

NORBERT ELIAS AND WOMEN: LIFE, TEXTS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER ISSUES

THE GENDER DIMENSION IN NORBERT ELIAS'S WORK: A SITUATED INTRODUCTION

Sex, gender and gender relations have generally not been considered major or central issues in Norbert Elias's figurational sociology. Most feminist and gender studies have simply ignored Elias's sociology. In contrast, the Jennifer Hargreaves's severe critique of Elias and his disciple and co-author Eric Dunning (Elias & Dunning, 2008) deserves attention (Hargreaves, 1992, 1996, 2010; Liston, 2018). In this critique, Elias's and Dunning's research and writings on men's sports and men in sport are said to have failed to consider the gender dimension and male domination (Hargreaves, 2010: 392). More generally, Jennifer Hargreaves criticises Elias for a theory of civilisation that claims to treat it with "detachment" (Elias, 2007). Under the pretext of neutrality, such a concept would implicitly support conservative ideas (Hargreaves, 2010: 393) and the configurational approach would remain permeated by masculinism (Hargreaves, 2010: 391).

In any case, Elias's historical sociology is rarely called upon to shed light on issues of sexual discrimination or gender (in)equality outside Elias's circle of fellows and the work of his followers. Some of the latter have, however, been precursors, be it on gender violence or on transformations of sexuality (van Stolk & Wouters, 1983, 1987; Wouters, 1998). In a second time, articles that are written more by women social scientists have explored the seemingly non-obvious but challenging connection between feminist, gender and figurational studies (Brinkgreve, 2004; Bucholc, 2011; Ernst, 2022), notably in the field of sports given the concomitant rise in the 1980s of gender

studies of sport and of the Eliasian-inspired sociology of sport (Liston, 2006, 2018; Mansfield, 2008). Since 2017, despite the strong resonance between some of the issues raised by the #MeToo movement¹ and Elias's work on the civilising of manners, Elias's analyses have not really been cited much. Again, there are some exceptions, but most of them come from "*Figurati*" and Elias's readers of different generations (de Swaan, 2021; Dekker, 2019; Delmotte, 2019; Wouters, 2019: 74-80).

Elias most often speaks in terms of "men and women" rather than "gender." However, his work does not reduce men and women to their biological differences and places greater importance to gender relations – and this not only in relation to body and sexuality – and to transformations of gender inequality than most (often male) contemporary sociologists did (Guionnet & Neveu, 2009: 342-344; Liston, 2008: 362-363). He actually devoted only one whole text to women and gender issues (Elias, 1987), and this text on ancient Rome also deals with other concerns that are more or less recurrent in Elias's writings. We will return to this later. In addition to this text on "The changing balance of power between the sexes," issues relating to women and gender are present in dotted lines throughout his work since the 1930s and the major work *On the process of civilisation* (2012 [1939]). Related topics never really cease to stand in the background and seem even more important as a preoccupation at the end of Elias's life (Elias, 2014). This paper first aims at showing or remembering this.

For Elias's readers, gender relations and their transformations are commonly seen, on the one hand, as falling under the theory of "established-outsidere" relations, such as race relations or relations between generations (Bucholc, 2011: 429-431; Mennell, 1992: 131-136), and, on the other hand, as one aspect of the civilising process(es) and the transformation of manners (Wouters, 1998, 2019). From the first point of view, gender relations, relations between men and women, are seen as particularly unequal, marked by a strong power differential, but have transformed through the centuries in one way or another due to specific social changes. Briefly, the following issues are at stake when speaking about gender relations in terms of established-outsidere (Elias & Scotson, 2008): what specifically characterises such unequal relationships, and which conditions make that power balance become less or more unequal?

In his work on "durable inequalities," the historical sociologist Charles Tilly refers to Elias and the theory of established-outsidere figurations as an alternative to essentialism, individualism and "mentalism" (Tilly, 1999: 18-19)². Tilly's book is concerned with how and why, by what identical mechanisms, a wide variety of paired and unequal categories are established and locked in – black/white, male/female, citizen/foreigner, etc. While Tilly is, perhaps, less interested than Elias in the transformation and reduction of inequalities, he is interested in their transmission in an Eliasian way. He

underlines that categorical boundaries are particularly efficient “if the boundaries in question incorporate already well-established forms of inequality” (Tilly, 1999: 11). This helps to make them “habitual and sometimes even essential to exploiters and exploited alike.” Regarding gender, although any particularism is a risk to be avoided for an author inspired by the Marxian tradition, Tilly, nonetheless, writes that “male/female distinctions have acquired enormous, slow-moving cultural carapaces yet reappear within almost all social structures of any scale” (Tilly, 1999: 12) and that “the form and degree of gender exploitation have varied greatly, but no economy so far has lived without it” (Tilly, 1999: 146).

Beside the established–outsiders model, a second possible entry is the “process of civilisation” *stricto sensu*, that is to say the book (Elias, 2012) and the more precise idea of a civilising of manners. Behaviour transformations between sexes then appear as an aspect of a broader movement that more profoundly affects the psychic economy of individuals, including the development of self-restraints in most men and women in their relations with each other and ways of thinking and feeling. Thus, the question is to know whether, to what extent and how transformations of manners relate to a changing balance of power between sexes and, again, which specific social conditions favour or disoblige such transformations.

The two perspectives, of the established–outsiders theory and of the civilising process, should be linked, and the questions and hypotheses they outline obviously make a lot of sense. However, to continue to decipher gender issues from an Eliasian perspective, the second aim of this article is to suggest that other perspectives remain to be explored. At this stage, I see three that complement and build on the two major entries I just mentioned. These other three are no more exclusively about relations between men and women, for Elias’s comprehensive vision avoids reifying and isolating the different aspects and levels of social life and considers them as historically connected. One hypothesis addresses the transformation of sensibilities, not to mention an increasing “sensitisation” of contemporary societies – a question at the core of the civilising process. The second one questions the emancipatory power of law and rights, a theme we find more present in Elias’s later texts, which might be linked to fashionable ideas of the increasing “legalisation” of social problems and the “judicialization” of extended forms of violence and discrimination. Finally, the third hypothesis is related to individualisation as a long-term trend, as Elias showed that it profoundly affects both individuals and groups’ identification and self-identification processes.

Recent years have seen a growing refusal to reduce people to their gender, skin colour or origin, including how they are named or referred to – and at the same time a growing demand on the part of some individuals and groups to assume and mark their difference in this way. These two apparently opposing trends can be seen as different reflections of the same desire to

fight against stigmatisation related to gender or origin, sexism and racism. There is also a growing questioning of the assignment of a gender or sexual orientation to a person, not only a growing recognition that a person is free to choose or change it.

As such, these trends, which might appear to be mostly cultural changes, may still contribute too little to abolishing concrete discriminations between men and women, gays, lesbians and heterosexuals, cisgender and genderfluid people, to stick to gender and sexuality. They might also contribute to radicalising the reaction. But in an Eliasian reading, these developments reveal that profound transformations in the relationship between men and women have already occurred, more broadly between established groups and outsiders in relation to sex, gender and sexuality, towards less inequality, more tolerance and more decentred and detached views. In other words, these transformations may only be one phase of a long ongoing process. Their observation alone does not answer the question of the causes of the discrimination and violence that we still have to explain and combat. In my reading, Elias's thought contributes to this questioning and to a movement of emancipation via sociology, while not denying the existence of certain categories such as "men" and "women," or even reaffirming them. This is of course not entirely in line with the turn taken by gender studies in the 1990s (Butler, 1990). However, Elias's work does not seem to be entirely incompatible with the questioning of the gender divide.

Starting not from feminist or gender studies but from a situated reading of Elias, I am trying to account for where and how gender issues arise in his work in more or less (un)expected and (in)direct ways. While I do not claim to be exhaustive, I am trying to illustrate how the treatment of gender issues in Elias's work can then be relevant to explore current transformations and maybe also to better understand the work itself in return. To this end, to begin with, I suggest that reexploring certain aspects of Elias's life, that is, his relationships with women and men or some of these relationships, makes sense in order to better understand his sociology and its links to gender issues.

ELIAS, MEN AND WOMEN: (AUTO-)BIOGRAPHICAL ASPECTS

Elias, as I have already reminded, is not regarded as a gender theorist, but the maintained under-utilisation of some parts of his work dedicated to women and gender remains quite astonishing. Nor have his relationships with women been much commented on, not as much as his intimate or emotional life in general. This is quite understandable because it is not what matters most. The intimate life of an author may be considered of little importance in the case of an intellectual, scientific work, and because of the separation that must be observed for some between the author and the work, in any field. Elias's professional and private life, however, seemed to be intertwined

at an early stage. This is very often the case, and probably much more visible and decisive in the case of intellectuals and artists. Furthermore, Elias himself insists on the fact that life experiences, and the specific involvement and detachment processes they required, play an important role in the personal building of each person in general, and in the genesis and development of his sociological work.

Was Elias gay? On a non-issue and its relevance

To be born German and Jewish in a bourgeois family at the end of the 19th century, to take part in the First World War, to be forced into exile in 1933 and remain stateless for a large part of his life, to lose his mother in Auschwitz (actually in Treblinka), and to lack a permanent job and recognition until very late in his life: all this played a role at different moments and deeply influenced some aspects of Elias's thought, the way it developed and was expressed, and the way we receive and read it. There are many indications of this. In a biographical interview given in 1984, the sociologist insists, sometimes in a self-analytical way, on his specific situation as an intellectually precocious only child whose childhood was particularly emotionally secure (Elias, 2013b: 71-82; Joly, 2012: 73-75). In the Introduction of *The Germans*, the last book published in his lifetime, Elias evokes his particular background and life course to elucidate his "eyewitness" position facing Nazism, war and camps (Elias, 1996: 1). In retrospect, he also directly links the great trauma of the First World War to the importance of the change in his thinking and his criticism of national ideologies and mythologies, as he relates his central focus on established-outsiders relations to the fact that he was born Jewish in Germany in a crucial period (Elias, 2013a, 2013b). One could add that he found himself as a poor and relatively misunderstood academic for a long time. In short, an outsider himself.

I would like to assume and push my intuition here that a great sensibility to issues of sex, gender and sexuality and, for the time, a real attention to male domination and gender discrimination, as well as a surprising freedom of tone in the treatment of questions of sex and gender, are very present in his work, and this, not mainly but also, because Elias must also have been a member of a sexual minority.

The truth is however that we do not – I do not – know so much about it. I remember that at a café terrace in Florence, Italy, on the occasion of a conference in 2010, and in front of an assembly that included several older colleagues, and Elias's disciples or friends who knew him well, one of us who, like me, was a younger participant, made a remark that I found provocative, a little brutal in its form, about Elias's homosexuality. Roughly, he said: "But everyone knew he was gay, right?" The statement was followed by a polite silence that seemed, to me, of disapproval in this assembly rather marked by

its conviviality and frankness – and I would say politically progressive and liberal in the philosophical sense. Disapproving, not as far as homosexuality was concerned, but as if the question itself was irrelevant, or so I thought.

According to Stephen Mennell³, who met Elias in the 1970s and became a very close collaborator and, with his wife, friend of Elias, as did Johan and Maria Goudsblom, it just was not a question. Elias was probably gay, Mennell argues, or perhaps bisexual, but his sexuality was not discussed. Some of Elias's relatives were very aware of it, others were not, and most of the time everyone seemed to not care. The status of his assistants or “flatmates” also seemed not to be an issue. On the other hand, this discretion from older *Figurati* is undoubtedly also explained by the terrible treatment of homosexuals in English society for decades after war⁴. This contributes to explain that an academic whose career had already been severely disrupted more or less “hid the fact that he was gay” (Liston, 2018: 268).

Much later, in the last twenty years that I have been interested from near or far in Elias, reading his texts and debating with colleagues of all ages and backgrounds who share my interest in the work, I do not remember to have seen, in publications or conferences, this issue addressed. Even in informal conversations, off the record, this was very seldom discussed. This can easily be explained by the fact that Elias himself hardly addresses this question in his writings, on any level. At most, one can conclude from his analyses that homosexuals can be considered a relatively marginal, outsider group. Like that of many marginal groups, the situation of gay and lesbian people has been improving in the last decades, changing the relations between heterosexual and homosexual groups and (self)image of individuals and groups. On the other hand, such transformation is more recent than the one associated with women's emancipation and seemed more difficult given that “the ties of interdependence between homosexuals and heterosexuals are far less close than between men and women” (Mennell, 1992: 137; van Stolk & Wouters, 1987). To the best of our knowledge, there is not much more from his work and no explicit mention of Elias's homosexuality in his autobiography (Elias, 2013a, 2013b).

It may therefore seem irrelevant, useless, and even unwholesome, to focus on one aspect of his intimate life, which he neither wanted to reveal nor seems essential to understand the author, his thought and its place in his era, unlike other authors. By contrast, one may easily think about Foucault (Moreno Pestaña, 2006) at once so close and so far from Elias (Joly, 2012: 66-67). For my part, I think that for Elias's readers, historians and biographers, this question remains to be further explored, without exaggerating its importance, and avoiding any reductionism or voyeurism, because Elias's work and life could shed more light on each other.

Women: very present outsiders

By contrast, if not as lovers, women are extremely present in Elias's life and biographical interviews (Elias, 2013b). His mother, Sophie, is firstly evoked, in terms that at first glance seem to recuse what I wrote above about Elias's gender sensibility: "I had a very-hard-working father, and an absolutely non-working mother. Although – that's not quite right. She worked, of course, when we had guests. She worked very hard preparing for parties. She was the nicest mother you could think of, very jolly, happy outgoing" (Elias, 2013b: 73). Elias describes his parents as having a "very good marriage," "in a way an old-fashioned type of marriage – what you call 'harmonious inequality'," even a "model of harmonious inequality: he took all the decisions, but that was what she wanted" (Elias, 2013b: 73). This portrait of his mother and family life may sound "misogynistic" or pro-patriarchal, but here we guess it is just "sincere" and "reality-congruent." In it, we still find "the aunts" and "mother's friends" whose "chatter" Elias would have perceived early as "below his intellectual level" (Elias, 2013b: 76). And the nurses, nannies, and later governesses, who succeeded one after another in looking after and teaching him, as was customary in a bourgeois family (Elias, 2013b: 77). The last one was a "very educated lady, who came from a good family, now impoverished" (Elias, 2013b: 78).

Then, nothing about women, or almost nothing, until Heidelberg, the middle of the 1920s, and Marianne Weber's salon (Elias, 2013b: 105). Max Weber's famous widow is described as a "strong" and "impressive woman," very influential and dominating, in the shadows, a good part of the intellectual life of the time, but "with her feet planted firmly on the ground." Without her, Elias (2013a: 18-19) wrote, Weber "would not have had the staying power to achieve all that he did." Elias recounts how himself waited patiently to be invited by Marianne, and his relief at not having been chased out of her living room, in the manner of an essential rite of passage (Elias, 2013a: 20). In his famous great book *On the process of civilisation*, we will find the idea that the power differential between men and women had been considerably reduced in the court society long before, when salons became real places of power dominated by women (Elias, 2012: 179).

We move then to Frankfurt in the beginning of the 1930s. In the surroundings of Karl Mannheim in "Marxburg" (the Institut für Sozialforschung where the philosophers Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer worked), there were many more women than in other circles (including academic ones), and a rather very egalitarian habitus. Among them Elias remembers Margarete Freudenthal. "She had a car" and helped him to leave Germany in 1933, along him to Switzerland. She wrote her thesis on... women and housework since the eighteenth century (Elias, 2013a: 113), which sounds, in 2022, like a very Eliasian subject for a PhD research.

There is insufficient space here to describe all of “Elias’s women,” among them the future famous photographer Gisèle Freund, whom Elias met in Frankfurt, and in Paris in the years of his poorest, albeit effervescent, exile (Elias, 2013c: 154-155). About his post-war English years, Elias will then speak about Melanie Klein, the mother of English psychoanalysis, and her rival Anna Freud (Elias, 2013b: 126-127). The latter introduced Elias to his “Freudian orthodox” analyst Kate Friedlander (Joly, 2012: 122), who unfortunately died during his therapy (Elias, 2013b: 128). Later, he will also correspond with other women, colleagues and friends, including the “prominent Dutch writer and journalist” Renate Rubinstein, “one of his closest friends in Amsterdam” who died a few months after him (Elias, 2009: 276-279; Kilminster & Mennell, 2009: XX). Finally, as an anecdote, the German Literature Archive Marbach holds a note addressed to the famous lesbian writer and left-wing activist Susan Sontag⁵. The note was probably written after a lunch in 1978 in New York after the publishing of *The civilising process* in English, tells Stephen Mennell⁶. Elias, “already very deaf at the time” and not having recognised her, would hardly have spoken to her even though she was sitting next to him while an important man was sitting on the other side. Learning who she was a few days after the lunch, he would have felt mortified and found a pretext to immediately write to her to apologize and arrange another rendezvous. We do not know whether this meeting took place...

Thus, one does not have to look very hard to find not “the woman,” or “one woman” in Elias’s life, but many women, not to mention wives of his friends and colleagues. Some of these women apparently liked and appreciated him very much, although one of them confided to her husband that she felt, when talking to Elias, as she was constantly being “psychoanalysed.” No mention is made of a woman with whom he would have had a true love affair. In his autobiography, in response to questions from his interviewers “Did you never want to marry, have children?” Elias explains that he had not really thought about getting married because there was an incompatibility between “what he wanted to do and to be married,” and also that it was “not a decision for him” – a sentence that sounds a bit ambiguous (Elias, 2013b: 138). It can nevertheless be noted that many men did not – do not – see any incompatibility between marriage and career, as they maybe did not intend, do not intend, to invest much time and energy in love relationship and family life. Quite often they even saw their wives as work assistants in many kinds of professions. And some of them still do so, including in intellectual professions. The question of not having been a father, of not having children, receives the same kind of response, but Elias recognises that he has “always very much liked teaching students” and that one can consider it as a substitute for fatherhood (Elias, 2013b: 139).

This concludes a long but still too brief evocation of the importance of Elias’s emotional life and his relationship with women and men, as reported

by some of his relatives and by the author himself. In short, while there is still work to be done⁷, this account is not silent, as discreet as it is in some respects. The way things are described in retrospect by the author himself – very simply, very humanly, one might say, but also with very “modern” accents – suggests a form of non-conformism, typical of certain intellectual circles but also marked by years of analysis and consistent with the sociological work on civilisation itself. All these features can be found in Elias’s treatment of gender issues.

WOMEN AND GENDER RELATIONS: DOTTED AND GROWING CONCERNS

Hereafter, I will delve into different texts that address the issue of women and gender or that develop hypotheses that contribute to shed light on these issues to this day. Except for letters and forewords (Elias, 2009), three texts directly and substantially address relations between the sexes and women’s emancipation: first, one chapter in *On the process of civilisation* (Elias, 2012: 166-185); second, the article “The changing balance of power between the sexes – a process-sociological study: the example of the ancient Roman state” (Elias, 1987); third, a very late text on “Freud’s concept of society and beyond it” (Elias, 2014), to which I will return in my conclusion. Different elements developed in these three texts in relation to women and gender are completed by those developed in a fourth text: “Changes in the ‘we-I’ balance” (2010a). This late essay takes up essential ideas from Elias’s work while developing themes that are not present elsewhere and illustrates particularly well the political topicality of the work, its capacity to enlighten and question the present. It is based on these texts that I suggest that three assumptions drawn from Elias are particularly stimulating and resonating today for thinking about gender issues in general and the changing situation of women in particular. Already mentioned in the introduction, one of them is obviously about civilising the relations between the sexes and leads to the question of raising sensibility to issues of gender domination; the second is about the emancipating though ambivalent role of law and rights; the third is about the dynamics of identification of individuals and groups and the long-term trend to individualisation.

On the process of civilisation [1939] and relations between men and women

Richard Kilminster and Stephen Mennell report that, in a lecture he gave in 1984, Elias “recalled that shortly after completing *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* he had written a book-length typescript on ‘the changing gender balance of power between the sexes’” and claimed: “I felt while writing *The Civilising Process* [that] I did not do justice to that subject, simply because there was too much material – so much to be said that I couldn’t fit it in. I

have just a poor little chapter on the relationships between the sexes in *The Civilising Process*" (Kilminster & Mennell, 2009: XIX). A note in the first edition of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, published in 1939, announced that a future publication dedicated to the "transformations in the relations between the sexes" should complete the two volumes (Linhardt, 2000: 49). While it is interesting that 45 years later Elias would still justify himself in this way, we will see that this chapter in the *Process* is not so "poor", although brief (20 out of 600 pages).

In his best-known work, Elias studies the transformation of "manners" and of the rules of good behaviour since the late Middle Ages in Europe, based on good manners books and other *traités d'étiquette* in force in European royal courts. The sociologist gives central importance to the shifts in the balance of power between social groups and to transformations of ruling groups, and links these two aspects together, manners and balance of power. He neither does so by following a pure causalist pattern nor analyses it in the framework of a particularly "optimistic" theory about the prevalence or progress of Western "civilisation." The book rather aims at deconstructing this notion, examining the way in which the psychic and emotional life of individuals depends on, and in turn influences, social structures and political institutions. Elias observes that in the long term, public and private behaviours have changed towards greater "reserve" and "modesty" and a lowering of the threshold of "disgust" and "embarrassment." These shifts pertain to a less visible movement: the development of powerful forms of self-control that have become less and less conscious, which Elias names self-restraints. In other words, we can observe a gradual transformation of the individual's "emotional economy" due, to put it briefly, to the growing interdependence between human groups. The latter is itself caused by demographic growth, urbanisation and technical innovations, among other factors leading to an increasing differentiation of social functions.

In the second volume of *On the process of civilisation (State formation and civilisation)*, Elias establishes the connection between the civilising of manners, on the one hand, and the development of the State and the monopolisation of legitimate violence, on the other hand. While the use of weapons was essential to a knight's survival, recourse to physical violence was excluded from the form of competition that men and women engaged in court society: "The means of struggle had been refined or sublimated" (Elias, 2012: 308). In other words, warriors in pre-State society did not want to be "violent" men, but were forced into it. Noble men in the court society had no choice but to be "less violent," including in their relations with women and their wives. Elias thus sees civilisation as an unplanned process (or a combination of unplanned processes) based on and connecting transformations of mental structures and social structures. In the long term, this process(es) led toward a relative decrease in power differentials, including between the sexes and

the generations in the twentieth century. Likewise, the increase in functional interdependences could explain the spread of behavioural models that were considered “civilised,” initially a characteristic of the elites, towards the lower social strata (Elias, 2012: 418-427).

“Changes in attitudes towards the relations between men and women”

In comparison with those focusing on aggressiveness, the passages of *On the process of civilisation* relating to sexuality may disappoint. In the first volume (*Changes in the behaviour of the secular upper classes in the West*), the chapter entitled “Changes in attitudes towards the relations between men and women” (Elias, 2012: 166-185) begins with the transformations regarding the sexual education of (male) children in the century of Erasmus and the position of prostitutes, both subjects being related, both increasing unease and secrecy (Elias, 2012: 166-174). The rest of the chapter actually concerns sexual, marital and gender relations more generally.

The main idea is that the court society led to a notable shift in the balance of power between men and women. Shortly, the physical superiority of men loses nearly all its value in an internally “pacified” state society, while the supposedly “feminine qualities” of gentleness, modesty, retreat, attention to others and strategic ability dramatically increase in worth when the importance of “salons” dominated by women increases: “The social power of the wife was almost equal to that of the husband” as “social opinion was determined to a high degree by women” (Elias, 2012: 179). Just as interestingly, “this strengthening of the social position of women signified (to express the point schematically) a decrease in the restrictions on their drives for women and an increase in the restrictions on their drives for men. At the same time, it forced both men and women to adopt a new and stricter self-discipline in their relations with one another” (Elias, 2012: 180). In a social system that had long been dominated by men (and still was), it meant more reserve and *courtoisie* for all, *but first for men*, and more sexual freedom or equality *for women*. It signifies, for instance, that extra-conjugal relations were now more tolerated for women too, and not only for men, and that men were now interdicted to beat their wives, as authorised for long.

Elias notes that another wave of transformations occurred in the bourgeois society in the nineteenth century:

[B]ourgeois functions – above all, business life – demand and produce greater self-restraint than courtly functions. [...] [B]y the standard of bourgeois society, the control of sexuality and the form of marriage prevalent in court society appear extremely lax. Social opinion now severely condemned all extramarital relations between the sexes – though here, unlike the situation in court society, the social power of the husband was again greater than that of the wife, so that violation of the taboo of extramarital relationships by the husband was usually judged more leniently than the same offence by women (Elias, 2012: 181).

To sum up, in matters of gender relations and sexuality in particular:

The process of civilisation does not follow a straight line. [...] In each phase there are numerous fluctuations, frequent advances or recessions of the internal and external constraints. An observation of such fluctuations, particularly those close to us in time, can easily obscure the general trend. One such fluctuation is present today in the memories of all: in the period following the First World War, as compared to the pre-war period, a 'relaxation of morals' appears to have occurred (Elias, 2012: 181-182).

From this apparent "relaxation of morals" it would therefore be misleading to conclude that a regression or backsliding took place since the civilising process cannot, in fact, be reduced to the quantitative progress and pure reinforcement of (self-)constraints. Elias uses the example of the bathing suit at the beach to show that a "relative degree of freedom" – for instance, to undress on a beach and neither "threaten" anyone nor suffer or feel threatened of sexual aggression – corresponds to a higher level of civilisation than having to protect one's privacy at all costs:

[T]his change, and with it the whole spread of sports for men and women, presupposes a very high standard of drive control. Only in a society in which a high degree of restraint is taken for granted, and in which women are, like men, absolutely sure that each individual is curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette, can bathing and sporting customs having this relative degree of freedom develop (Elias, 2012: 182).

However, this is by no means the only direction or way in which the process could develop, at least in the short term. In the 1930s, this is indeed one of the sociologist's concerns:

[W]e also find in our own time the precursors of a shift towards the cultivation of new and stricter constraints. In a number of societies there are attempts to establish a social regulation and managements of the emotions far stronger and more conscious than the standard prevalent hitherto, a pattern of moulding that imposes renunciations and transformation of drives on individuals with vast consequences for human life which are scarcely foreseeable as yet. [...] Like many other drives, sexuality is confined more and more exclusively, not only for women but for men as well, to a particular enclave, in socially legitimized marriage (Elias, 2012: 182-183).

In this first text exploring questions that interest us, it is easy to place the "progress in civilisation" on the side of a "controlled relaxation of constraints," namely a self-control that does not exaggeratedly restrain "sex drive" but rather allows for sexual freedom based on what we consider today to be mutual respect, involving a certain relational equality and mutual consent (Wouters, 2019: 76-77).

The transformations of sensitivity and the topicality of the Process

The theses developed in the passages dedicated to gender relations in *On the process of civilisation* may shed light on the highly topical issue of the transformations of sensitivity, particularly regarding gender relations, violence against women and emancipation of women in various areas, including sexuality. Such transformations indeed operate in connection with the development of new social controls and other self-restraints imposed on human drives, and what we usually call norms and values. These constraints both affect micro-social and intimate relationships in everyday life, and are broadly present at the macro-social level, in the rules and functioning of the society's central institutions. It entails that transformations of sensitivity also have to do with symbolic forms of violence and discrimination – and with symbolic forms of pacification and “egalitarianisation” –, the way violence, discriminations and equality are experienced and expressed by individuals and groups and performed through media in the society as a whole. These transformations thus concern the ways of reacting to and characterizing violence and inequalities of all kinds, and what can be said or done without offending the opinion or sensitivity of this or that individual or group or of society as a whole.

A tricky but interesting question left open by the *Process* regards the relationship between, on the one hand, a code of manners giving more and more prevalence or markers of respect to women, at least until the nineteenth century in Western Europe, and a social and political structure where women remain largely dominated by men, on the other hand. In the twentieth century, the paradox seems to reverse itself: women win autonomy, the balance of power with men becomes less unequal, and the code of manners relaxes. A common view is that today, “after #MeToo,” we could return to some kind of stricter moral code. This old code, which would come back into force, would be based, among other things, on explicit double consent – recalling the marriage rite, – and on the condemnation of certain expressions of “vulgarity” or physical and verbal “provocation” in sexual matters. For some, such change should be interpreted as a regression, including for women, compared to years of supposed sexual freedom from the late 1960s. However, if one looks at it closer, the movement observed over the last 10 years or more, and of course even more after the Weinstein scandal that triggered the #MeToo protest in 2017, is not a movement against sexual freedom for all – although such movements obviously exist. Rather, it reveals a greater refusal to consider women as sexual objects for men and a greater refusal of any kind of violence.

Cas Wouters precisely points out this issue:

In 2017, continued in 2018, the wave of protest by the #MeToo movement against virtually all degrees of sexual intimidation effectively broke the regime of silence that dominated these practices. It broke a major stronghold of this regime: internalised shame resulting from shaming the victims, and pressured the social codes dominating these experiences to allow for deeper and stronger feelings of

anger, indignation and injustice. No longer are these feelings almost automatically silenced by feelings of shame, but now shame is increasingly silenced by them (Wouters, 2019: 76-77).

That said, the impact of #MeToo is as undeniable as it is difficult to assess, as is its durability. The movement itself is the result of a long transformation of the gender balance of power and the resulting changes in behaviour and sensibilities. Violence against women has become more intolerable, but this trend is socially conditioned and by no means definitively established⁸.

This transformation is undoubtedly both irreducible and linked to a transformation of sensitivities that tends to establish new rules of behaviour and language – not to re-establish the old ones, which have coexisted for so long with a very strong gender inequality. Such transformation can be seen – and deplored by some – as an endless increase in the importance of sensitivities or of sensibility, what I call *sensitisation*, or *over-sensitisation*, of the society. However, it is clear that it is not exclusively about women, behaviour towards women and words used about women, but also about other dominated groups – first and foremost “people of colour,” homosexuals, children, in a society where the established are still largely adult, white, heterosexual, men. It is therefore understandable that the most ulcerate condemnation of such a transformation – “what was allowed is now forbidden” – comes mostly from established groups or those who identify with them, although they are outsiders in some cases, and consider their status as threatened.

Finally, the “reality-congruence” in Elias’s analysis suggests that the sensitisation of a society, in the first meaning of the lowering threshold of repugnance, pain or indignation toward suffering caused to others, including by members of one’s “own group,” is not first the result of a “moralisation” of public and intimate life. Rather, this trend reveals an interdependence that has become less unequal between certain established and outsider groups and the resulting civilisation of their relationships. In his only text entirely focusing on gender relations, 50 years after the *Process*, Elias returns to the dynamics of such change towards greater equality between men and women, or toward less inequality between them, to better say.

“The changing balance of power between the sexes – a process-sociological study: the example of the ancient Roman state” (1987) and the question of state and law

For Elias, relations between men and women would have been “a lifelong favourite subject” (Linhardt, 2000: 49). While this may have been true, it was mostly disciples who explored this path, initially dealing with domestic violence (van Stolk & Wouters, 1983). A famous but half-credible anecdote recounts that the materials and notes Elias had accumulated over the years to

carry out the project he had envisaged since the late 1930s on transformations in gender relations were lost, thrown away by an over-zealous housekeeper in the 1960s (Kilminster and Mennell, 2009: XIX; Linhardt, 2000: 50). In any case, in the mid-1980s, Elias resumed in *extremis* his work on the subject. First published in 1986 in an issue of the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* devoted to gender studies, “The changing balance of power between the sexes” (Elias, 1987) focuses on the development of conjugal rights within marriage at the end of the Roman Republic, the only period about which he would have retained some material.

Elias’s idea is not that the transformation of a society towards greater equality between men and women would find its ultimate origin in a specific period of history. If Elias shows an interest in Antiquity, it is not to defend the idea of the linear evolution of a European tradition – as Hargreaves (2010: 395) reproaches him –, leading from the absolute submission of women to their complete liberation. The text does not propose a “return to Rome” but a *détour* via Rome and reveals the detachment promoted Elias’s sociology. It illustrates well the merits of a kind of impertinence, as well as the author’s prudence and freedom of tone.

A détour via marriage in Rome

Elias begins by recounting a memory of an Indian couple he used to encounter in the streets of London years before. Even when the couple was deep in conversation, the wife was walking several steps behind her husband. Elias saw this as a symbol of what “has been termed ‘harmonious inequality’” (Elias, 1987: 287), an expression we have seen him also use about his own parents’ relationship. He compares it with the “terrifying custom” (Elias, 1987: 288) practised by certain casts in India which dictated that a wife had to follow her husband into death. In contrast, the code that characterised the middle and upper classes in modern and contemporary Europe was “more equivocal” (Elias, 1987: 289) as he already pointed in the *Process* (1939). Elias then renounces to explain this paradox or “surprising problem,” merely presenting it. On the one hand, women continue to be subjected to male domination, while on the other, “good behaviour [demands] instead that men should publicly treat women in a way usually accorded to socially superior and more powerful persons” (Elias, 1987: 289). According to Elias, this ambiguous code, which prevailed until at least the nineteenth century, seems nevertheless to indicate a power differential that was considerably lower than in the case of Indian wives and Chinese foot-bound women. It was a sign that European women were already able to defend themselves, that something had already changed.

In his usual style, Elias presents the problem in a disenchanting, inspiring way. Elias is not interested in the origin of inequality between men and women, as if equality were the norm (historically this is not the case at all).

Nor, of course, does he posit that inequality is “natural.” What he is interested in are the social conditions and processes that, in a particular context, have allowed gender relations to evolve towards less inequality, and those that, conversely, accentuate gender inequality. In the later stages of the Republic, he then identifies a “surprising” development towards relative equality between the sexes *within marriage*. Even though this relative equality within marriage later disappeared with the invasions and the rise of the Christian church, it nonetheless left traces, which also requires an explanation.

Before this development, and often afterward, marriage resembled the acquisition of a woman by purchase (as in the Germanic *kaup-*) or a kidnapping, as evidenced by the rape of the Sabine women. For a long time, a married woman in Rome was the property of her husband, as were their children. If she was beaten, she had nowhere to turn. Returning to one of his key ideas from *The civilising process*, Elias (1987: 293) explained this extreme state of female inferiority by the fact that, in pre-state Roman society, “muscle and fighting power had a social function of the highest order.” The result of this was that women typically held the position of “outsiders,” held at a distance by the “established,” that is, upper-class men. Up until the middle and even the end of the second century BC, women simply had no autonomous existence. They were not given a name. They were forbidden to have possessions, to request a divorce, even to drink wine. Until they married, they remained under their father’s tutelage, or that of another male relative. His authority then passed fully to the woman’s husband.

However, later historical texts give evidence of the option to conclude another form of marriage, one that did not include this transfer – from the father to the husband – of tutelage over the woman (Elias, 1987: 295). Such transformation was neither deliberate nor easy. The question of women’s status in Roman society indeed deeply divided men, who were less occupied by war after the final victory over Carthage (149 BC). Following Elias, it was initially the customs, not the laws, that reflected a profound shift in society: girls began to participate in their brothers’ education and turned away from household chores that were the *matrona*’s responsibility. Next, and more importantly, a married woman could own possessions and, although girls were still given arranged marriages, divorce – which had always been an easy, informal procedure for men – became available for women too. They were also free to choose their second husband, and their lovers. On Catullus’s love for Claudia – a young poet in love with a married-woman of superior rank – Elias evokes a form of *amour courtois* which, in Rome, helped to expand the “range of emotions” (Elias, 1987: 300), as evidenced by Roman music and poetry, and led to a “higher level of self-discipline” in men–women relations.

This form of emancipation also reinforced the distance between the sexes. Married women “often identified themselves far more closely with their lineage than with that of their husbands” (Elias, 1987: 301), forming a

network of their own, with distinct rules. Finally, Elias mentions Appian of Alexandria, who recounted a pivotal incident in the Roman civil wars during the first century BC. A group of noblewomen led by Hortensia, the daughter of a famous orator, publicly rebelled against the triumvirs Octavian, Lepidus and Mark Antony. These women dissented against the dictators' decision to take away all their property as a way of punishing their fathers and husbands, while these women, unlike the men, were not even on the proscription list. In other words, the outsiders were no longer willing to accept the image of themselves imposed by the established. Although the account of the incident, written two centuries later, is partly fictitious, the story speaks volumes about the independence these women had achieved and its limitations, because the economic and moral emancipation of Roman noblewomen did not extend to politics.

State, law and rights: on social conditions of emancipation

Elias goes on to examine “the reasons for this development of a less uneven balance of power between the sexes in Rome.” An initial explanation offered by the author highlights the growth of the city into a virtual empire. The senatorial class was no longer made up of peasant warriors. Instead, it became “a class of aristocratic holders of high military and civil offices owning immense estates” (Elias, 1987: 304). This means that the male aristocracy had become rich enough to relinquish their right over a married woman and her property. Here, Elias puts forward a different argument than those which prevail in other texts. While it is evident that peace and prosperity reduce the need to worry about survival and, therefore, lead to the refinement of civilisation, elsewhere these factors are insufficient to explain the lessening of inequalities. In the case of advanced industrial societies and European states, Elias posits that their “functional” and “institutional” democratisation, at the twentieth century, resulted firstly from the fact that outsider groups, first of all workers and lower classes, came to represent a social force that demanded they be conceded a position and recognised rights that were previously denied to them (Elias, 2006: 61-63). A few years later, the model associated with *Les Trente Glorieuses* (The Glorious Thirty) was outlined during dark times, after the Great Depression in the United States and in the context of the Second World War in Europe. Leaders could no longer do without the support of the masses, and of women, who bore twice the burden of the war effort.

A second explanation refers to the theses of *The civilising process* and the role of the state. But Elias especially stresses the importance, in the pacified Roman Republic, of the stability of administrations capable of enforcing laws and judicial decisions, ensuring the security of goods and people, and protecting wives from their husbands (Elias, 1987: 307). It seems a stretch to infer that Elias posits the state as a neutral, benevolent institution and that gender inequality could be resolved by legal means (Hargreaves, 2010: 398)⁹. In Rome,

legal equality in marriage did not mean equality in other areas. For Elias, it did, quite simply, enable women to become *individuals*. Hence, the depictions of independent, self-assured women... that vanished with the invasions, the erosion of the monopoly of violence and the return to power of the “strongmen.”

Customs relating to the holding of property for women and free consent in marriage were nonetheless incorporated into Roman law, overriding the legal provisions in force in many of its contemporary societies. The Christian emperors then had to work hard to unravel what had been achieved and to strengthen the constraints on divorce. But they never made a pure and simple return to the state that had preceded the advances made under the Republic (Elias, 1987: 310-313). One reason for this was that both Roman and canon law had kept a record of it, helping – like Sophocles’ *Antigone*, Catullus’ *Claudia* and Appian of Alexandria’s *Hortensia* – to write in dotted lines the history of the transformations of the women condition.

Here, thus, Elias sketches out an unusual reflection on the role of law, customs and rights in the civilising process and the lessening of inequalities. While this role is more generally little discussed (van Krieken, 2019: 268; Woodiwiss, 2005: 50), it is interesting that law in general and some rights in particular have a more explicit place in some late texts (Elias, 1987, 2008, 2010a). Of course, it is very difficult to deny law a first rank place in “the changing balance of power between the sexes” while focusing on Ancient Rome, a time when the importance of the law, in its full expansion, is inescapable and almost unparalleled. In his text, Elias probably still underestimates it. It can also be argued that it is more generally in relation to the development of the State that Elias considers the “emancipatory” role of law and rights, in this case for women. In a foreword Elias wrote for the book two of his Dutch fellows published in the 1980s on women victims of domestic violence living in homes in the Netherlands (van Stolk & Wouters, 1983), he emphasises, without idealisation neither, the civilising importance of the welfare state in which legal rules but also such material structures exist (Elias, 2009: 271).

On another level, in the text “The civilising of parents” few years before, Elias had pointed out that the United Nations designated 1979 as the International Year of the Child. According to him, this revealed the “recognition of this right of children, to have their particular identity as children respected and understood:” that is, “too, a human right,” although “new attempts to do justice to this right are accompanied by particular difficulties” (Elias, 2008: 15). What Elias is insisting on here is the considerable distance we have covered so far: “The Year of the Child symbolised the fact that in today’s societies children, *despite their dependency*, are recognised as having, to a very high degree, their own unique character as particular group of members of this society” (Elias, 2008: 15, emphasis added). In a beautiful page, Elias quotes a contemporary poet (Gert Kalow): “I cry / half dead / the neighbours / rang / why / does this child cry / end / of the blows”. Elias concludes, maybe too optimistically for once:

[I]t is doubtful whether neighbours in earlier societies were always concerned when child cries. For a long time, too, state authorities had neither laws nor executive organs to mobilise in the protection of children. What would prevent adults from allowing children to die when they got on their nerves or when they had insufficient food to eat? I will refrain from listing all the other aspects of childhood which used to be possible and which are no longer possible today (Elias, 2008: 22).

By pointing out the role of law and rights, both in the text on children and the civilisation of parents and in the text on the changing balance of power between husbands and wives in Rome, Elias finally emphasises what law and rights have recognised for women and children after having denied it them for a long time: an identity as full individuals despite their high “dependency” in a patriarchal and androcratic society. It means that the evolution of law appears here not only as a reflection or consequence of a changing balance of power, but also as a driver or one of the causes of it.

The role of the law in recognising people and in particular members of outsider groups as individuals in their own right is also linked to the third and final concern I wanted to address: the recognition of persons (and their rights) as individuals and less and less as members of particular groups or categories, whatever they may be. Inevitably, this is linked to the way in which individuals and groups identify themselves and are identified by others, and thus to the delicate issue of identities and identification processes, which currently seem to be “in flux,” particularly for women (Elias, 2014: 33). Charles Tilly, in his aforementioned book on durable inequalities, argues that feelings of identity and intergroup hostility play only a secondary part (Tilly, 1999: 15). Elias, on his part, does not seem to see issues of identity as driving principles for transformation and the reduction of inequalities. Resistant to change, identities are nevertheless affected by the changing balance of power brought about by increased interdependence. As in the case of law, changes in identification processes and identity issues could thus play a more active role in the transformation of different types of inequalities in a second time.

Changing gender balance of power and “Changes in the ‘we-I’ balance” [1987]

From different testimonies, it is said that Elias affirmed in the 1980s that “the greatest revolution in the history of Western societies was, in the course of the twentieth century, the accession of women to an identity of their own, no longer that of their father or husband” (Heinich, 2003: 83). This transformation, as we have seen, has a long and dotted-line history. From this standpoint, the changing balance of power between the sexes and transformations of gender relations profoundly affect (self-)identification processes of individuals as members of more or less established and outsider groups.

Women and men: two groups in a changing balance of power

In Ancient Rome, the relative emancipation of women entailed not only the recognition of their own identity and personality, but also the possibility for them to form women's groups, which helped them to free themselves from their family and their husband's family. In the twentieth century, we can observe a similar tension between the recognition of women as an ascending outsider group, and the will to be recognised as persons as such and not to be identified by belonging to a group, from which rights would be derived. The same observation can be made about (members of) other outsider groups already mentioned: black and "non-white" people, migrants, members of cultural communities, and "sexual "minorities" – lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, queer (LGBTQ), but also questioning, intersex, asexual, allies, pansexual (in the longer US acronym LGBTQQIAAP). The open character of such acronyms – illustrated by the use of the "+" in French (LGBTQ+) or "O" in English (for "other") – challenges the very idea of assignment to a defined and closed category or community, while this is still for some other people and conservative political movements the very definition of "identity": something that "unifies" and "does not change" (Delmotte, 2022).

The development of gender studies and the transformations of feminist and women's studies since the 1960s have fully accompanied and nourished political struggles and debates. I cannot enter into these debates here¹⁰. There is no sense to excessively "update" the thought of a dead author, to "guess" what he would have thought. Let us simply point that Elias seems to be giving grist to different possible interpretations on the above-mentioned issues.

On the one hand, human society can be seen as composed of two groups different by their biological sex, one dominating, established, and one outsider, dominated, for socio-historical reasons. However, these two groups are incomparably more dependent on each other – or at least differently dependent – than in any other configuration of established and outsider groups, "because no other groups of people are *biologically* made for each other" (Elias, 2009: 272). I emphasise here the word that, instead of shocking the contemporary reader, imposes a strict restriction to the interpretation of the sentence, for Elias of course refused to reduce sociology to biology. These two groups also became, for socio-historical reasons, more and more interdependent, at least up to the twentieth century. Therefore, a long-term process of transformation and a sudden acceleration occurred, with risks of backsliding (de Swaan, 2021).

The old-generation feminist Elisabeth Badinter talks, like Elias, of a "revolution": "one of the only revolutions of the history – and what a one, of changing people relations! – that has developed successfully. And that goes further with dignity. Without gulag, without camps" (Elisabeth Badinter on 1st December 2020 at the French television, my translation). The judgment is a bit quick, and one might add, in Eliasian terms: "if not without any violence", especially on women's side, but on men's side too. However, in terms of

physical violence, the level of this last revolution is indeed particularly low against the men of the established groups. In addition, Elias agreed that “women’s problems are men’s problems and [that] men’s problems are women’s problems, seen from a different perspective and enacted with different and with changing power resources” (Elias, 2009: 273). No doubt he could have written – if he did not, but in other words he did – that “women’s freedom does not go without men’s freedom.”

A society of individuals

Elias’s sociology does not, however, imply a view of human societies as primarily composed of two (biologically) distinct and fixed groups, though increasingly equal (or less and less unequal), and/or that Elias clearly wanted to see develop as such. First, social groups are not biological sub-groups and conversely. The entire work of Elias aims at showing that humans are “biologically forced into indeterminacy,” that the only “universal” of human society is the “humankind’s natural changeability,” thus a social, not a biological, constant (Elias, 2006: 99-105). Second, for this very reason, all identities (identification and self-identification) are socio-historically processed and never given by nature, however resilient “second natures” may appear (Delmotte, 2022). Third, long-term trends of “changes in the ‘We-I’ balance” (Elias, 2010a) tend to make the “I” (I-identity) prevail over the “we” (we- or group-identities) in the identification of the self and of others in contemporary societies. The development of law and rights, more specifically of human rights, attests to this. For Elias, human rights and human rights claims in the second half of the twentieth century correspond both to a new upsurge of integration, in the direction of humanity, and to a “new upsurge of individualisation.” The extension of human rights and of struggles carried out in their name tends to prove that “the individual as such, as a member of humanity, is entitled to rights that limit the state’s power over the individual” (Delmotte & Damay, 2021; Elias, 2010a: 207-208).

In this same important later text, written in 1986-1987, Elias (2010a) shows that more and more globalised interdependencies profoundly affect in a way or another the processes of identification of individuals with the groups to which they belong or to which they are supposed to belong. Why should this not also be the case for sex- and gender-based identities in the age of transgender people, and when bisexuality and not only homosexuality seem to be more tolerated than ever in larger social strata, at least in certain contexts?

Deceased in 1990, Elias has not witnessed most of the last changes and innovations related to gender and sexuality and it would make no sense to guess what he would have thought about our more gender-fluid age. However, his comprehensive and historical-sociological approach to the civilising processes enlightens in a specific manner and from several angles the transfor-

mations of gender relations, their causes, meanings and consequences until our days. Among other causes and consequences, both scientific and medical advances and changes in attitudes to sexuality necessarily stem from and contribute to changes in gender relations.

In very last fragments, Elias (2014: 32-36) underlines the major impact of the invention of contraceptive pills. Since then, medically assisted reproduction, homoparenting, and gender reassignment have impacted the way more and more people perceive and identify themselves, that is, more and more as individuals, and less and less as being first and foremost *female or male by nature*, considering it (more) normal to be (exclusively) attracted to members of the “other sex” and more or less (in)consciously inclined to reproduce for the survival of the human group. In addition, psychologists have long recognised the non-binary character of sexual preferences, and among biologists, current discussions attest the continuum feature of the criteria establishing the differences between male and female characters (see US proposal..., 2018). Among other factors, these discoveries and new ways of thinking logically raise or follow doubts within individuals and social groups about the durability of sexual identities long considered and imposed as given by nature to justify many forms of domination.

CONCLUSION: AN OLD MAN FEMINIST SOCIOLOGIST?

One of the very last texts we have from Elias is based on what he dictated for hours to several assistants shortly before his death as he was blind during his last years. In “Freud’s concept of society and beyond it” (Elias, 2014), Elias comes back to his great debt to Freud and to the main criticisms he, nevertheless, wants to address to him. Maybe nothing new except for a true tribute expressing his great admiration for someone who really cared about people’s problems, wanted to contribute to solve them and was not afraid of breaking through with traditional ways of thinking. Women are the other subject of this text, more exactly young women and their unprecedented emancipation in the twentieth century. Elias stresses three immediate factors of it: enlarged access to intellectual formation and universities, expansion of the labour market and of state activities, and last but not least, the invention of contraceptive pills, as already said:

Society, for a long time rather repressive in matters of female sexuality and in some respects also of the sexual conduct of young males, itself produced a liberating remedy. It is too early to assess the full consequences of this change. As far as one can see, it occurred without any major disturbance of the order of society or, for that matter, of the order of nature (Elias, 2014: 32).

It is true that Elias definitely had no time, aged 90 years old, to achieve his developments on a such a complex affair (Joly apud Elias, 2010b: 155).

However, is it not highly significant that beside an ultimate elucidation of his relation to Freud he gave women, sexuality and gender issues an ultimately prominent place? Elias thus writes: “Greater equality between men and women, a more even distribution of power chances between them, made it necessary for both groups to treat each other with greater circumspection. It required greater self-restraint on the part of both. It represented a very pronounced civilising spurt” (Elias, 2014: 33-34). And finally:

In itself, neither the increase not the relaxation of constraints constitutes a determining criterion: both can have a civilising function, but it is not necessarily so. The question is whether, in total, the new regime allows boys and girls, men and women, to live in a more decent and enjoyable way than under the earlier regime. I tend to think that that is the case. I would not be far from reckoning that the key element is that young women are now deciding their own lives to an extent that they never did in the past (Elias, 2014: 36).

In 2019, the *Global study on homicide (Booklet 5: Gender-related killing of women and girls)* hardly gave reason to rejoice, apart from the very existence of a report made on this matter by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime⁴¹. And in 2021, it is still possible to teach Prehistory in Belgium, Europe, to a class of 8–9 year old children without once using the word “women” and using 37 times the word “men” and “man” with or without capital letters, as if there were absolutely no women or girls in Prehistory. Just to take two very different examples of the still dominated position of women today. So, more than ever we can say, with Holbach, and Elias (2012: 490): “the process of civilisation is under way,” *la civilisation n’est pas encore terminée* – and there is still a lot of work.

Many possible connections between Elias’s historical sociology and feminist approaches, in the social sciences and law, in the arts and literature too, thus remain to be explored. What I hope to have done is to show that Elias’s work is based on significant insights and a remarkable sensibility for a sociologist born in 1897. This sensibility, a simple way of saying things and depicting the problems of individuals and groups, can be interpreted as a true open-mindedness that has something to do with Elias’s trajectory and reflexivity. All this contributes to keep his sociology alive and still useful for a better understanding of unresolved but transforming gender problems and inequalities today.

Florence Delmotte is research associate of the Belgian Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) and professor at the Université Saint-Louis in Brussels. Her research focuses on the political actuality of Norbert Elias's work. She published: "About post-national integration in Norbert Elias's work", *Human Figurations*, 2; "Norbert Elias, Catherine Deneuve y la igualdad sexual" (*Letras Libres*, 2018); "Identity, Identification, Habitus" (*The Palgrave Handbook of the History of Human Sciences*, 2022). She also wrote *Norbert Elias: la civilisation et l'État* (2007) and co-edited *Norbert Elias in Troubled Times* (Palgrave, 2021).

NOTAS

- 1 In October 2017, the producer Harvey Weinstein, a key figure in the Hollywood movie industry, was accused of sexual harassment by numerous actresses. Immediately afterwards, thousands of women stated that they too had suffered violence at the hands of men, using social networks and the #MeToo hashtag, and encouraging women to speak. The movement has grown with multiple variations with the hashtags #YoTambien, in Spain, #quellavoltache, in Italy, #MiraComoNosPonemos, in Argentina, and #Balancetonporc for the French version (Achin et al., 2019). The reaction to this unprecedented form of revolt was not long in coming. In France, to begin with, a tribune signed by one hundred of women and published in *Le Monde* (9 January 2018), defended the “freedom to importune” as “essential to sexual freedom” (see Delmotte, 2019).
- 2 The organisational approach to inequalities focusing on workplaces and the Relational Inequality Theory (RIT) draw in part on the same “relational thinking” to reject the *Homo Economicus* model (Tomaskovic-Devey & Avent-Holt, 2019: 13-14). I thank my anonymous reviewer here for this reference as well as the one of Tilly’s book, both very relevant.
- 3 While preparing this article, I had a long conversation with Stephen Mennell (3 December 2020, not transcribed), among other things on this subject of Elias’s homosexuality. I would like to thank Stephen Mennell for having tried to answer my risky questions and for having agreed to give me his feelings on many points that were obscure to me. I also thank him for agreeing to let me use elements of this informal interview in the present article.
- 4 Many people still have in mind the tragic life of Alan Turing. Turing was a mathematical genius who played a crucial role during the Second World War in cracking intercepted coded messages. This directly contributed the Allies to defeat the Nazis. Condemned in 1952 under the law against homosexuality, Turing chose chemical castration instead of prison and died of cyanide poisoning two years later. Turing was only fully rehabilitated and honoured in 2009 and granted a “royal pardon” in 2013 (<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Alan-Turing>).

- 5 I am indebted to Christophe Majastre for having noted the presence of these two characters, Rubinstein and Sontag, in the archives, as well as other elements that I have not had the opportunity to exploit yet. I also thank him warmly for his comments on earlier versions of this text.
- 6 Reported by email by Stephen Mennell on 26 November 2020.
- 7 As I was finishing this text, Adrian Jitschin was about to publish a biography devoted to Elias's "coming of age" and based on significant historical research (Jitschin, 2021). This work brings background for understanding the work and why the sociologist "broke out the bourgeois norms." While Elias expressed his sexual orientation quite openly in exile in France, he hid his "slow discovery of same-sex orientation" in Breslau years. Jitschin considers it as "part of [Elias's] personality development" (reported by email by Adrian Jitschin on 18 and 21 March 2021).
- 8 Historical distance is lacking for an overall assessment of the impact of the #MeToo movement. Levy and Mattsson (2019) have evaluated the effects of #MeToo on the reporting of sexual crimes to the police in 31 OECD countries. They showed an increase in reporting that reflects a higher propensity to report sex crimes and not an increase in crime incidence; victims would perceive sexual misconduct a more serious problem following the movement. Among other attempts, on the side of more qualitative studies, we can mention the special issue of the French journal *Mouvements* (Achin et al., 2019), which looks at the "sexual revolts" after #MeToo under various aspects (the denunciation of violence, the tools of revolt and the reinvention of sexualities) and in different contexts. I thank my colleague Sophie Jacquot for these references. See also the wide-ranging and inclusive collective edited by Fileborn and Loney-Howes (2019) on "#MeToo and the politics of social change".
- 9 Elias certainly did not participate in the decisive discussion initiated by a feminist author like Catherine MacKinnon on the gendered nature of the state and how male domination is exercised through state law (MacKinnon, 1989; Hargreaves, 2010: 398). But he has too often emphasised the "Janus face" of the state and its ambivalent character for his sociology to be seen as blind, naive or purely optimistic about the emancipatory power of the state.

- 10 In particular, “recognition” or the “struggle for recognition” (an expression forged by Axel Honneth in 1992) has since the late twentieth century become an important paradigm for decoding political conflicts. Feminist authors, among them Nancy Fraser (1995), contributed much to the discussion on its relevance.
- 11 https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/gsh/Booklet_5.pdf

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NORBERT ELIAS E MULHERES: VIDA, PRODUÇÃO ESCRITA E NOVAS PERSPECTIVAS SOBRE A QUESTÃO DE GÊNERO

Resumo

Sexo, gênero e relações de gênero costumam ser considerados questões menores na sociologia histórica de Norbert Elias. Entretanto, o sociólogo enfatizou tais relações e desigualdades de gênero de forma muito mais marcada que muitos de seus contemporâneos. Para os leitores de Elias, as relações de gênero e suas transformações em termos de equilíbrio de poder entre os sexos estão se enquadrando na teoria das relações entre os estabelecidos e os *outsiders*, representando um aspecto crucial do(s) processo(s) civilizador(es). As relações de gênero e suas transformações também se referem, na obra de Elias, ao papel emancipatório do direito e dos direitos, às transformações das sensibilidades, à crescente individualização e integração da humanidade. Partindo não de estudos de gênero, mas de uma leitura situada dos textos de Elias, este artigo também sugere que reexaminar certos aspectos da vida de Elias, como a sua relação com mulheres e homens, faz sentido para que possamos compreender melhor sua sociologia e sua atualidade num mundo pós-movimento #MeToo.

Palavras-chave

Norbert Elias;
Gênero;
Mulheres;
Processos Civilizatórios;
Sociologia Histórica.

NORBERT ELIAS AND WOMEN: LIFE, TEXTS AND NEW PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER ISSUES

Abstract

Sex, gender and gender relations are generally considered minor issues in Norbert Elias's historical sociology. However, the sociologist placed greater emphasis on gender relations and inequalities than many of his contemporaries did. For Elias's readers, gender relations and their transformations in terms of the power balance between sexes are falling under the theory of established-*outsiders* relations and represent a rather crucial aspect of the civilising process(es). Gender relations and their transformations also refer, in Elias's work, to the emancipatory role of law and rights, to transformations of sensibilities, to increasing individualisation and integration of humanity. Starting not from gender studies but from a situated reading of Elias's texts, this article also suggests that re-exploring certain aspects of Elias's life, like his relationship to women and men, makes sense so we can better understand his sociology and its topicality in the post-#MeToo context.

Keywords

Norbert Elias;
Gender;
Women;
Civilising Processes;
Historical Sociology