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Apropos "The Collected Works of Norbert Elias". An Interview with Stephen J. Mennell

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Flashback

Apropos “The Collected Works of Norbert Elias”

An Interview with Stephen J. Menzell

by Ruben Flores

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Ruben Flores: What was it like to edit the eighteen volumes of the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias* in English?

Stephen J. Menzell: Well – a lot of work! I think I need to explain a lot about the background to this enormous project. In the 1970s and 1980s, Elias had become good friends with Siegfried Unseld, the famous head of Suhrkamp, the great German publishers. As a result, Suhrkamp published all of Elias’s books from then onwards. And, after his death, they agreed to bring out revised scholarly editions of all of Elias’s work, including translations of the books and essays that Elias had written in English. The resulting *Gesammelte Schriften* runs to nineteen volumes – they included a volume of Elias’s poetry too, which we decided could not be translated into English. That explains why there is one fewer volume in the English series.¹

This interview took place in the context of the International Research Seminar Series at the School of Sociology of the Higher School of Economics (HSE) in Moscow. Special thanks to Professor Stephen Menzell, who not only accepted to be interviewed, but also kindly added footnotes to the interview text.

¹ The eighteen volumes are published by University College Dublin Press, Dublin (www.ucdpress.ie). See appendix for the full list of titles. In 2007 UCD Press also published a “supplementary volume”, *The Genesis of the Naval Profession*, compiled by René Moelker and Stephen Menzell from Elias’s published and unpublished texts on that subject. The title page and contents pages of all these volumes can be viewed at www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/foundation/works.php.

In the early 2000s, as the *Gesammelte Schriften* neared completion, the Board of the Norbert Elias Foundation – that is, Johan Goudsblom, Hermann Korte and I, who are effectively Elias's legal heirs and literary executors – began to think about an equivalent series in English. But the situation in English was much more complicated. True, all but one of the books Elias had written in German had been translated into English (the exception was *Humana Conditio*), but they had been spread among as many as five publishers. That raised what at first appeared to be insurmountable copyright problems. Fortunately, however, there is a loophole in international copyright law, which permits the publication of a uniform collected works in spite of the fact that some of the titles may already be in print from other publishers. We decided to seize on that loophole, not only because some of Elias's books were already out of print, but because many of the earlier editions, although very well translated by Edmund Jephcott, had been sloppily edited by the various publishers.

Now, as it happened, my wife Barbara and I had in 1995 founded University College Dublin Press on behalf of the university, and I was chairman of its Editorial Committee and Barbara its Executive Editor. Joop and Hermann took a shine to the idea of UCD Press undertaking the *Collected Works* in English. I was a bit less enthusiastic, because I knew we were only a small Press, and I foresaw – quite correctly as it turned out! – that an enormous amount of the work would devolve upon me. But Joop and Hermann persuaded Barbara, and negotiated a contract directly with the university. When it was signed, I was of course delighted, in spite of my misgivings. We published the first two volumes in 2007, and the final one will appear in Spring 2014.

I suspect that many British and Irish sociologists regarded us as crazy to embark on such an enormous project, but a group of us thought that we could undertake no more important a task than to ensure that Elias's intellectual legacy endured. Fifteen names appear as editors of the eighteen volumes, but I should like to mention the contribution of three people in particular. First, Richard Kilminster, who has not only served as chairman of the Editorial Advisory Committee, but has also been one of the editors of as many as seven of the volumes. He and I are especially proud of the three volumes of Elias's essays that we edited together. Second, Edmund Jephcott, who translated most of Elias's German books in the 1970s and 1980s, and who for the *Collected Works* agreed to translate *all* of the work written by Elias in German and not previously published in English. That amounted to about one-third of Elias's more than a hundred essays, and half a dozen late interviews,

as well as *Humana Conditio*.² And finally, completely behind the scenes, the celebrated historian Sir Keith Thomas, who lent his name as “Patron” of the Collected Works, read all the proofs, and saved me from some awful editorial and historical gaffes.

As General Editor, I did the final editing of all eighteen volumes. The General Editor has to do this, because you have to make sure that all the references, cross-references and technical vocabulary are accurate and consistent, as well as putting all the full stops, commas, colons and semicolons in the right places. So there has been a lot of drudgery in the copy editing. Yet, at the same time, all the days I spent in the University Library in Cambridge and the British Library in London checking Elias’s often vague references were not mere drudgery – they were highly stimulating too. I remember that about twenty-five years ago, Jeffrey Alexander remarked to me how intellectually rewarding it was “to come to terms with a great mind.” He was right – we have found this whole project intellectually rewarding. But Jeff was thinking of Talcott Parsons, while I was thinking of Norbert Elias. I had in fact studied with Parsons, briefly, in the 1960s. I had come to terms with his ideas, and although I liked the man, I found myself wholly unconvinced by his theoretical apparatus. When in the early 1970s I quite accidentally encountered Elias’s *Was ist Sociologie?* [2012 (Collected Works, vol. 5: *What is Sociology?*)], and then Elias himself [Mennell 2006], I found Elias to be a vastly more impressive intellect than the then far more famous Parsons.

Funnily enough, publishing the works that had been translated from German was a bit less problematic than the works that had been written in English. That was because although Norbert wrote reasonably good English, especially when he was living in England, in his later works when he dictated in English it was often not very idiomatic English and it needed the attention of a good, confident copy editor – which meant me and Barbara, in practice. So it’s been lots of work, a great deal of work. But we’re now within spitting distance of finishing the entire project.³

² The bulk of Elias’s essays were published by UCD Press in the three volumes 14, 15 and 16 of the Collected Works (see note 1 above). Several other essays, however, appear in other volumes, such as *Mozart and Other Essays on Courtly Art* [Collected Works, vol. 12], while *Studies on the Germans* [Collected Works, vol. 11] is itself a collection of essays. A list of essays and chapters not previously published in English can be found at www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/docs/pdf/Essaysnotpreviouslypublished.pdf.

³ The final volume, the *Supplements and Index to the Collected Works*, was published in Spring 2014, and the completion of the project was celebrated at a large international conference at the University of Leicester – Elias’s old university – in June 2014.

RF: Would you know whether there is anything left to be published?

SJM: The peculiar thing is that this man wrote continuously throughout his life, but only published most of it in the two decades before his death at the age of 93. It was a very strange career.

There are masses of typescripts in the Elias archives at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar, and scholars are constantly working through them to discover further insights. I know of a few texts that are of interest, but they are not necessarily suitable for publication. For example, there is an *Essay on laughter*, to which Elias's devoted assistant Michael Schröter and others have referred [Schröter 2002]. It started as a simple short seminar paper in Leicester in 1956, but then Elias added masses of additional notes and amendments, which gradually peter out in complete chaos. Elias's handwriting, by the way, would tax even the most skilled palaeographer! There's a long typescript entitled *Kanonen*, dictated to Artur Bogner in the early 1980s, which may be salvageable. And I found a long typescript in German on "the changing balance of power between the sexes," not all of which seems to have found its way into the published essay of that title [*The changing balance of power between the sexes*, in Elias 2009b (Collected Works, vol. 16: *Essays III*, 240-265)]. But my hunch is that Elias managed to get all his key *ideas* into the public domain before his death.

There are perhaps two important exceptions to that. We decided to include two previously unpublished texts in volume 18, which was originally planned to include only the consolidated index to the Collected Works. These were substantial essays on Freud and on the French philosopher-anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1857-1939). Both essays plug important gaps in his theorising, and both are related to important misinterpretations by Elias's critics.

The Lévy-Bruhl essay dates from the 1960s. At first it was planned as a (very) long introduction to a reprint of one of Lévy-Bruhl's books, and then as a central part of a book on the French sociological tradition, which Elias never finished. We decided to publish it, under the title *Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and "the question of the logical unity of humankind"* [in Elias 2014 (Collected Works, vol. 18: *Supplements and Index*, 53-136)].⁴ The essay ranges far beyond Lévy-Bruhl himself, dealing at length with Aristotle, who is so often seen as the first theorist of Western "logic." Elias's point is that "logic" is not a human universal: patterns of logical thinking, like so much else, have developed through long-term social processes, and have varied between cultures. This has often got Elias into trouble with British social anthropologists,

⁴ That was not Elias's title: the internal quotation comes from the British anthropologist Rodney Needham [1972, 160].

such as Sir Jack Goody.⁵ This argument is also related to Elias's sociological theory of knowledge and the sciences, and to his dispute with the philosopher of science Sir Karl Popper and his disciples [Elias 2009a (Collected Works, vol. 14: *Essays I*)].

In the case of the essay on Freud [*Freud's concept of society and beyond it*, in Elias 2014 (Collected Works, vol. 18: *Supplements and Index*, 13-52)], the story is a little sad. Elias seems to have recognised in the very last months of his life that he had never spelled out exactly where he stood in relation to Freud and psychoanalysis. He certainly never denied his debt to Freud; he used some Freudian terms; and he was one of the founders, with S.H. Foulkes, of the psychotherapeutic school of Group Analysis. But he was never an orthodox "Freudian." So he set out to make a sympathetic critique of psychoanalysis, seeking to show how Freud's theories could be made both more sociological and more processual. But at the end of his life, he was almost completely blind, and worked by dictating (in English) to an ever-changing rota of assistants. The result was an enormous but chaotic and unfinished typescript of around 150 pages. We thought it was unpublishable, until the young French intellectual historian Marc Joly performed a radical task of editing, through which he extracted a very coherent and important argument. It shows that Elias was firing on all cylinders intellectually right up to the day of his death.

RF: What are you working on yourself at the moment?

SJM: First, I am planning to take a holiday after having finished the eighteen volumes! But in recent years I've been writing a little bit in the area of international relations, the interface between sociology and international relations, under the influence of Andrew Linklater who is a major Eliasian scholar in international relations. I am writing an essay on *Explaining American hypocrisy* [Mennell, 2015]. And I have become interested in economics again – nearly half a century after I graduated in economics from Cambridge – because, like a lot of other people, I think that economics has failed as a discipline. As Paul Krugman says, the economic crisis of 2007 onwards was a failure of economics as well as an economic crisis.

RF: It seems to me that Elias did not examine economic processes in much detail.

SJM: That's probably true. In *On the Process of Civilisation* he often mentions economic growth, the division of labour, trade and monetarisation as long-term

⁵ See especially Goody 2006, 154-179.

processes interwoven with “the civilising process” [Elias 2012a (Collected Works, vol. 3: *On the Process of Civilisation*)]. But his own focus – what he regards as his major discovery – is on how civilising processes are intertwined with economic processes that had already been much studied by earlier scholars. He was not totally ignorant of economics. His essay on *The sociogenesis of sociology* [in Elias 2009b (Collected Works, vol. 16: *Essays III*, 43-69)] is actually in large part about the early history of economics. And his theory of the monopoly mechanism in the writings on state formation owes a lot to Marx, but probably also owes quite a lot to the work of Joan Robinson [1933] and Edward Chamberlin [1935] who were developing theories of what they called “imperfect competition” or “monopolistic competition” in the 1930s, at about the time that Elias was writing his *magnum opus*. But I don’t think he quite foresaw the greedy fat cats who have brought the world economy to its knees!

RF: Would it be correct to say that he neglected capital as an analytical category?

SJM: Yes, I think so. He wasn’t blind to the dominance of big business, particularly in America. Nor did he neglect conflict. Conflict between capital and labour was certainly important during his lifetime, though with the triumph (so far) of neo-liberalism since the 1970s and the corresponding decline of trade unions, it seems to have become a less prominent theme. But one of Elias’s methodological recommendations to me was: «Stephen, you should always look for the main line of conflict in a society or a social group or a situation.»

There is actually a lot of Marx in Elias [see for example the previously unpublished additional chapter *Karl Marx as sociologist and political ideologist*, in Elias 2012b (Collected Works, vol. 5: *What is Sociology?*, 173-200)], and he was certainly aware of the history of economics. But I don’t think that he kept abreast of economic theory – I don’t think he would have been able to comment, for example, on the merits of Milton Friedman versus John Maynard Keynes.

Incidentally, I have just remembered an amusing incident way back at the World Congress of Sociology in Montreal in 1998, when I was the discussant in a session on the work of Richard Sennett. I remarked that we “figurational sociologists” did not use the term “capitalism” very much. Richard called out: «Shame!» And now, nearly two eventful decades later, I absolutely agree with him!

RF: Perhaps there is room for bringing [Elias and economics] together.

SJM: What Elias was very strong on was *power*. He understood power, and emphasised that all human interdependences involve power. Whenever there is an interdependence between two people or, more likely, chains and webs of people, each

link in the chain involves a power balance that is usually unequal, often fluctuating. This is what he emphasised. And so he certainly wasn't blind to the enormous power of corporations. He's been dead twenty-three years now, so he couldn't be expected to see what has happened in the last two decades. But the point about power is that economics seems to me to have become blind to power [Mennell 2014]. It wasn't always so. You could say that, until the 1930s, economists had worked out in detail only, on the one hand, the idea of monopoly, which was much discussed by Marx of course, and, on the other hand, the idea of perfect competition, that wonderful vision of the early classical economists that still exerts its ideological power today. And the whole point about perfect competition is that no one really has any power because there are many small producers buying and selling and no one can shape the outcome of the market; that is not realistic, except in rare cases. What economists began to do in the 1930s was to develop models of imperfect competition and oligopoly. Then the Marxist economist Paul Sweezy is famous for the kinked oligopolistic demand curve, which is relevant to the power situation in many markets today [Sweezy 1939]. These were models of power. But the kind of neoliberal economics that came to the fore from the 1960s and 1970s onwards essentially neglects power altogether. And I think it does it partly by pretending that financial markets are so perfect that they will constrain product markets. So I would argue that you can use Elias's ideas on power to talk about economic processes rather well, perhaps rather better than the economists do.

RF: So do you see this as part of your current project?

SJM: I think it is. And I've begun to write a few papers in this area. But mainly I want to rest after this work. So not immediately.

RF: How do you see your work right now vis-à-vis the continuum between involvement and detachment? Do you feel that you have had phases of more involvement and more detachment?

SJM: There are a lot of complicated things to be said here. One is that Elias is not preaching an ethical ideal. It's not Weber all over again. Weber was almost *preaching Wertfreiheit* as an ideal. What Elias is saying is that relative detachment – and detachment is always relative – is something that can only grow slowly through a long-term process of development of the sciences. And so he thinks that to be able to look at society as a sociologist in a relatively detached way is a later, and if you like more advanced level of development. Look at British sociology, just to take one example – it has been so much tied up with politics that at one time it seemed almost like the academic wing of the Labour Party (if not further left), and always had a sort

of political campaigning element to it. I think Norbert was right to stress that it is a higher level of sociology when one is able to take the “detour via detachment” and stand back from current conflicts and how you feel yourself. It’s actually a skill that is not a personal quality, or only partly a personal quality; it is rather something that is made possible by the stage of development of the discipline in which you’re working.

Elias himself always claimed to be completely non-political and even said that he had never voted. I thought that was an absolute disgrace, and so did a lot of other people: «Do you really mean, Norbert, that you never voted in [the Hitler election of] 1933?» Of course the truth was that he’d never been entirely apolitical, because he’d been an active Zionist.

Now, when I stood for parliament in 1983, Elias showed his own ambivalence about all this because he said, on the one hand, «Stephen, your work is more important» – meaning my academic work – but, on the other hand, he said, «If you are elected, I look forward to being invited to tea on the terrace at the House of Parliament.»

But there’s another argument that I’ve been pushing forward, and this is a little playful and mischievous. A good part of Elias’s argument was that we should not orientate ourselves – as again much of British sociology has done – towards the “attribution of blame” [Van Benthem van den Bergh 1978]. Too often sociology has been used to investigate things in order to point the finger at the guilty parties. One reason why he was against that was that he believed that increasing complexity brought with it “functional democratisation”, meaning relatively more equal power balances throughout society. The consequence of that was that outcomes in society were more frequently unintended and unforeseen, in other words he was a great believer in the cockup theory of history rather than the conspiracy theory of history [The connection between unplanned consequences and relatively equal power ratios is worked out most clearly in Elias 2012b (Collected Works, vol. 5: *What is Sociology?*, chapter 3 *Game models*)]. Now, that’s all very well if he was right about the overall trend being towards functional democratisation. Perhaps he is right in a broad sense; there *are* many tendencies in that direction: you can look at emancipation of colonial peoples, the emancipation of gays, the relatively more equal balance of power between the sexes, and many other examples. But I would argue that there are many counter-currents, and one of them is towards what I call “functional de-democratisation” [Mennell 2007, 311-314]. And, my goodness, the current financial crisis shows where the power really lies. My argument is that – and this is partly mischievous because it’s not what people expect a figurational or Eliasian sociologist to say, and some of my friends are rather shocked by it – where functional de-democratisation is taking place, where you can identify accumulations of small groups of people with the power who

have wrecked the world economy by their recklessness, in those circumstances, in a de-democratizing situation, you should not be ashamed to point the finger of blame. And people are doing that, though perhaps not as much as they ought. The curious thing is how reluctant politicians have been to name Goldman Sachs, “the great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity”,⁶ sucking money out.

I have given up politics, in the sense that I haven’t lived in Britain now for twenty-three years and I’ve never been active in politics since – but I can’t stop myself being really quite politically motivated: I’ve turned into quite an angry old man.

RF: But that brings you closer to some Marxist takes on social science. Do you feel closer to Marxist sociology in that respect?

SJM: I’ve never been a Marxist, exactly, apart from a brief period when I was about 15 – maybe I was then an adolescent communist for about three months. I’ve never really been inclined that way politically. I was always on the right wing of the Labour Party. I was in the Fabian Society and strongly opposed to the left-infiltration by the Trotskyites. (What a pity we failed to anticipate right-infiltration by conservatives and neoliberals like Tony Blair!) But since we’ve seen what’s been going on in the world economy, I’m just beginning to think that maybe the Trotskyites were right after all! Maybe it’s too late to have those doubts running through my head! You can laugh about it, and maybe some of what some of I’ve written is a bit cheeky, but I think the thing that really re-politicised me was the invasion of Iraq. I’ve never been so angry about anything for so long in my life. I am still angry. I followed the papers and watched the television transmission of the United Nations debate, and it was perfectly obvious to any intelligent person that these people – Blair and Straw and Colin Powell (although I think he didn’t mean to) – were all lying through their teeth. I don’t think the ideal of detachment shouldn’t neutralize us ethically; I think I might take a moral stance, and say that these people should be driven from office.

RF: So you’re trying to bring ethics and politics back in?

SJM: I would like to see ethics and politics more steered by a relatively more detached sociology.

⁶ In a celebrated phrase (from an article in *Rolling Stone*), Matt Taibbi described Goldman Sachs as “a great vampire squid wrapped around the face of humanity, relentlessly jamming its blood funnel into anything that smells like money” [Taibbi 2010].

RF: Changing gears a little bit, authors like Steven Pinker have been using Elias's work a lot in recent years [Pinker 2011]. How do you see those developments?

SJM: I've been in touch with Steven Pinker, and Johan Goudsblom has actually talked to him face to face in Amsterdam. We have a very favourable impression of him; he seems to be an extremely nice man who doesn't have the airs and graces of the international superstar. The only discouraging thing was that described Norbert Elias as "the most important thinker you have never heard of" [Pinker 2011, 59]. I thought, «Oh hell! – I've been trying for forty years to make people recognise the importance of Elias's work, and he's still someone "you have never heard of."» It has been an uphill struggle, particularly in America. Alan Sica, in an email to Chris Rojek, once wittily described why American sociologists don't appreciate Elias:

The reason Americans don't take to Elias is that he writes about European historical and cultural change and American sociologists don't feel comfortable with that sort of thing, except for [Jack] Goldstone and that small lot; and because he is theoretically very adventurous and synthetic, and they don't go for that; and because he trashed Parsons, who many of them liked back in the day; and because he could be mistaken for a closet Freudian, which they don't like; and because he brings up really obnoxious qualities of humankind, which they particularly don't like; and because he wrote a helluva lot of stuff, which takes a long time to read, they don't have time; and because "figuration" is a word that has a distinctly effete connotations in this country, and sounds like art history...

It makes a good laugh. But I think there's a more serious underlying reason. The great majority of American sociologists are basically interactionists, stuck at the "micro" level of individuals in small groups, and they find it difficult to make to jump to the "macro" level. And one reason for that is the profound individualism of American culture, or what I now call "American National Ideology" (with capital letters). In my view, Elias showed how the so-called "macro/micro divide" can be overcome, in his *Game Models* [Elias 2012b (Collected Works, vol. 5: *What is Sociology?*, chapter 3)], but American sociologists by and large are still stuck with the absurdities of "there are individuals on the one hand and social structures on the other." American sociology's real strength in the last half century has been in the development of quantitative research methods. But in the realm of theory, it has gone off in a lot of unhelpful directions like ethnomethodology and rational choice theory – both dead ends. In fact American sociology has rather turned in on itself, and become a bit of intellectual backwater. Very different from when I made the pilgrimage to study with Talcott Parsons in the 1960s (though poor old Talcott turned out to be dead end too).

RF: What about British sociology?

SJM: Well, of course I've not been affiliated to a British university since 1990, though I am a member of the British Sociological Association. I think it's getting better, but it went through an extraordinarily bad patch, the so-called "battle of the schools" in the 1970s. It seems surprising to look back to how fresh and new sociology seemed in the 1960s. I was inspired by sociology in Britain, lots of other people were inspired by it. People like philosophers, political scientists, historians, were looking to sociology for ideas; Keith Thomas and Peter Burke were among the historians who were actually following developments in sociology. The subject was doing well. And then the battle of the schools broke out, principally between the Marxists and non-Marxists. There were other unhelpful developments like phenomenology and ethnomethodology, for example; essentially the ethnomethodologists disappeared up their own fundament. Heinz 57 varieties of relativism set in, when it seemed there were doubts about the very existence of a real social world about which we could accumulate a steadily growing body of reliable knowledge. Then there was a long period where it was a great disadvantage to be a member of the male sex; as a male member of the British Sociological Association you were made to feel like the member of an oppressing class. British sociology largely fell apart. I think it's now becoming more respectable again, but now the problem in universities right across the world is that they're coming to be business-orientated and government-orientated. I think that in those circumstances it is extremely difficult to get the kind of relatively detached sociological research that people were doing in the 1960s.

RF: Going back to Elias, you mention in your memoir [Mennell 2006] that in one of your first face-to-face chats with him he convinced you that phenomenology was a bad idea.

SJM: A whole sequence of fads and fashions went through sociology. One of the first, which was already around in the early 1970s, was symbolic interactionism, and then hard on its heels came the Berger and Luckman type of phenomenology [Berger and Luckman 1966]. Then out of that Garfinkel and ethnomethodology, followed by conversation analysis, which must be the most boring area of study ever invented. Students were for a time attracted to this, to micro- and ultra-micro-sociology (probably because those who taught it were so very enthusiastic – and enthusiasm in teaching is certainly infectious). But of course I didn't immediately understand what Elias was telling me. What he said to me was that phenomenology was based on what he called the *homo clausus* model of the image of the human being from Descartes to Kant and on to Popper, where there is a sort of *a priori* structure to the brain

– from *cogito ergo sum* to the Kantian *a priori* to Popper and his idea of an eternal logic of science. He was trying to tell me that phenomenology was starting from the wrong point of view.

RF: But don't you think that you could develop phenomenology without falling into this kind of trap?

SJM: My philosopher friends claim that Merleau-Ponty resolved this problem, but I think that Elias is right that, even if Merleau-Ponty did resolve the problem, it was a problem only arose because they started from the wrong place anyway. Richard Kilminster has more recently said that Heidegger's "fundamental ontology" also represented a fundamental break with the Cartesian–Kantian epistemology, and it may have been an early but unacknowledged influence on the young Elias. But Heidegger only offers philosophical mumbo–jumbo in its place, whereas Elias went on to formulate what Richard calls a "post-philosophical sociology" that is at once theoretical and empirical [Kilminster 2007].

RF: But you seem to dismiss the role of introspection and first-person analysis.

SJM: Up to a point. You can only introspect and build first-person analysis because you have become an individual. The other side of the equation is Parsons's zombie model of society where Parson gets himself into a real tangle theoretically, especially after 1950. There's the idea of growing up and learning values, but – in spite of the fact that it was Parsons who got me reading Freud, and I'm grateful for that – what Parsons somehow lost was the idea of the internal conflict. The most important thing you get out of Freud is the idea that there is always a battle going on between the id and the ego. You don't have to call it the id and you don't have to call it the ego, or the superego. The way I used to explain it to first year students was that you look at an attractive young woman or an attractive young man and you think "Whoa!," your drive is saying "I would like to do something that is socially forbidden there." But you have developed a superego and this lecture hall is not going to descend into an orgy.

RF: On another note, I'm just very curious why some very insightful and highly accomplished social theorists and thinkers like Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth or Hans Joas, for example, would seem to be more inclined to draw on Parsons.

SJM: I'm astonished too, really. These are immensely accomplished scholars. But I actually studied with Parsons. I knew him personally – not for a long period, but I got to know him reasonably well and chatted to him a lot over a period of maybe nine months. I gained a pretty good grasp of his work, but I realised that he

had lost it. You know the (true) story about how he invented a fourth bit of the Holy Trinity in order to make it fit into his AGIL system? I've never really been able to take Parsons very seriously since. As soon as you have people just learning social values and reproducing them, I think you lose the whole problem of the stressfulness of social interdependence. The biggest single influence on Elias was Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* [Freud 1961 (1930)]. Of course Freud's book is fairly speculative, but at least Freud tried in *Civilization and Its Discontents* to bring out the stresses and strains of living in modern society. This seems to have disappeared completely in Parsons, and I don't quite understand why. As for Niklas Luhmann, I thought he was off the wall – he took Parsonian nonsense to an altogether higher level. But I don't understand quite why Hans Joas would find more inspiration in Parsons.

Über den Prozess der Zivilisation was published in 1939, but, as Bryan Wilson said, «1939 was not the most propitious moment for the publication of a two-volume work in German by a Jew on, of all things, civilization» [Wilson 1979]. No one noticed it because Elias had gone to exile, he had no proper university post, and it was wartime. In contrast, two years earlier, in 1937, Parsons had produced *The Structure of Social Action* [Parsons 1937], which is an important book if only because it introduced a version of Weber and Durkheim into English-speaking sociology, and therefore is of great historical importance. But the actual theory of action was trivial, as C. Wright Mills pointed out [Mills 1959, 25-49]. But carry out the thought experiment: what would it have been like if Talcott Parsons had been the downtrodden semi-employed person enjoying a marginal existence in London, and later in the obscure provincial university of Leicester, while Norbert Elias had gone to America – as he briefly tried to do in 1939 – and his book had been published there and been translated immediately? How different would modern sociology look if *On the Process of Civilisation* rather than *The Structure of Social Action* had become the classic work of the late 1930s? Part of my answer is a sociological one: people gravitate still to some extent towards figures like Talcott Parsons because of the prestige of American sociology and, in particular, of major American universities like Harvard. Who cares about the University of Leicester? But the ideas to be found in Elias are, in my view, more fruitful.

RF: Taking your mention of Harvard as a prompt, let me to ask you about Robert Bellah who died recently. Do you have any recollections of him?

SJM: He was a brilliant man and I liked him very much. My main contact with him was in a class on the French sociological tradition for first- and second-year graduate students. We started with Montesquieu and ended by reading pretty much the whole of Durkheim's work. We read a book a week for however long the semester was

– something like fourteen or fifteen weeks. And so we read Montesquieu, Rousseau, Saint-Simon, Comte, and Fustel de Coulanges, though surprisingly not Alexis de Tocqueville, for whom I later developed a great respect and enthusiasm [see Stone and Menell 1980]. We voted Herbert Spencer out of the course, because we were running a week late and he was the only non-French person in the “French sociological tradition.” In retrospect, I can see that it was probably a mistake not to read Herbert Spencer. And then we embarked on Durkheim, chronologically, starting with his Latin thesis on Montesquieu and *The Division of Labour*, and running through all the famous works and even the relatively less well-known works like *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. I must say I found Bellah enormously inspiring, but what I particularly remember was that he was just finishing his famous essay on *Civil Religion in America* [Bellah 1967]. I may be wrong, but I think I’m correct that he circulated this among us in typescript before it was actually published. It’s really inspiring, and I always retained an interest in American history over many years. But apart from my very first published article, which was about the Prohibition episode [Menell 1969], I didn’t write much about America until my book *The American Civilizing Process* [Menell 2007]. There is a chapter in that book (Chapter 11, *Involvement, Detachment and American Religiosity: 266-293*) which doesn’t actually correspond directly to anything that Elias wrote about in *On the Process of Civilisation*, but derives partly from Elias’s theory of involvement and detachment and also particularly from Bellah’s notion of civil religion in America. He’s really famous for *Habits of the Heart* [Bellah et al. 1985], which was widely read, but I actually think that the full-length book is less convincing than that early, brilliant and incisive essay on civil religion. But Bellah became very definitely a sociologist of religion, and I took very little interest in that field until relatively recent years. I wasn’t greatly interested in religion until I arrived in Ireland in 1993, and then you couldn’t avoid it – because there was a low-intensity civil war, partly about religion, going on in the North of Ireland when I arrived there. I did do a little bit of work in the sociology of religion after I went to Ireland. I led a study of the Protestant minorities – an outsider group within the Republic, where the Protestants are only about five per cent of the population. There were one or two publications arising from that but I’ve never written up the full study [Menell et al. 2000]. So I did eventually become involved in the study of religion, though I didn’t really follow Bellah’s work. The trouble is that he’s also a Parsonian, and I’m actually very sceptical about the whole idea of central values.

RF: The late Robert Bellah worked with Hans Joas on the idea of Axial Age religions. Do you have any reaction to this idea, which derives from Karl Jaspers?

SJM: This is not really my forte, I'm not a sociologist of religion in spite of my late and tentative interest. Funnily enough, there is an Elias–Jaspers connection, because Elias and Jaspers became friendly very early on when Elias spent his first period as a doctoral student in Heidelberg in 1919 before he went there properly as a *Habilitation* candidate in 1925. I was at an International Institute of Sociology congress in Stockholm in 2005, when Bellah and Shmuel Eisenstadt – and perhaps Hans Joas, though I'm not sure – were describing themselves as “the Axial Age roadshow.” The connection between them goes back a long way. In the 1963 *American Sociological Review* there are three essays on social evolution. In the first, Parsons – who in *The Structure of Social Action* famously echoed Crane Brinton in asking, “Who now reads Herbert Spencer?” – went back to reading Herbert Spencer. The other two essays were by Eisenstadt and Bellah.

RF: You've mentioned Eisenstadt and the personal connection between Jaspers and Elias. We were talking earlier about the need to write an intellectual history of this whole community.

SJM: I don't know precisely what the connection was between Eisenstadt and Elias. I suppose they knew each other – they would have met at international congresses. But when we started doing the *Collected Works*, Eisenstadt told me that he regarded it as work of the greatest importance, and I asked him to write a blurb before the series, which he did. It also meant that we paid him for this courtesy by sending him free copies of the *Collected Works*. He was an extremely nice and very funny man. I never really worked out whether he really knew Elias, or only knew *of* Elias. But there was also a Jewish element to it – I'm not saying that was especially important, but one element in Eisenstadt was that he was interested in any Jewish writing on sociology.

RF: And how much do you think we know about the social milieu from which where Norbert Elias came? I'm talking about the Weimar Republic and his connection with Mannheim, Alfred Weber. It goes back to this idea of *homo clausus*, of the history of sociology as a history of great men – we talk about Elias or Weber but we don't think about communities.

SJM: I agree. “Dead white males!” What we may call the “Great man theory of the history of sociology” is profoundly unsociological. I think one of the most unfortunate aspects of recent trends particularly in Britain is a (probably unintended) result of Tony Giddens's excellent book on *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory* [1971], which dealt with Marx, Weber, and Durkheim. Sociological theory as taught in British universities came to consist of very little else. John Rex and I did a survey of

sociological theory teaching for the Council on National Academic Awards in 1988 or thereabouts [Rex and Mennell 1988]. In summing up our findings, I compared Marx, Weber, and Durkheim to three stone faces on Easter Island, staring out to sea: no one knows where they came from or where they're going.

The "Great Man" theory also feeds a peculiarly sterile form of the history of ideas. To explain what I mean, let us start from one small example. Elias uses the concept of *Zweifrontenschicht*, meaning "two-front stratum" – something like "the squeezed middle", about which Ed Miliband is talking in British politics at the moment.⁷ The term *Zweifrontenschicht* comes directly and unambiguously from Georg Simmel, though Elias doesn't mention this. He said to me: «but, Stephen, in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany, everyone knew that *Zweifrontenschicht* came from Simmel, and it would have seemed pretentious to put in a footnote referring to Simmel.» Conventions about footnoting have changed enormously. I should think that about 95 per cent of sociologists today think the word "habitus" was something invented by Pierre Bourdieu, but it was in common use in Germany. I am trying to think who used it: Karl Mannheim and Emil Lederer certainly, and Marcel Mauss in France, as well as Norbert Elias. These are ideas that he took over, and he never claimed that they were original. Elias was a great synthesizer; he spent his first forty-odd years just reading and then he synthesised it all into this great book. On the other hand, he was very annoyed when – after they had seized on his use of some term like *Zweifrontenschicht* – people tried to cross-question him and work out whether the formula for "Norbert Elias" consisted of 20 per cent Weber, 20 per cent Marx, 20 per cent Durkheim, 15 per cent Simmel, and so on. If you put these ingredients in a Magimix and blend them, do you come out with Norbert Elias? He was very confident that he had made an original contribution, and in particular he was adamant that his idea of a long-term civilizing process was his and no one else's. But the actual ingredients, things like the monopoly mechanism or habitus, were not like a Meccano set.⁸ You could bolt the ideas together but the actual construction that emerged was quite an original synthesis.

RF: But do we still need a biography of all of these people around him?

SJM: It would actually be very good if someone who didn't know Elias wrote an intellectual biography. My own book about his ideas [Mennell 1998 (1989)] is

⁷ The Rt. Hon. Ed Miliband MP has been Leader of the British Labour Party since 2010.

⁸ For those who may not be familiar with it, Meccano is a British toy, mainly for boys, consisting of metal bars, wheels, cogs and so on that can be bolted together to make all sorts of objects and machines – a sort of more sophisticated plaything than the internationally better-known Lego.

rather cautious because Elias was still alive when I wrote it, and he was fairly peppery about being misrepresented. But I think someone will eventually have to do a serious intellectual biography and draw upon the voluminous correspondence that he had with all sorts of people. You do get the feeling that Elias knew everybody in London as well as in Germany. To some extent this study of milieu has been done by “the Mannheim gang.” The “Elias gang” or “figurational family” has fraternal relations with the group of Mannheim scholars led by David Kettler. One of their recent books was a study of the Mannheim circle focusing particularly on his students [Kettler, Loader and Meja 2008]. There’s a chapter on Norbert Elias, but also chapters on Hans Gerth, Hans Weil, Käthe Truhel, Natalie Halperin, Margarethe Freudenthal, Jacon Katz and Nina Rubinstein.

But there’s a lot I don’t understand about the wider milieu. I read and translate Elias, and I understand his German because I know so well what he would be likely to say anyway; but my German wouldn’t be good enough to do primary research into all these people. There’s a lot we don’t know, and there’s a lot we don’t understand about the Jewish connection as well, the Blau-Weiß circle. Elias was very active in that as a young man, but in old age he seemed to want to conceal his involvement – for reasons we just don’t know – and it was only after his death that Jörg Hackeschmidt’s research showed the true extent of Elias’s Zionist involvements [Hackeschmidt 2004].

These are matters of history as well as biography, but Elias rather discouraged further probing. He had things he wanted to hide, and it’s not always clear what he wanted to hide and why. But certainly one fact he wanted to hide was that he was gay; after all, for most of his lifetime male homosexuality was illegal and he could have ended up in jail. That was a good motive for trying to cover his tracks. It is relevant to the question of his milieu and his contacts. How did he come to know Klaus Mann in Paris in the 1930s? How did he come to know André Gide? And then the penny drops: you realise that those are just two examples of people who are gay, who are part of gay circles. This is interesting, but it’s not *so very* interesting: it is not so directly relevant to the intellectual ideas.

RF: But it would be interesting to think of sociological ideas as being produced in communities.

SJM: Which is exactly what Elias would say himself. The point is often made that he railed against *homo clausus* conceptions even though in some ways he was a bit of *homo clausus* himself. We all know that he had all sorts of contacts and was synthesising ideas that he’d discussed with all sorts of people, but it’s not very clear exactly how he did it. He became for a long time rather isolated, and until he

went to Leicester he had a very precarious existence on the very margins of academic life.

RF: Do we know much about his poetry?

SJM: Most of his poetry is in German. I don't feel able to judge it because my German has its limitations. But Tabea Dörfelt-Mathey has recently published her doctoral thesis on "*der Dichter Norbert Elias*" [2015]. And she takes him quite seriously. The contrary view is that what he wrote was what I believe in German is called *Professorenlyrik*.

Worth mentioning here, however, is *Die Ballade vom Armen Jakob*, a sort of satirical musical or short opera for which he wrote the libretto while interned as an enemy alien in 1940 the Isle of Man. The music was by a fellow internee, Hans Gál, who was quite a well-known *avant garde* German composer in the 1930s and went on to become a professor of music at Edinburgh. The *Ballade* has been revived and performed on a couple of occasions in recent years, at Eliasian conferences.

RF: What about his work in Group Analysis?

SJM: We do know more about this now. But for a long time, Elias's sociological followers and those who knew him from Group Analysis were scarcely aware of each other's existence.

All the living sociologists who knew Elias in his lifetime date their acquaintance with him from no later than the 1950s. Joop Goudsblom, who is now over 80, discovered *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* in the library in Amsterdam in 1950 and read it as an undergraduate, before actually meeting Elias in 1955. Eric Dunning was an undergraduate in Leicester from about the same date. All the rest of us followed later, but none of us knew Elias in the old days. It turned out that there was another group. Group Analysis is not a footnote, it's a major school of psychotherapy whose leader was S.H. Foulkes (1898-1976), who was one of the Mannheim circle in Frankfurt. Foulkes had been director of the outpatient clinic of the Institute of Psychiatry in Frankfurt, and he and Elias knew each other. In the late 1940s and early 1950s they collaborated in formulating the principles of Group Analysis, which (among other things) came to be a more affordable form of therapy than individual psychoanalysis. (In the 1940s, Elias had himself undergone analysis, under Kate Friedlander, one of Anna Freud's allies in the battles with Melanie Klein that racked the British Psycho-Analytic Association during the war, but could not afford the fees necessary to complete his analysis). Some of the people who took part in those discussions with Foulkes and Elias are still alive, like Malcolm Pines who is now in his eighties. It's a very important school of psychotherapy, but the essence of it is the rejection of *homo*

clausus, and what Foulkes was groping towards was the possible falsity of doing psychotherapy one-to-one. If you take on board Elias's idea that we are all such socially interdependent people from the beginning, perhaps therapy also is better conducted in a group. One of the key concepts of Group Analysis is the "matrix", which is created by the coming together of the group. One of the rules is that members of the group who meet within their group must never contact each other outside the matrix. So they meet frequently and certain kinds of assumptions emerge. The idea of the matrix in Group Analytic therapy is really a way of capturing the German word *Gestalt*. In my view, Elias's concept of "figuration" in sociology is also a way of capturing the meaning of *Gestalt*. Elias refers to the influence of Gestalt psychology in his autobiographical essay [*Notes on a lifetime*, in Elias 2013b (Collected Works, vol. 17: *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections*, 3-67)], particularly of Max Wertheimer, who was Professor in Frankfurt when Mannheim and Elias were there.

RF: Jumping back to your work and intellectual trajectory, what would your desert island books be?⁹

SJM: [Laughs]. Well, right now I wouldn't take any Elias with me because after eighteen volumes I'm full to here with Elias! But I suppose I would have to say, after cooler reflection, that I probably would in fact take *On the Process of Civilisation*, because it's a book you can read and reread and always get something new out of it, it's such a rich source – partly because it's such a *big* source as well. I might take more than one C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*. Truth of the matter is, one of the luxuries of being retired is that I don't feel any particular need to read the sociology journals and the sociology books simply for the sake of keeping abreast. So I've been reading a lot of history; for example I would be sorely tempted to take the book *Religion and the Decline of Magic* by Keith Thomas [1971], who as I mentioned is the Patron of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias.

I would need weeks to work out eight essential books. One of the rules of *Desert Island Discs* is that you are always given the Bible and Shakespeare, otherwise I would say the complete works of Shakespeare. But among historians, Eugen Weber's *Peasants into Frenchmen* is an enormously interesting work, because you can read it like the third volume of *On the Process of Civilisation*, in that he's talking about the way in which all sorts of things like manners and cleanliness permeated down into the peasantry in France in the Nineteenth century. The use of the fork was still spreading

⁹ This is an allusion to the long-running BBC Radio 4 programme *Desert Island Discs*, in which celebrities are asked to choose eight favourite records they would take with them when marooned on a desert island.

to the remoter areas of France in the late nineteenth century! I think he was probably influenced by Elias, and when I was in correspondence with him he certainly knew about him. I think one of the saddest things is that I much prefer academic books that are written in good English, and you're much more likely to get that from an historian than from a sociologist.

RF: What about Robert Merton?

SJM: If you're thinking of desert island sociology books, I think you'd have to think of Merton's *Social Theory and Social Structure* [1968]. He writes beautifully, which is so unusual. He's more often right than wrong, and ultimately a much more impressive figure than Talcott Parsons in my view.

RF: Any advice you would give to aspiring sociologists in terms of intellectual development?

SJM: Read Norbert Elias, and in particular buy all eighteen volumes! No, no... For general intellectual development I think I would advise them to read widely in history, almost anything that interests them. I would advise them to read anthropology; despite the fact that nearly all anthropologists seem to hate Norbert Elias, I still think it's necessary to have some knowledge of them. Read C. Wright Mills's *The Sociological Imagination* – it's an inspiration even now, more than fifty years after it was published. But it's getting increasingly difficult to have the time to read widely like this, given the pressures young scholars are under from the bean-counters. The best advice to young sociologists might be "Get your bloody PhD as quickly as you can, and *then* read widely." Without the license to preach, which a PhD is, you can't begin to have a career, and then you're subject to all the bureaucratic incentives of getting research grants. I don't know how it's possible to be a wide-ranging intellectual any more, given the bureaucratic and business ethos of universities now. That's not going to encourage young sociologists – I'm afraid it will discourage them.

RF: Well, let's hope it will encourage them. I know that historians have been very critical of some of Elias's data.

SJM: Elias himself when faced of critiques of his data would say, "We must do more research." He saw it as a process – in fact he even emphasises that the theory of civilizing processes is only a provisional and partial theory. I think that he would doubt that it would be completely refuted, but he said it might well need to be amended and elaborated, and indeed he did quite a lot of amending and elaborating himself in his later works, as for example in his *Studies on the Germans* [Elias

2013a (Collected Works, vol. 11)]. But I think that among critics, most of them get the wrong end of the stick and don't read Elias sufficiently carefully. They often criticise him for saying things that he doesn't actually say. To some extent that's true of Sir Jack Goody, who is quite a friend of mine. I think he's wrong, but Jack has written a number of essays critical of Elias from an anthropological point of view [see Goody 2006]. I've argued that Jack was already a very experienced West Africa anthropologist when Norbert suddenly parachuted in as Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana in 1962, and they got off on the wrong foot. I think most of the blame was Norbert's. He went around saying things along the lines that anthropology is a *Western* sort of discipline, and we should be doing *sociology* in Ghana. I don't think he was very diplomatic. It's a pity, because Jack Goody is a very substantial, historically-oriented anthropologist, so I've always thought it was sad that they didn't see the merits of each other's work. I think Jack Goody is wrong in some respects, but I would accord him respect for having taken Elias seriously. The people who irritate the most among the critics of Elias are the philosophers, who think that they can destroy a theoretical–empirical body of work just by sitting cross-legged under a banyan tree and manipulating concepts.

RF: So Elias himself was very dismissive of philosophers?

SJM: Yes, and don't underestimate how much courage it takes to be dismissive of the discipline of philosophy. Philosophers have enormous power and prestige, and it's usually regarded as completely beyond the pale to dismiss them, but I think Elias was right. I don't know that he said this in so many words, but I think I would regard philosophy as, in large part, an empty husk – all the empirical sciences have over the centuries evolved out of philosophy, and what's left now is a rather trivial pursuit. But I'm not sure I'd have the courage to say that in public.

RF: Final question: apart from Merton who do you admire as a writer?

SJM: In sociology?

RF: I suppose so, especially in sociology but also outside sociology.

SJM: I've mentioned C. Wright Mills and Merton, and actually even Elias, although writing in English he was a bit patchy, but he could write pretty clear English. Joop Goudsblom writes beautiful English, but Joop's problem is – as I said in an essay for his *Liber amicorum* [Mennell 1997] – it is a kind of minimalist art and he writes with such limpid clarity that sociologists don't take him seriously, don't see the importance of what he's saying, because they expect people to be obscure and complicated. More generally, two very different writers, George Orwell and Jane Austen.

I once claimed that my first book, on sociological theory [Mennell 1974], was the first sociology book written in the style of Jane Austen. This proved to be the wrong hypothesis, because I gave a copy of the book to my father, a railwayman, who was very proud («My son, the author!»). I told him, «It's very clearly written, you'll be able to understand it.» When I saw him next he said: «I don't like the kind of book where you have to sit with t'book on one chair arm and t'dictionary on the other.» So clarity is always a relative thing.

Appendix. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias In English (University College Dublin Press)

1. *Early Writings*, edited by Richard Kilminster, 2006.
2. *The Court Society*, edited by Stephen Mennell, 2006.
3. *On the Process of Civilisation*, edited by Stephen Mennell, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Richard Kilminster, 2012.
4. *The Established and the Outsiders*, edited by Cas Wouters, 2008.
5. *What is Sociology?* edited by Artur Bogner, Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell, 2012.
6. *The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana Conditio*, edited by Alan and Brigitte Scott, 2009.
7. *Quest for Excitement*, by Norbert Elias and Eric Dunning, edited by Eric Dunning, 2008.
8. *Involvement and Detachment*, edited by Stephen Quilley, 2007.
9. *An Essay on Time*, edited by Steven Loyal and Stephen Mennell, 2007.
10. *The Society of Individuals*, edited by Robert van Krieken, 2010.
11. *Studies on the Germans*, edited by Stephen Mennell and Eric Dunning, 2013.
12. *Mozart, and Other Essays on Courtly Culture*, edited by Eric Baker and Stephen Mennell, 2010.
13. *The Symbol Theory*, edited by Richard Kilminster, 2011.
14. *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences*, edited by Richard Kilminster and Stephen Mennell, 2009.
15. *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity*, edited by Richard Kilminster and Stephen Mennell, 2008.
16. *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities*, edited by Richard Kilminster and Stephen Mennell, 2009.

17. *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections*, edited by Edmund Jephcott, Richard Kilminster, Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell, 2013.

18. *Supplements and Index to the Collected Works*, edited by Stephen Mennell, Marc Joly and Katie Liston, 2014.

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Apropos "The Collected Works of Norbert Elias"

An Interview with Stephen J. Menell

Abstract: In this interview, Stephen Menell tells the story behind the publication of the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias* (UCD Press), and reflects on some aspects of Elias's life and work, such as Marx's influence on Elias, and Elias's contribution to Group Analysis. In addition, Menell shares his memories of Robert Bellah, lists some of his favourite books, and offers some advice to aspiring sociologists. The interview was conducted in Moscow in November 2013, and was subsequently revised and annotated by Professor Menell.

Keywords: *Figurational Sociology; History of Sociology; Norbert Elias; Process Sociology.*

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Stephen J. Menell is Professor Emeritus at University College Dublin. He has been at the forefront of the development of process sociology, not least through the dissemination of Norbert Elias's work. His books include *The American Civilizing Process*, *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image*, and *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*. He holds the degrees of Doctor in de Sociale Wetenschappen (Amsterdam) and Doctor of Letters (Cambridge). He is a member of the board of the Norbert Elias Foundation, Amsterdam, of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Royal Irish Academy and Academia Europaea.