

Interview met Norbert Elias

door J. GOUDBSLOM*

Norbert Elias publiceerde in 1939 zijn grote werk *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation*, waarbij hij een model ontwierp om de ontwikkeling van sociale en psychische structuren in hun wederzijdse verbondenheid te bestuderen. Tengevolge van de oorlog verwierf dit boek slechts een geringe bekendheid. Pas de laatste jaren neemt de belangstelling toe, wat onder meer tot uiting kwam in een in 1969 verschenen herdruk. Voorts verschenen *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965, samen met John L. Scotson) en *Die höfische Gesellschaft* (1969). Binnenkort zal verschijnen *Was ist Soziologie?* Elias woont sinds 1965 in Engeland, waar hij sociologie doceert aan de University of Leicester. Gedurende het eerste trimester van de cursus 1969-70 was hij als gasthoogleraar verbonden aan het Historisch Seminarium van de Universiteit van Amsterdam.

Goudsblom: To begin this interview I should like to read you a quotation from Amitai Etzioni's recent book, *The Active Society*: 'the institutionalized control of the means of violence is largely a macro-variable; it has only minimal application in micro-theory and next to none in intra-role and intra-personality analysis.'¹ I would think that you will have something to comment on this.

Elias: Yes, I am quite surprised that so intelligent a sociologist uses the categories micro and macro sociology without asking himself how these two types of sociology are connected, because the facts, the data with which they are concerned obviously do not stand unconnectedly side by side in reality. Therefore their problems and findings too must be somehow connected.

G: And then, the example he gives seems to be particularly ill-chosen.

E: That is perfectly true, but it is his evident inability to see how the structure of violence control in the individual and the structure of violence control in the state can be linked to each other. I do not know why so many sociologists overlook so simple a thing, but I think I have succeeded in embodying it in my own theory.

G: Yes. I suppose that Etzioni and most other sociologists would agree that, at closer inspection, these things do belong together, but they say they can treat them separately for the purpose of analysis. One of the formulae they often use is the formula 'other things being equal,' as if by invoking this formula they can simply concentrate on either a macro or a micro level.

E: Yes. I think the decisive point in all this is that, as long as you consider what one calls 'for the purpose of analysis both levels' statically, you can analyse them in separation and you will not find the links. But as soon as you use a developmental model, that is to say, see both levels as being in a state of structured flux, not only a historical flux, the separation becomes impossible and you see the unity between them. If you use a dynamic model, it becomes very simple. You can of course ask: 'Why do not people have development or dynamic models?'

G: Well, you raise the question yourself!

E: My inclination would be to say that there are two main reasons. The first is that the whole trend of our reflection, the whole traditions of our conceptualisation, is so much attuned to what I call in German *Zustandsreduktion*. There is no corresponding word which I can at the moment find in English. It means the

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¹ Amitai Etzioni, *The Active Society*, New York: Free Press, 1968, p. 48.

reduction in thought of all things that you observe as being dynamic to something static. Our whole conceptual tradition, particularly our philosophical tradition, pushes our thinking in that direction and makes us feel that one cannot come to grips with observed happenings as flowing events in speaking and thinking. The second reason is an ideological one, that is to say, a great deal of our thinking has strictly conservative ideological undertones and, if that is so, one inevitably tends to think of society as it *is*, rather than of society as it *becomes* — *has become* in the past, *is becoming* in the present, and *may become* in the future.

G: When I hear you mention these two reasons, it seems to me that they are actually linked to each other. I mean that the tendency towards *Zustandsreduktion* in social science is very much connected with the ideological tendency.

E: Yes, but the tendency towards *Zustandsreduktion* in reflection is not confined to sociology. It is deeply embedded in our philosophical and linguistic traditions.

G: But has not physics, for instance, emancipated itself from this tendency?

E: Not wholly. I can give you a very short example. Physicists still have not got over their surprise that they cannot operate with the concept of cause and effect on the subatomic level. They do not see the concept of blind mechanical causality as a specific type of perceiving connections which has developed at a certain time in a specific phase in the development of our knowledge. As long as they consider the concept of cause and effect as an eternal category, they cannot get over their surprise that this category does not apply when we gain further knowledge and especially when we open up new levels of our universe. They then make hundreds of guesses as to how this is possible, while in fact the opening up of new levels of the universe requires a new effort to study the different types of connections we encounter there and to develop not only new mathematical but also new non-mathematical forms of thinking to fit them.

G: The words cause and effect come to us very easily and it is very difficult to conceptualise an alternative to cause and effect.

E: But only because the idea that our forms of thinking are unchanging and eternal has taken such a hold over us that, if I say we cannot always use the term cause and effect in sociology, or we cannot identify explanation with cause-and-effect explanation, everybody says 'this is impossible.' While in fact we must constantly reflect not only on the observations we make on the empirical level, but also on the forms of thinking we use to cope with what we observe. And if we find that our present forms of thinking do not fit what we observe, we have to develop new instruments of thinking.

G: And do these have to be entirely new? I am thinking of Max Weber's definition of what sociology should be. He said that sociologists have a double task, consisting of *deutend verstehen* and *kausal erklären*. And *deutend verstehen* was apparently something he considered necessary, because *kausal erklären* is not enough in sociology.

E: I will, if you want me to, come back to this *deutend verstehen*, but I want to say something else first. I think that all those definitions are too learned and too abstract. For me, sociology is an undertaking in which the primary task is to help us to orientate ourselves in this social universe of ours — to orientate ourselves better than we are able to do now, and accordingly also to act less blindly. That goes for both empirical and theoretical levels. Both are necessary in order to orientate ourselves, and the first step in that direction is the step which

makes us aware that we are dis-oriented, that we do not really understand the universe which we form with each other. So I am not satisfied with this rather academic way of regarding sociology. I think we must be strictly scholarly, of course, but always with the knowledge that a sociologist has the hard task of helping to orientate ourselves in the unknown social universe which we form with each other.

G: Homans has called this 'the familiar chaos of daily life'.

E: Yes, daily and not daily.

G: Don't you like the words 'familiar chaos'?

E: No, he means something quite different. One must clearly say that what seems most familiar to us covers our ignorance, so the question is not whether this is a chaos, but whether we are not aware of our own not-knowing.

G: So actually, it is not a chaos, but an unfamiliar order.

E: It is unfamiliar and it is not a chaos. Quite. But in any case, unless we are able to make that which seems most familiar to us completely unfamiliar, we shall never be able to find our way in it.

G: Is that not what you mean by 'detachment'?

E: By 'distantiation': to step away from it, to look at it again, to get away from the idea that we know all about it — then perhaps we can get to know it anew.

G: Is this in any way parallel to the alienation effect that has been used in the theatre by Berthold Brecht?

E: Yes, but the term 'alienation' as it is used today has very strong romantic undertones, as it had when the young Marx brought it into favour. The young Marx *had* strongly romantic leanings, that is to say, a longing for a utopian paradise in which no alienation would ever exist. Speaking only of the more psychological aspects of the concept 'alienation', one has to say that *every* form of reflection requires a 'standing back' at a distance from the reflected object. If people feel so inhibited by this reflection that they suffer from it, then the self-control needed for distancing and reflecting is built in wrongly. There is no reason why one should not be able to stand back, to reflect, to 'alienate oneself', as it is called, and then go into action with the full impetus of one's spontaneity. That is why I don't like to use the term 'alienation,' because it is always used with the undertone of 'something from which we suffer.'

G: Well, not always. That is why I mentioned Brecht.

E: Yes, you are right there, but it seems to me that this aspect of Brecht is getting lost. If one speaks of alienation today, one no longer realizes that he gave it a relatively positive meaning in the theatre. But today 'alienation' is only used in a negative sense.

G: I am reminded now of a remark by the American sociologist Maurice Stein in his book, *The Eclipse of Community*. There is one sentence which goes something like this: 'the feeling of being alienated may be our last shared experience.'³ This sums up very concisely an image of men being entirely cut off from each other; the only thing that still connects them is their common experience of being alienated.

² Zie Norbert Elias, 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment,' *British Journal of Sociology*, VII (1956), pp.

³ Maurice R. Stein, *The Eclipse of Community*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960, p. 329.

E: A terrible picture, a completely unrealistic picture. It sounds as if affectionate love had completely disappeared out of our world. Which is obviously wrong!

G: Not only love, but also hatred.

E: Certainly, but let us say affectionate love had disappeared. In fact, our world has become even richer in this spontaneity of affection than it was earlier, but it was never lost. When I think of my 'parents or grandparents' marriage, both were full of warmth and affection. So, what the heck?

G: And do you think there has been a turning-point recently, that the idea that everyone is so very much on his own, a sort of small closed human universe, is beginning to loose its hold over the younger generation?

E: The *feeling*.

G: All right.

E: It may very well be so, but let me say something about the theory of the civilising processes in this connection. So far, the civilising of human beings and the standards of civilization have developed completely unplanned and in a haphazard manner. It is necessary to form a theory so that, in the future, we may be able to judge more closely what kind of restraints are required for complicated societies to function and what type of restraints have been merely built into us to bolster up the authority of certain ruling groups. What I have done is not enough, it is only one step. We must find out more about it. We do not know. I do not believe that we can live entirely without restraints, as some communes today try to do. But I firmly believe that the ways in which restraints are built in today are wasteful and uneconomical.

G: This has a certain similarity with what Herbert Marcuse calls repression and surplus repression.

E: I must decline any relationship. That is all philosophy, and we must investigate these problems empirically as well as theoretically. We cannot do it with philosophies; we need both more experiments and more theoretical *understanding*.

G: I agree. Marcuse seems to believe that he has already solved the problem. He seems to know where the boundary between necessary and surplus repression lies . . . I have here a quotation from a book by R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, that I meant to show to you. He says: 'From the moment of birth, when the stoneage baby confronts the twentieth-century mother, the baby is subjected to the forces of violence called love, as its mother and father have been and their parents and their parents before them. These forces are mainly concerned with destroying most of its potentialities. This enterprise is, one the whole, succesful. By the time the new human being is fifteen or so, we are left with a being like ourselves, a half-crazed creature, more or less adjusted to a mad world. This is normality in our present age!'⁴

E: Yes, but I dislike the description. The sort of general description of our society with complete hostility, is as harmful as the description which rests contents with what *is*, and regards it as wonderful. We have to sit down and do some hard work and hard thinking in order to find out what is wrong. But if one just sits down and calls our world mad, this helps as little as when one says, 'How wonderful our world is'.

G: He is, of course, thinking of some very concrete reasons, like the Vietnam

⁴ R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1967, p. 50.

war, for calling this world mad.

E: But this means proceeding as if he knew why there are wars! As if, by simply crying 'There shouldn't be any wars', we shall stop wars! This is an illusion and a very dangerous one. Moreover, if you only accuse one side of being guilty of wars, you increase the chances, the danger of future war.

G: Now you say that we should investigate empirically and theoretically how much restraint will be necessary for people in order to live together in a complicated social world.

E: Not only how much. What *kind*. The whole pattern of conscience-formation, the whole pattern of taboos. Not only how much. I have no idea what built-in restraints with regard to sexuality are really economic or fruitful in terms of our living together. I simply do not know. I can only guess that what we have today is entirely wasteful.

G: But, don't you think that at the moment the restraint on sexuality is becoming less of a problem than the restraint on violence?

E: All types of restraints require a far more thorough investigation, *not* in the form of present-day psychology, but in the form of a unified human science which embraces the social as well as the psychological aspects.

G: And should one consider the psychological aspects especially in psycho-analytical terms?

E: Yes. But psycho-analysis, while it was an enormous breakthrough, has a theoretical framework which is also an example of *Zustandsreduktion*. While it goes into individual dynamics and appears to be dynamic from the psychological point of view, it is *Zustandsreduktion* because a kind of super-ego formation and Oedipus situation which can be found in middle-class people of our society is theoretically presented as eternal, as a nature-given formation of man in general. In that sense it is static.

G: But still, as you have demonstrated yourself in your book on the civilising process, you can use the basic theoretical ideas of psychoanalysis very well in a dynamic perspective. I mean, you can show the changing *Affekthaushalt* and the changing relation between ego, super-ego and id without treating them as fixed entities.

E: Yes, but psychoanalysts often proceed as if e.g. super-ego structures were unchanging. Further developments of psycho-analytic theory will be necessary for the practical problems which I have raised. Again, I am not saying Freud is wrong, because he was an enormous breakthrough. But today, psycho-analysis is one of the few branches of knowledge acquisition which still follows the ancient pattern in which the practitioner and the person doing research are not differentiated. And while I think research in all fields should be done in close relation with experimentation and practice, I also think it requires a degree of specialisation. If research is entirely in the hands of those who are at the same time doctors, the future of this branch of science is severely handicapped. My own friends who are psycho-analysts realize that psycho-analysts will have to collaborate far more with sociologists in the future than is the case today. There is no fruitful way to further development of psycho-analytic theory except by interdisciplinary collaboration.

G: In your book on the civilizing process you also used two words that are not at all technical: *Scham* and *Peinlichkeit*, referring to thresholds of shamefeeling and of revulsion. Although they sound very innocuous and easy, these words

seem to lie at the crux of the whole problem of personauity and social control. At first sight, one may be inclined to think that they refer to personal feelings, but, on closer analysis, one is inclined to think that shame and revulsion are not personal feelings, but functions of social control.

E: They are both.

G: I was leading to that. Isn't it — and that is why I called it the crux of the matter — isn't it right to say that we should get away from the idea that we are faced with a dilemma? Shouldn't we reconceptualize everything with the idea that, as you said, they are both?

E: Yes, I don't think for a moment that one could say that shame feelings and feelings of revulsion are *not* personal feelings. They are highly personal feelings. But they are at the same time built-in personal feelings, built in accordance with social controls. You cannot say they are *not* personal feelings. So there is no one or the other. Wasn't this your question?

G: No, my question was rather: shouldn't this awareness be the starting-point of a whole reconceptualization of a great many categories? For most of the categories that we are using in sociology and psychology today refer to *either* personal *or* social characteristics.

E: Well, I fully agree with that. We are bound by classifications which correspond to autonomous academic disciplines and we think that the corresponding factual data are as autonomous as the two occupational groups wish to be in relation to each other. Psychologists and sociologists wish to be academically autonomous, and our conceptualization of either 'social' or 'psychological' is really a reproduction of the professional ideology of two different academic groups.

G: Yes, but doesn't it go back even further? I mean, today it may be the ideology of two professional groups. But the whole way of thinking, of contrasting individual and society goes back much further.

E: Yes, you are absolutely right, it goes back much further and much deeper. Undoubtedly. But let us reformulate it and say a very old *Weltanschauung* division has become petrified and reinforced through its institutionalization into different disciplines.

G: The basic theme in all your work is the unity of all the apparently diverse phenomena that have been the subject-matter of history, sociology, psychology, psycho-analysis, economics, political science. The problem to many of your readers who may wish to continue with such studies is that when they see this unity, they may lose the firm grasp that a more narrow disciplinary approach might give them.

E: Well, if people have become socialized with a particular scheme of classification, they feel thrown into the sea of uncertainties if someone tells them that this scheme of classification does not correspond to the structure of what we are actually observing. Formerly people linked a particular plant, a particular type of direction of the sky, a particular type of illness, a particular type of animal with one tribe, and another animal, another direction of the sky and other aspects of the world with another tribe; people who used such a classificatory scheme were probably also very unwilling to abandon something that gave a really firm security in their whole thinking. So I can understand that people feel thrown into the sea of uncertainties if they are told that these types of divisions do not correspond to what we are observing, but are merely remnants of an old tradition of thinking. But my whole conviction is that our image of and orien-

tation in our social world will become very much easier once we realize that human beings are not economic in one of their pockets, political in another and psychological in another, in other words that *no real divisions correspond to the traditional divisions*. I say I think that one can give a new, greater certainty if one abandons this classification.

G: Yes, but the reply to this would be that the method of science in general is analytic, that is, one does not face reality with all its possible aspects at once, but tries to isolate the aspects that seem to have regularities of their own. Then, one makes a model of those regularities, hoping that this will enable one to predict — always with the condition 'other things being equal'. Now physical sciences have gone a long way along this analytic line, because there is a practical possibility to rule out disturbing conditions.

E: I think the term analytic method is a disguise for something quite fictitious. If analysis means cutting off one thing from another, it is obviously very important what scheme you use for dissecting. And my argument is that, if you dissect according to the traditional classificatory scheme, psychology here, economics there, politics there, God knows what there, then this type of dissection is obviously inadequate for what we actually observe; as we get along, it becomes more and more inadequate. Moreover, I do not agree with the theory of science that all science has to do is to analyse. True, analysis is one step, but synthesis is another. You cannot have an analytic method which does not have models for putting together again what you have dissected. Therefore, I think all the human sciences will in the end have to build an overall model of interdependent human beings, which can be improved and changed in accordance with the evidence, — in any case a model which shows how the dissected parts belong together, or can be fitted together. But today, no one shows me how psychology, sociology, economics, politics are really connected with each other.

G: But they say that, by dissecting social reality in this manner, certain partial developments can be predicted. Especially economists and also demographers claim that they can make prognoses and predictions.

E: Yes. I think that in our present theory of sciences we do not distinguish clearly enough between the application of human sciences for purposes of shortterm administrative planning, and scientific work without regard for its immediate application. Today many people take it for granted that the main task of science is to provide predictions for state or business planning. Let me give you an example. Econometrics is extremely useful in providing techniques for enabling administrators of the state and in business to make shortterm forecasts and, thus, to plan for the near future. This is very useful and very necessary, but we must not confuse these techniques with prediction in the sense used by people like Popper, who seems to consider it the main criterion of anything that aspires to the status of a science.

G: But what other criteria could you mention?

E: The other criteria, vastly underplayed today are, for instance, the criteria of explaining, and in particular for explaining longterm processes. I know that every type of explaining is linked to the possibility of forecasting, but the present emphasis on forecasting alone creates an imbalance which in the human sciences is surely due to the immediate need to legitimise themselves through the shortterm help which they give administrators in their practical tasks. So, my answer is that I would rectify this imbalance by saying that there are many different types

of forecasting. At present the emphasis on shortterm forecasting threatens to stifle basic or longterm research and theory building in sociology, without which a good deal of social action, as well as shortterm sociological research, is inevitably misconceived and misdirected. We need more basic research into the largely unknown human universe, in order to find out *why* things have happened, and *why* they are happening today.

G: Could you go on a little more in this direction? There are so many ways of conceiving of the 'why.' Some people feel satisfied when they have had a historical report, others think that they understand when they have an explanation in terms of human motives, again others think they understand if they can give a functional analysis of the social system . . .

E: My own formulation would be that our primary task is to see that the human sciences provide us with a more adequate, better fitting faculty to diagnose the present events in the social universe. Once we have a more realistic diagnosis, we can really determine what we should do about things. One can only make a better fitting diagnosis if one has long-term processes in mind. They cannot be made, as is so often done today, simply by means of short-term, makeshift predictions. In the book on the civilising and state formation processes I put forward for the first time a model for diagnosing the nexus of events in long-term processes, by showing how the development of standards and types of restraints are connected passively as well as actively with certain aspects of the state-formation process. This provided both an explanatory and a diagnostic model. One could continue it by, for instance, asking why the power of governments has increased in the last hundred years even in parliamentary democracies, as shown by the increase in personnel and in the functions of government. We must have a clear picture of why this is so. This is just one longterm problem among hundreds, which requires longterm developmental sociological research.

G: And would then the sociological solution to such problems lie in a diagnosis of the underlying interdependencies of the human beings who together form a specific social configuration, as in this instance a configuration of 'the rulers and the ruled'?

E: Yes: but this is in itself a pretty wide subject.

G: I know, but I am trying to fill in more fully what you mean by 'more adequate explanation . . .'.

E: . . .than those we have today.' Well, I mean that we can see the facts. We can demonstrate the fact that in 1850 what were regarded as functions of governments in industrial nation states were far more limited than those we have today. May I say that I think that you formulated your question a bit too abstractly? On a very empirical level it is quite possible to find relatively simple answers to the question: 'what is the explanation for the general extension of governmental activities *even* in countries that are ideologically opposed to this extension?' This is an empirical question, and we do not need to go into the interdependence of everything. It is an example of the type of question which requires explanation, and which means a stepping back from certain ideological assumptions. Why is it that in a country like America, which is severely opposed ideologically to the extension of government activities, such activities are in fact constantly growing? This is a problem which cannot be answered merely on the economic or the political level; you have to have an overall sociological model for configurational developments of this kind in order to answer such questions.