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Nico Wilterdink reviews  
Richard Kilminster

**Richard Kilminster**, *Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology* (London: Routledge, 2007). 209 pp. ISBN: 978-0-415-43706-6. (Also published as an e-book: 978-0-203-93930-7).

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 'the *abandonment* of philosophy altogether' (ibid.) and its replacement by empirical sociology.

By accentuating Elias's anti-philosophical stance as the basis and core of his work, Kilminster gives a new twist to the thesis he advanced in his earlier book *The Sociological Revolution* (1998): there he argued that sociology in general, beginning with Comte, Marx and Spencer and continuing with Weber and Durkheim, signified a break with philosophy. This thesis implies that Elias did not initiate this 'revolution', but continued and perhaps radicalised a tradition that had been formed in the nineteenth century.

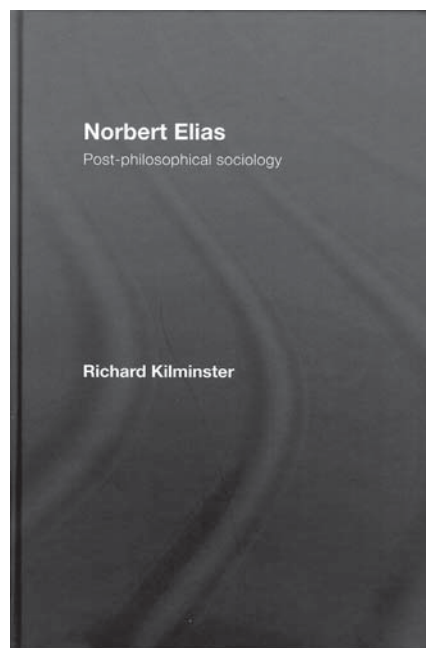
However, as Kilminster shows in this new book, the transition from philosophy to sociology was for Elias also a personal conquest, a deeply felt, hard-won conviction, which in turn can be understood in the context of intellectual and social transformations in Germany after the First World War. In illuminating 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 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 informalisation 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 forgotten past that corresponds to the hidden part of our individual selves; the historical 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 ideological 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 Process* has evoked since the 1980s among social scientists and particularly anthropologists (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 criticism, which could have given his own interpretation more sharpness.

In the next chapter Kilminster returns to fundamental problems of knowledge formation in his discussion of Elias’s conceptual pair ‘involvement and detachment’. With these twin concepts Elias purported to overcome the philosophical, Kantian dichotomies of subject versus object and facts versus values, and to revise Weber’s prescription 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’ (emotionally controlled, object-centred). The long-term trend from involvement to detachment, as can be seen in particular in people’s perception of ‘nature’, is part of and conditioned by wider civilising processes. Elias views the emergence of relatively autonomous scientific fields as a late stage in this development. Within these fields ‘autonomous’ evaluations (rather than non-evaluative or value-neutral observations) increasingly take the place of ‘heteronomous’ ones.

Here Kilminster stresses again how Elias develops a radically post-philosophical sociology, taking distance not only from the philosophy of philosophers 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 involvement-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 Kilminster terms ‘involved detachment’. What exactly makes this kind of involved detachment different from the ‘involved involvement’ of, for example, magicians or religious believers? And what is the place of moral evaluations within the sciences if these are not ‘value-free’? Are such evaluations by definition ‘heteronomous’? More generally, are the boundaries between ‘autonomous’ 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 scientific progress reflects a stage in the civilising process in which a strong super-ego suppresses forbidden emotions. In a later stage, the control of emotions becomes more ego-dominated; emotions are recognised rather than forbidden 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 morality 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 desirable. 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 formalistic, and bears the stamp of informalisation 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 ideological group alignments. This lesson is still relevant today, but younger generations 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 professional work. The recurring dilemmas for social scientists to which the concepts 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 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

**Cas Wouters**, *Informalization, Manners and Emotions since 1890* (London: Sage, 2007). xii + 274 pp. ISBN 978 1 4129 3575 3 (hb); 978 1 4129 4718 (pb).

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.’

