172.**

doi: 10.2383/29576

In 1950, a curious article appeared in the pages of the *British Journal of Sociology*. It was authored by a then-unknown scholar, by his name presumably a foreign one, who did not hold a permanent position in the academy – a privilege he would gain only four years later, at the surprisingly late age of 57. The article's title was explicit in revealing its topic: the “genesis of the naval profession” in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth century, a subject undoubtedly atypical and not easily classifiable according to the usual rules of the sociological discipline of the time, and probably still today. The name of the obscure scholar was Norbert Elias, and nobody could foresee that in a few years he would become one of the most respected and influential sociologist of the second half of the Twentieth century, even more than his first mentor and protector Karl Mannheim, and close to scholars of such a reputation as Robert K. Merton, Erving Goffman, or even Talcott Parsons. To make things odder there was the strange fate of this publication, for many years a veritable editorial enigma for its – indeed presumably very few – readers (and I was among them). The article was in fact accompanied by a long footnote, which presented the article itself as the first of a series of “three studies” to be published presumably in the same journal, about “the origins and the early development of the career of naval officers in England. It shows – the note went on – the initial situation in which members of the nascent profession were recruited from two very different social groups. The second study deals with tensions and conflicts between these two groups; the third with their gradual integration and the emergence of a more unified hierarchy of naval officers combining to some extent the functions and methods of training of both groups. In addition, a brief comparison with the early development of the naval profession in France shows some of the interrelations between the development and characteristics of naval professions and those of the countries to which they belong” [p. 135].

A long and maybe a little atypical footnote, to be sure, but also a really instructive one, clearly suggesting a work in progress that is relatively structured if not already accomplished in more than its general lines. The reader, however, would have met real difficulties in looking for these two announced further studies. They have, in fact, never been published: neither in the *BJS*, nor in the subsequent few bibliographies of Elias released after his retirement in 1962, nor in the many ones that followed his rise to fame after the publication in 1969 of the new edition of his early masterwork, *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, soon translated in dozens of languages. In fact, these two subsequent studies were never published for reasons that the editors of this posthumous book persuasively describe as a matter of disappointment (besides the hard existential times Elias was living in those mid-century years, also for the trauma provoked by the death of his beloved mother at Auschwitz): “He could only have been more discouraged by the negligible impact of the 1950 *BJS* article, intended to be the first of three. One of

the reasons why the other studies were not published may well have been that the first one did not provoke any response” [p. 8].

Never published, and indeed never finished, this series of studies (which had to become, in the plan of the author, a book in itself: see the outline discovered by the editors and reproduced at page 2) are not included in the great collection of Elias’ works which is being published by the University College Dublin Press in 18 volumes, supervised by Stephen Mennell and a team of Elias’ scholars. As they were not elicited for publication by their author, they have not gained a place in his Collected Works. They are published here, however, as a supplement, as a contribution to the knowledge of a piece of work which for too long has remained obscure even to Elias’ specialists. One of the two editors of this book, the Dutch military sociologist René Moelker, has the great merit of having first restored the sense and reconstructed the story of this editorial adventure in an article published in the same *BJS* a few years ago (2003), from which the introduction to this volume is substantially drawn and adapted.

Even today few sociologists are aware, I guess, of this early article by Elias and fewer still know that the sociology of professions has been a relatively constant, albeit not-so-central, concern of the German sociologist since his migration from Nazi Germany and in some ways even earlier. The sociology of professions was at that time a strategic field in the Anglo-American social science, thanks to Parsons and the work of a peculiar scholar at the Chicago department of sociology, Everett C. Hughes. In England this branch of social research even had a moment of glory in the 1930s thanks to a few sociologists teaching at the London School of Economics, including T. H. Marshall. Curiously, none of them were mentioned by Elias in his published article, with the exception of a fugitive and inconsequential reference to the big book published in 1933 by the LSE sociologist and demographer A. M. Carr-Saunders and his colleague P. A. Wilson on the social history of professions in the United Kingdom. What the article’s references show, instead, is a passionate recourse to archives and to the scanty but apparently revealing historical documents Elias had been able to locate. The sociological study of professions was however undoubtedly in the horizon of the author, as the first pages of the article suggest and a later (1964) dictionary entry on “Professions” also confirms (recall that Leicester, where Elias spent his last years as a teacher, was also the academic site of the late Terence Johnson, one of the most influential writers in the sociology of professions of the last decades). The impact of this branch of sociology on Elias’s work is apparent in a number of other texts, including his unfinished Mozart study, in great part built on the idea that what Mozart was lacking and was desperately seeking was *also* that professional autonomy which only the later generation of musicians (Beethoven among them) would have gained through a strategic use of market opportunities and the progressive retreat from the traditional musician’s subaltern position inside court society. For instance, one could read many pages of the *Civilization Process* as a contribution to the sociology of professions – a historical sociology of the professional ideal. The book focuses on the development of the aristocratic ethos and its appropriation and re-interpretation by other social formations, including the middle classes. Moreover, what is the court society if not a complex system of – both new and established – occupations constantly struggling for the improvement of their position with respect to the king and to each other, which employ not only practical and local

tactics but also articulated discourses on the excellence of their contribution to civility and authority?

What this book offers to its reader is therefore the chance to restore this focal, albeit often implicit, concern of Elias – here under the disguised vest of a military sociology (itself in part a chapter of a more general sociology of professions), – while putting it in insightful connections with at least two of the most influential and well known contributions of this scholar: the concept of human figuration and the socio-historical theory of civilization. Four full chapters (including the early published article) and three fragmentary texts form the bulk of this restored book, preceded by a lengthy editorial introduction which helps to contextualize these writings in the intellectual biography of Elias and in the current research on the naval profession (and also on Elias' impact on sociology). That these early studies of Elias on the naval profession could not represent the definitive word on the subject is not an issue. Of course, the contemporary social scholar interested in the genesis of the navy has now other and usually stronger references [e.g. J. D. Davies, *Gentlemen and Taraulins. The Officers and Men of the Restoration Navy*, Oxford 1991], besides two or three sociological papers by former students of Elias, who have developed some of their teacher's early insights. But Elias' written voice is as always worthy of being read in itself and not only for philological or erudite spirit. What Elias still offers us in these brief texts is an exemplary even if unfinished essay in the social history of a profession, interpreted with the sociological lens of an ongoing fusion (after and through a secular feud) of two different early social formations – the seamen with low status but high knowledge about the sea and the naval machine on the one side, and on the other the gentlemen soldiers with high (noble) status but poor technical competence, – but also some insightful analysis of the management of social boundaries and of the impact that social barriers with different degrees of rigidity (weaker or stronger) could produce on such macro-structural features like the imperial supremacy of a country vis-à-vis the others (in this case, Great Britain against both France and Spain, which are constant terms of comparison in these pages). Not surprisingly, Elias tries to explain these different degrees mainly through variations in the social structure and above all in the organization of the polity (along the absolutism/liberalism continuum). Still, in the second fragment collected here, scholars interested in institutions and institutional analysis could find an interesting attempt to compare what I would read as a Chicago heritage (the idea of a natural history of institutions through a succession of stages) with the kind of historical social evolutionism Elias has struggled to develop all over his career, together with some insightful, even if brief, reflections on the usefulness of statistics in sociological analysis.

The editors should be praised for their effort to restore these pieces of sociological work which had remained hidden for more than half a century. And the readers, Elias' fans or not, should give a look at them not only for the sake of curiosity. Reading these texts with contemporary eyes strengthens a feeling that many sociologists already have, i.e. the subtle affinities between Elias' "figurational" or "process" sociology and Bourdieu's genetic or constructive structuralism. (This reading would contribute, I guess, even to a topic currently debated in the sociology of professions, that is the potential articulation of Bourdieu's concept of field with the Anglo-American concept of profession, when the latter is restored to its intrinsic historical nature and depurated of the essentialist

features inscribed in it by functionalists). But the reader will also find other surprises, including for example some pages devoted to what we could claim to be Elias' early concern for a sociology of race (here in the form of a sociological analysis of some of Spain's structural features, like the historical weakness of its manufacture and its relative economic underdevelopment, as emerging from the historical conflict between "whites" and Moors). Probably even more strikingly, the reader will discover also a theatrical piece, a fragment of a planned drama, written by this creative – and not yet fully appreciated in all his facets – sociologist, about the human and social struggle between the seaman Francis Drake and the gentleman Thomas Doughty, early friends and social partners turned into mortal enemies for reasons that only a true sociological imagination could account for.

*Marco Santoro*  
University of Bologna