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Lever, John, Powell, Ryan and Clement, Matt

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# **Norbert Elias, figuralional sociology and the investigation of contemporary social processes: tensions and possibilities**

**John Lever – University of Huddersfield**  
**Ryan Powell – Sheffield Hallam University**  
**Matt Clement – University of Winchester**

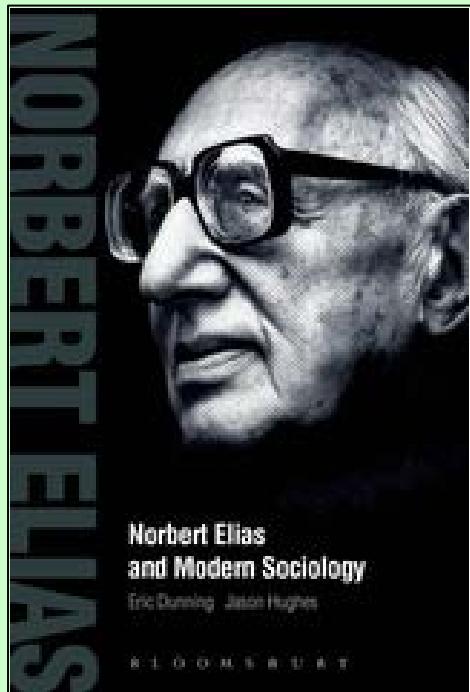
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*"From the Past to the Present and towards Possible Futures: The Collected Works of Norbert Elias"*, University of Leicester, UK, June 20-22, 2014.

2013

They argue that Elias's unique configurational approach to sociology offers the potential for a '*relational turn*' within the discipline involving a programme of '*research theorising*'.

# Dunning and Hughes



Such a turn centring on the unification of theory and research, they argue, can contribute to the betterment of the human condition through the creation of a more reality congruent fund of knowledge.

Discussing the inadequacy of current knowledge, they question the dominant position of *economics* within policy-making in relation to recurrent crises, culminating most recently in the financial meltdown of 2008.

Dunne claims that there is a the lack of engagement with politics on the part of configurational researchers, and he calls for a '*renewed consideration of configurational sociology's engagement with questions of the political*' (Dunne, 2009)

Dunne  
Stephen

# **Eric Dunning & Jason Hughes reject this assertion**

*'Dunne is manifestly wrong to suggest that configurational sociologists are conspicuously silent on issues of policy, resigning such commentary to later generations, or perhaps shirking such responsibilities'* (Dunning and Hughes, 2013, p.47)

- *We argue that* what is common to both accounts (Dunning & Hughes and Dunne) is the relatively narrow engagement with a core group of "*established*" Eliasian scholars
- *We argue that* this focus neglects figural works by a more diverse group of researchers engaging with contemporary concerns and processes

Norbert Elias

# INVOLVEMENT AND DETACHMENT



- Amsterdam 2012: *Reinventing Norbert Elias: for an open sociology*
- *Appeared to be a consensus that “figurati” – to use Jason Hughes’s term – should be more willing to speak out on contemporary issues and affairs of the day*
- Some weeks later on the NEF blog, Stephen Mennell claimed that configurational sociologists have...
  - *“...often seemed inhibited by our own reputation for pursuing relatively “detached” sociology and long-term perspectives, rather than the short-term policy-orientated research that is bread and butter for much of mainstream sociology.”*

# Blog debate

<http://norberteliasfoundation.nl/blog>

*“I believe it is possible, indeed essential, to take a long-term detached perspective but at the same time engage with contemporary concerns and “myths”. The whole “underclass”, “welfare dependency” discourse that seems so pervasive across the western world, for instance, is beset with “myths” fuelled by short-term/involved social misdiagnosis.”*

- *Others argued that Elias would have disagreed with the proposition for greater involvement and that with greater involvement come unforeseen risks and consequences.*
- The argument here was that those commenting on contemporary affairs should follow Weber and acknowledge that a particular statement or view...
- *“...is a normative judgement and does NOT claim to be some impartial judgement about facts... independent of one’s political, religious, cultural, moral convictions or affiliations.”*

- Elias's repeatedly expressed fears about the threat of nuclear conflict during the cold war did appear to offer a degree of consensus on the issue!
- The contentious point revolved around what degree of involvement that appropriate
- There was some talk of *secondary re-involvement!*

# **Established/ outsider relations**

- Elias's study of Winston Parva – a figural engagement with the *present* we are advocating in the paper
- We argue that this is being taken on and applied to a range of contemporary societal and political concerns by a diverse group using Elias's ideas
- Many of this group do not see themselves as figural sociologists!

# Richard Kilmminster

Argues that the development of sociological theory is part of a changing set of attitudes towards different forms of knowledge

Younger sociologists	Older generation
<p><i>Through their relations with others, younger sociologists will see the methodological imperative of greater detachment and the suspension of value judgments – pursued rigorously in its pure form – to be inflexible and even authoritarian</i></p>	<p><i>Sociologists still wedded to the greater detachment, fantasy-control, ideology banishing model will find contemporary sociological activity and preferences disconcerting.</i></p> <p><i>New research trends will seem unrigorous and uncontrolled, blurring the much-fought-for clear boundary between scientific knowledge and personal and lay experience.</i></p>

# **Richard Kilminster**

- Do current trends in sociology prefigure the death throes of detachment?
- Probably no!
- Argues that human society, and by implication, sociology, is entering a higher level of integration and functional democratization within which greater specialisation is occurring.
- As Kilminster has argued on many occasions, we could take a wide range of contemporary research projects and findings emboldened by the '*decorative turn*' in sociology and align them with changing levels of functional democratisation and academic specialization

We argue that a similar process is also evident  
*within*  
figurational sociology



*We argue* that a higher level of cross-disciplinary integration and functional democratisation is bringing about greater engagement with contemporary social processes

# **Our argument!**

Following Dunning and Hughes (2013) we would suggest that it is not the case, as Dunne claims, that there is a barrier between politics and the quest for knowledge within figuralional sociology

We argue that many of the younger/ diverse group find the *retreat to the future* highlighted by Dunne (2009) hard to understand, given that mutual identification and empirical, process-driven, contemporary research are not always "bad" for knowledge

We also argue that the '*research theorising*' demanded by Dunning and Hughes (2013) – and the engagement with policy called for by Dunne (2009) are in fact *already continuing apace*.

# **Evidence – our own work**

- **John Lever** – Urban regeneration partnerships; sustainable communities; halal meat markets; migrant workers/ entrepreneurs
- **Ryan Powell** – Anti social behaviour; gypsy-travellers, Eastern European Roma
- **Matt Clement** – Youth & knife crime

# **Evidence – the work of others!**

- Amanda Rohloff – moral panics and climate change
- Alex Law and Gerry Mooney – Chavs & Neds

**We believe that the neglect of the growing body of work by configurational “*outsiders*” may serve to stifle:**

- the development and refinement of Elias's ideas;
- the empirical testing of his workable synthesis, and;
- the intergenerational transmission necessary over the longer term

# **Norbert Elias, figuralional sociology and the investigation of contemporary social processes: tensions and possibilities**

**Thank you!**

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