

ELIAS AND THE NEO-KANTIANS: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW¹

(A COMMENT ON BENJO MASO)

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I

Tracing Elias's intellectual debts is an interesting task, but not an easy one. Elias did not assign much priority to carefully delineating them and situating himself in relation to other writers and schools, in anything like the detail that, say, Parsons, Habermas, Bourdieu or Giddens have done. As Johan Goudsblom (1977:79) said, Elias managed to integrate through empirical research many seemingly incompatible perspectives into a 'workable synthesis', a single model of human interdependence. He regarded the scientific task of building this synthesis, applying and elaborating it, as more important than digressing into the sources of the concepts or insights which he had absorbed, let alone entering into disputes about how his use of various concepts or ideas differed from those of others. Elias further complicated the issue by challenging the conventional assumption that an 'influence' always had to come from a book: 'I am extremely conscious of the fact that others have influenced me, that I have learned from others - though not only from books, but also from the events of my age' (quoted by Goudsblom, 1977:78).

Elias probably genuinely could not see why anyone should be interested in where he had got his ideas from. He assumed people would see that the 'workable synthesis' was everything. Working directly from the theoretical model to problem areas in this rather unorthodox way, was not without its dangers. It exposed Elias to the risk of commentators (often using the history of ideas approach, which lends itself to this kind of exercise) finding in his books apparent similarities with the ideas of others but, failing to grasp the synthetic character of his work, accusing him of unacknowledged derivation, lack of originality or worse.

However, seriously attempting to trace Elias's intellectual origins is an important task,

¹ For Madeleine.

because this exercise can help us to understand and evaluate his synthesis, as a social-scientific achievement. This task has already begun in relation to the sociology of knowledge (Rehberg, 1979; Kilminster, 1993); sociology, history and psychology (Goudsblom 1987:42-60); social psychology (Niestroj, 1989); evolutionary biology (Kilminster 1991); and psychoanalysis (Schröter 1993a). Maso's article on Elias's relationship to neo-Kantian philosophy contributes to this task and, as far as we know, is the first article directly on this subject. Maso is illuminating about one of the important philosophical tendencies prominent in the academic milieu of the young Elias and the one in which he was intellectually raised. Maso has begun to map out this territory. His article helps us to understand an underestimated phase in the history of human orientation, which in turn helps to understand Elias's obstinate battle against philosophy and against neo-Kantianism in particular, to which theme he returned towards the end of his life (Schröter 1993b; Kilminster 1991).

But Maso is ambivalent about Elias. On the one hand, Maso uses his wide knowledge of neo-Kantianism to accuse Elias of failing to acknowledge that he founded his theory of civilizing processes on a 'relational' neo-Kantian epistemology, derived in particular from Ernst Cassirer of the Marburg School. On the other, he wants to acknowledge the intellectual achievement of Elias and praises him for his originality at having applied that epistemology so effectively. His achievements, Maso says, were possible precisely because he was able to incorporate those 'advanced' insights of the very philosophy which he otherwise sweepingly denounced at every opportunity. These attacks by Elias on philosophy are to be explained, Maso suggests, by the lingering bitterness felt by Elias at being unable to make a career in philosophy because of a dispute with his *Doktorvater* Richard Höningwald in early 1920s.

We intend to offer a different interpretation of the relationship between Elias and neo-Kantianism. The issue of Elias's intellectual debts takes a further interesting turn when it comes to his relationship to philosophy. He considered that his work presupposed the supersession of philosophy and refused to grant this discipline any significant autonomy whatsoever. This fact affects how we view his relationship to the neo-Kantian philosophy in which he was initially schooled. This philosophy partly provided Elias with a disciplined mental attitude, as he himself admitted (Elias 1990:131). It also alerted him to problem areas of enquiry, particularly in the field of knowledge, so constituting a point of departure for his move into

sociology. Once he had made this break, then his sociological enquiries - and in this we disagree with Maso's interpretation - became *structurally different* from philosophy, despite similarities of terminology.

When Maso writes that the leading argument against Elias's view that philosophy has reached the end of its road is Elias's own sociological work (p.60), this observation is presumably offered as an irony - or is it perhaps intended as a joke? If it is intended as a joke, then it has rebounded badly on Maso, for at least the reason that the joke relies on a conventional assumption about the status of philosophy which Maso takes for granted, but which Elias and others had moved beyond over 60 years ago. Maso assumes as a matter of course the salience of philosophy as the epistemological leader, with sociology as the follower. He says that the scientific-theoretical ideas upon which Elias's sociological model was 'based', were drawn 'directly from neo-Kantianism' (p.22). This assumption runs counter to the general historical tendency of the development of sociology, which has been increasingly to subsume questions raised in philosophy and to define its own epistemology (Kilminster 1989). The social-scientific achievement that is *The Civilizing Process* did not have, nor do such achievements require, an epistemological 'foundation' provided by philosophers. In any case, philosophical epistemologies always emerge *after* spontaneous developments in the sciences have taken place and partly form a rationalization or a summary of the implications of those developments. It is seldom the other way around.

Furthermore, Elias, Mannheim and other writers in the German sociology of knowledge tradition, were particularly conscious of the possibilities of sociology to transpose questions not only of epistemology, but also of ontology and ethics, on to another level (Kilminster 1993). In the field of knowledge, a transformed sociological epistemology would relate ways of knowing to the patterns of living together of human beings and remodel the issue of validity (Mannheim, 1929; Elias 1971). The theory of levels of integration was to render ontology empirically testable (Elias 1987;1991). On morality, Elias very early on comments that 'Ethical questions are routinely and very wrongly separated from other scientific questions' (Elias, 1921:140). How successful Elias was in his endeavour to translate questions previously posed by philosophers into terms amenable to sociological investigation, is a matter for discussion and evaluation. But Maso fails to engage with Elias's sociology in those terms, hence misunderstanding it in a

fundamental way.

II

Maso points out that Elias's often repeated criticisms of the Kantian apriori, i.e. that the Categories of the Understanding (such as space, time, number, etc.) are learned and not innate and that they develop processually, were in fact common currency amongst the anti-metaphysical neo-Kantians such as Cohen and Natorp of the Marburg School at the turn of the century. In arguing in this way, Elias was thus pushing at an open door. Many of the neo-Kantians, including even Hönigswald had, according to Maso, retained the idea of the apriori, not as referring to something innate in human cognition, but as a logical invariant. The basis of Elias's disagreement with Hönigswald, Maso continues, could not have been that Hönigswald thought that the categories were innate and Elias did not, because none of the neo-Kantians, including Hönigswald, ever claimed that the categories were innate. Maso says that the passing of time may have distorted Elias's memory of his dispute with Hönigswald.

An important document for the case Maso is trying to make about Elias's dispute with Hönigswald is Elias's Dr.phil thesis *Idee und Individuum: Eine kritische Untersuchung zum Begriff der Geschichte* from the University of Breslau in 1924 (Elias 1924b). Here it is possible to study Elias's engagement with neo-Kantianism at first hand. Maso's claims are considerably weakened by his not having consulted this thesis which has been preserved (see discussions in Korte, 1988:75-76 and Mennell, 1992:8-9). The thesis was in fact completed in July 1922 but Elias had to alter it on some points as a concession to 'Hönigswald's transcendentalism'(Elias 1990:131). Maso is also negligent in ignoring large parts of what Elias himself said about the conflict with Hönigswald, particularly in his *Norbert Elias über sich Selbst* (1990).

Maso goes to great lengths to show that denials of the apriori and/or its innateness were commonplace amongst the neo-Kantians, but in fact as far as Elias's conflict with Hönigswald is concerned that is beside the point. The related issue of *Geltung*, or validity, was of greater importance in the dispute. Of course Elias knew the intricacies of the neo-Kantian discussions of the status of the apriori - it would be surprising if this were not so. To anticipate a later argument, Elias rejects the apriori simply because it constitutes empty logical knowledge which, to make it more substantially 'universal', *would require* something like biological evidence of its

human innateness.

Maso says that Cassirer and Hönigswald occasionally polemized over the issue of *Geltung*, but he fails to mention that this issue was indeed one of *the* main focusses of debate in neo-Kantianism generally after Rudolph Lotze had established the twin frameworks of *Werte* and *Geltung* in the 1870s. Hönigswald and Elias were entering an established tradition of debate about validity in which writers took various positions on the issue some, for example like Rickert, giving an extraordinary autonomy to judgements of validity. He argued that these judgements occupied a different mode of reality from the empirical world (Rose, 1981:2-24; Kilminster, 1983:121-23;). Others came close to asserting that logical thought, as such, actually created reality. These ideas were by no means those of a philosophical minority, but represented a common philosophical view of the world that Elias was combatting. It is easy to overstate, as Maso does, the 'anti-metaphysical' character of the work of the Marburg School. As the Kantian authority Lewis White Beck points out:

By the standards of recent philosophy Marburg Neo-Kantianism, or panlogistic transcendental philosophy, was no less metaphysical [than earlier Kantianism], but by the standards of the time its orientation around the "fact of science" seemed to make it at least antispeculative (Beck, 1967:470).

In his reconstruction of neo-Kantianism Maso plays up the stress on science in the Marburg School because this enables him better to display the apparent continuities with the work of Elias. On the other hand, he underplays the metaphysical residues in their work and represses some of their more far-fetched excursions into idealism, which went hand-in-hand with their tying in of philosophy to the products of science. These aspects are decidedly *discontinuous* with the work of Elias. For example, Maso cites the work of Hermann Cohen as metaphysics-rejecting and as being against psychologism (p.29). However, Cohen was also a Platonist who regarded logical thought as autonomously productive and generative of the social and natural reality. Beck describes the work of Cohen as 'extravagant panlogism'(1967:471). Whilst Cohen talked of 'pure logic', Paul Natorp, the other famous Marburg Kantian, quoted by Maso as anticipating Elias's ideas about the process-character of science, preferred the term 'general logic', meaning the idea that the logic of thought itself was independent of the process of cognition, whether this was viewed from the point of view of either subjectification or

objectification (see Rose, 1982:10; Beck, 1967:471).

When these considerations are taken into account and a fuller picture of the Marburg School is painted, the great difference between neo-Kantian epistemology and ontology and Elias's developmental, sociological approach to society and knowledge emerges in sharp relief. There is just no sense at all in which Elias's sociology could have been 'founded' on work which makes those kinds of assumptions. On the contrary, he departs from them. Nor could it be said that Elias's work even follows the 'method' of neo-Kantianism, because method for them was a form of transcendental, logical inquiry in pursuit of invariants, that he specifically rejected. The Marburg School philosophers had very different objectives. The demonstration by Maso of superficial parallels of terminology, or even problem areas, between the two, cannot mask the basic structural difference of approach between that of the Marburg philosophers and that of Elias.

In his doctoral thesis of 1924 Elias leaves more than enough room for philosophical discussion and the work starts off with lengthy discussions of general principles, in rather cramped, neo-Kantian terminology. At this stage of his intellectual development this is the only conceptual vocabulary available to him and the rather laboured expression does not make the document easy to read. However, it is possible to recognise already in an embryonic form the characteristic later Eliasian themes of studying people in the plural, the history of humankind as a whole, an emphasis on process and societal diversity and the need to place single historical facts in the context of the whole society.

But very prominent is the issue of *Geltung*. Interestingly, on pp 12-13 of the dissertation Elias uses a long quotation from Cassirer to back up an argument for the historicity of the concept and principle of *Geltung*. The point Cassirer makes in the quotation is that history does not follow apriori from the general laws of causality. Scientific ideas emerge in 'causal sequences ...so complicated and knotted together that it is impossible for us to single out one thread and separately to follow it.' Elias asks: 'what is in reality the form of this relationship between a single fact and an idea?'(p.14) that is, what is the specific order allowing us to pass judgements [*Urteile*] about facts that can claim to be true, i.e. valid and scientific? He concludes that 'The dialectical process, encompassing everything that claims validity, consists of that particular order through which historical facts are connected to each other; it is the order of

history'(Elias, 1924:26).

The thrust of Elias's argument about *Geltung* in the thesis is that it is contradictory in a time-bound and changing socio-historical world to claim a timeless status for the principle of validity of the facts of empirical inquiry. Hence, it is impossible to separate a science of principles (philosophy) from historical science, which has its basis in experiences and provides a 'time-determined body of facts' (p.41). He declares: 'There is fundamentally no possibility of indicating a point where philosophy stops being historical philosophy' (p.42). Elias sees an indissoluble social link between the deduction of something that is valid and 'the someone who is striving to know what is valid' (p.28), so he concludes that it is only a small step 'to understand the dialectical process as a function of a time sequence' (p.28). In the neo-Kantian language of the dissertation, *Urteil* and *Geltung* are, he says, inseparable. He continues (although not quite with the clarity and straightforwardness which characterize his later writings):

And when in this way the science of principles, in its dialectical process, then too, regards its own principles as historically determined facts, whose claim to validity must be verified, only then will it become a critical historical science in the real sense of the word. As long as it defends itself by rigid and absolute principles against the influence which is necessarily exerted on its own procedure by autonomously conceived knowledge and bans the insight that also its own principle, although claiming timeless validity ... is time-determined and ego-related [*Ich-bezogen*], namely a *relative* concept of absolute wholeness, their endeavours will remain fruitless (Elias, 1924:45).

If, as Maso says, Hönigswald and Cassirer were not fierce opponents, but did nonetheless polemize on *Geltung*, the subject-object dichotomy and on Leibniz's monadology, then we feel it is highly likely that Elias would have known about these polemics. Although he does not have regard to the fact that Elias's subsequent discussions of these questions were in a sociological and not a philosophical idiom, Maso has nonetheless usefully pointed out (p.39) that Elias's subsequent work can be seen as having taken Cassirer's side on all those three issues. The evidence of the dissertation supports this interpretation. Citing Cassirer probably provided Elias, as a lowly doctoral candidate in a philosophy faculty, with an authority of high status for introducing his own argument about the historicity of *Geltung*, a subject which he knew might be problematic with Hönigswald. Quoting Cassirer approvingly in his dissertation was

effectively to take his side in any disputes that may have been going on with Hönigswald. It could also have been intended by Elias as provocative, although it is hard to know this for certain.

What is very apparent in Elias's dissertation, however, is that already at that stage he had developed a commitment to *sociology*. He talks of 'a multitude of I's [*Vielheit der Iche*]...who are connected to each other in an unambiguous relationship ... at the same time, however, a multitude of 'you' [*Du*], objectively determinable I's, who necessarily have to be a possible object of historical research' (p.47). He further suggests that in order better to solve the problem of the relationship between history and ethics, which boils down to relating how 'dutiful activity' in relation to others conforms to the conditions of a historical society, it will be necessary to 'look more deeply into the structure of society' (p.54).² We feel, therefore, that it is both misleading and unfounded to imply, as Maso does, that Elias opportunistically turned to the low prestige newcomer discipline of sociology because he had no more career chances left in philosophy. He clearly did not *intend* to remain a philosopher.

The standard Kantian argument about the universal validity of the categories always was and still is, a logical one. The universality of the categories cannot be explained genetically without the inquiry itself exemplifying the very categories that are being explained, thus confirming their invariance. It is obvious from the dissertation that Elias had grasped the nature of this so-called 'transcendental' argument, but had tried to render both the apriori and the issue of *Geltung* in dynamic, historical, social-scientific terms. As Gerd Wolandt says: 'The historically sensitive Elias did not want to acknowledge the ahistoricity of the validity theme (*Geltungsproblematik*)' (Wolandt, 1977: 128).

However, Elias had to write a 'summary' of his dissertation (which document is all Elias actually talked about in his interview '*Notizen zum Lebenslauf*') which is another story (see Schröter, 1993b). Here, it is possible to see exactly how, for the sake of getting his doctorate, he compromised with Hönigswald on the question of 'invariance'. The subtitle of the summary is 'A Contribution to the Philosophy of History', which is striking because in the dissertation itself he had already argued that such a field was a nonsense. The summary starts out mentioning three

² This is the last sentence of the typescript. Most probably, Elias did follow up this idea in the following three pages, but he took them out later, noting on the cover '*[die Seiten 55-57 fehlen]*', as part of his attempt to make Hönigswald accept the thesis.

types of 'invariants' or 'unchanging relationships', whereas no such things are mentioned in the dissertation. On the contrary, there everything is in flux, movement: *panta rhei*. The three invariants, which all run counter to explicit statements in the dissertation, are briefly : (i) events in nature which follow physical time; (ii) the subject of experience, the I; and (iii) the validity of historical facts. At the end, there is a deep bow to Hönigswald: 'Due to the unifying power of the ordering principle of *Geltung*, through which the historical process appears as order, it is thus principally possible to speak of a science of history and of a historical truth' (p.3). Further, after having presented thought processes as a dialectical sequence, leading to the conclusion that every single idea is rooted in this dialectical process, Elias also added the sentence: 'The idea of *Geltung* as the principle of dialectical processes transcends the movements of this process' (p.2). Many years later, in his *Norbert Elias über sich Selbst*, he explained what he had done in adding this conciliatory sentence:

I bowed to the philosophical fetish of the concept of *Geltung*, which most certainly has its place, like any other concept, in the process of human thinking and only becomes comprehensible through its function in this ordering of sequences [*Ordnung des Nacheinander*], but which often served the philosophers, being the secularized heirs of theological modes of thinking, as a symbol of their own claims to eternity, of their own floating above the unending flow of development (Elias 1990:134).

The implications of Elias's argument about the categories were far reaching. If, as presuppositions in Kantian terminology, the categories have merely a logical status (which was the force of the dominant neo-Kantian view) then they are 'timeless' universals only in a rather vacuous sense, as an artefact solely of the philosophical reasoning process. As such, their cognitive value (a favourite term of Elias's) is rather low, even though they are surrounded by an unwarranted awe. For Elias, the only way left open for rescuing any solid universal significance for the Kantian categories, *would be* empirically to establish their biological innateness. In the absence of evidence such as this, the continued championing of their empty logical universality by philosophers alerted Elias to the function such argumentation performed for them as a group. In sociological language, he had seen the connection between spurious claims to universal knowledge and social power:

Only gradually it became clear to me that the concept of validity had no other function

than the one Hönigswald demonstrated in this reaction to my doubts: as a part of an argument system it functions as a shield against critical counter-arguments directed at the elementary practice of philosophy, which is the reduction of observable processes in time to something that defies time, movement and transitoriness. (Elias 1990:131)

Elias came into philosophy and sociology from the study of medicine, and this experience fed into his reflections about human beings and human societies. Elias (1990:114-121) drew attention to the contradiction between the philosophical-idealistic and the anatomical-physiological perspectives. Emotion or feeling and its expression were one undivided whole, but only later in a civilizing process of humankind does a differentiation develop between emotional movements and muscle movements. Yet, the *homo clausus* mentality induces people to understand muscle movements as the expression of some inner existence, as if emotion was the cause and (face) muscle movements the result. Hönigswald and other neo-Kantians made the same distinction between an inner and an outer existence; a 'world outside' that was supposed to stand in contrast to the 'inner world', the sphere of ideas, the transcendental constants (*Gegebenheiten*) of the apriori.

During his medical training, Elias realized in the dissecting room that the fundamental structure of the human brain was completely attuned to the complementary character of sensory perception and movement, to the constant exchange between 'inner' and 'outer' worlds, to connecting orientation and self-regulation (self-steering) in an encompassing world. Hönigswald reacted to these ideas by pointing to the inadequacies of biologism and insisting on the validity of judgements 'that remained untouched by such contaminations', as Elias puts it (p.131).

From all this it seems to us that not just the apriori, nor just *Geltung*, but the status of philosophy as such, was already at stake in the dispute with Hönigswald. Although Elias still used the cramped, neo-Kantian technical vocabulary, from our vantage point we can see that he was struggling to appropriate the idea of *Geltung* as part of the comprehension of sequences of knowledge development and ultimately of social development. With hindsight, it is possible to see that Elias was at this point in the early stages of transforming the philosophical concept of validity into a sociological one, as part of a theory of social and scientific development, in which the issue becomes reframed. As he put it, after this point he more and more sought a focus not on 'a sequence of dialectical thought constructions (*Denkgebilden*)' but on 'phases of social

development in which people of flesh and blood figured' (Elias 1990:133). When later Elias elaborated 'universal features of human society' (Elias 1978:104ff; 1987:226ff) he was careful to call these 'process universals', which arise out of comparative, historical inquiries into societies at different stages of development and can be empirically tested. They are not aprioris derived from transcendental argumentation. The insistence on subjecting philosophical reflections to the rigours of empirical enquiry, is a prominent strand in Elias's work. It has its origins in his break with neo-Kantianism.

In his Dr.phil thesis, Elias was effectively making the Marburg neo-Kantians dance to their own tune. For them, scientific knowledge was the pinnacle of reason and truth. He was saying that if they followed through their own 'anti-metaphysical' proclamations and applied the scientific criterion of adequate evidence to their own claims about the universality of the categories, then there were serious consequences. They would expose the emptiness of the categories and hence their own pretentious 'claims to eternity'. This was what Hönigswald seems to have found unacceptable.

III

There is enough internal evidence from Elias's dissertation to refute Maso's imputation of opportunistic motives to Elias in changing from philosophy to sociology because of having spoiled his chances with Hönigswald of a philosophical career. But what of Maso's idea that only these very bitter experiences 'could offer an explanation for the tone in which he expresses himself in later writings on the work of philosophers' (p.27)? Why Elias assailed philosophers in such an indiscriminating way, often caricaturing them at considerable risk to his own credibility and reception, is difficult to fathom. Maso's angry demonstrations from the field of neo-Kantianism of how incorrect Elias's generalizations about philosophers were, is proof of the risk Elias took. In many ways, he provoked the kind of response Maso has made. Others have reacted in a similarly defensive way (Sathaye 1973; Albert, 1985).

But we disagree that Elias's attitude towards philosophy was simply the result of the bitter experience of his brush with Hönigswald. Maso disregards the fact Elias did not just fight Kant's apriori, but also attacked in various places the more modern ideas of Popper, Apel, Chomsky, Kuhn, Lakatos and others which he regarded as different expressions of *the same*

basic structure of thinking. He has a sociological view of belief systems and their functions. Behind his crusade was a scepticism about the credentials of philosophers as a group, the assumptions upon which they took it on themselves to examine the assumptions and findings of others, including scientists. For Elias, philosophy was an equivocal subject with a dubious warrant, which Elias felt leaned itself to the smuggling into its analyses of undeclared prejudices, values and political convictions (Elias 1982; Kilminster 1989). His attacks on philosophy, as a style of thought, were an organic part of his sociological programme.

There is a strange contradiction in Maso: on the one hand he compliments Elias for taking the neo-Kantian relational model into sociology (insofar as this is what he did). On the other, he claims that all of Elias's arguments are entirely integral with philosophy and, moreover, that they are not new. He even suggests that Elias's attacks on philosophers are simply an unorthodox way of presenting his position in philosophical discussions (p.37)!

Maso's contorted reconstruction of Elias's motives and intentions in moving from philosophy to sociology tells us more about Maso than it does about Elias. Elias's criticisms of Hönigswald and his attacks on philosophy in general, far from reflecting the animosity of a man who has recklessly dashed his career prospects in the field, are in fact evidence of Elias's courage and high scientific integrity. He was prepared to risk a great deal, including his career, in order to take a stand on a matter of social-scientific principle. The tough-minded, uncompromising side of his character surfaced at a number of points during his life. Already in '*Vom Sehen in der Natur*', his first publication, he alluded to the 'danger which cannot be overestimated' of people unused to taking responsibility for their own decisions, falling into the hands of an educator or manipulator who knows how to make use of this weakness (Elias 1921:143). In 1928 at the Zurich Congress of Sociology he came out publicly against his *Habilitation* sponsor Alfred Weber over Weber's individualism and commitment to the apriori (Mennell 1992:13-14; Kilminster 1993: 93-96). Elias later said that once in England he could have had a much more comfortable life if he had accepted dominant ideas, but 'I was not disposed to compromise. That I really could not do' (quoted in Mennell, 1992:19). In a similar vein, Elias said of his friend and colleague Karl Mannheim, that he 'could have produced something greater if his career would have been less important to him' (Elias, 1990:139).

It may be difficult for people brought up in highly status conscious societies such as our

own to understand someone like Elias. If he had been so fond of a career, then why would he have risked a conflict with Hönigswald in the first place and in the second, why did he stick so uncompromisingly to his position, which for a very long time was a very isolated one? Writing in the 1970s, Elias said that in societies where status and power differentials play a dominant part, people often fail to see that 'the aim they have set their heart on is dictated by status-considerations, so that they neglect great personal potentialities whose actualisation holds out a much greater promise for fulfillment' (Elias, in Wouters, 1977: 445).³

IV

Maso's article gives the impression of being nuanced and balanced, with praise and blame being evenly distributed, but Maso is selective. He employs a rather dubious method of selective quoting, for example in his opening section, where he tries to establish that Elias could never free himself from the German academic ideal of *Unzeitgemäßheit*, the ideal of distancing oneself from daily worries and politics. Maso argues that this idea had become an anachronism by 1939, which partly accounts for why *The Civilizing Process* 'remained only noticed by a few for such a long time' (p.26).

In order to establish that Elias would not compromise on the question of political involvement being kept separate from science, according to that tradition, Maso quotes from a letter from Elias to Wolandt in 1977 in which Elias said that he had 'never been able to make a compromise with the *Zeitgeist*' (Maso, p.23-4). But in the letter in question it is clear that when Elias talked of never compromising with the *Zeitgeist*, he was referring to intellectual fads and fashions, not to being detached from politics or the major social issues of the day (extract in Wolandt, 1977).

In 1939, far from Elias being someone adhering to an anachronistic German academic tradition of aloofness from social problems, he in fact embraced a sociological programme in which illuminating the human social condition with a view to potentially changing society, was *integral* (Kilminster 1993; see also later glosses by Elias, 1965:173; Elias & Dunning, 1986:143-144;). This feature of Elias's sociology helps us to understand his attacks on

³ The article from which this quotation is taken was first published in Dutch in the *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift* (Wouters 1976). Elias helped me to translate it, and in that process suggested some changes. The sentence quoted here is entirely his. [CW]

philosophy and on the doctrine of the apriori in particular. Elias wanted to encourage the development of adequate sociological knowledge as an aid to understanding and thus contributing towards controlling, blind social forces. The doctrine of the apriori suggests that our thinking is forever and tragically limited by universal categories which we cannot shake off. Elias believed that (together with Cartesianism) the apriori doctrine stemmed from and encouraged a defeatist attitude in the face of the task of developing new theories and models for understanding emergent social processes and aiding our orientation and potentially our control of them (Elias, 1991, passim; Kilminster, 1991:xxi). His work can be interpreted as a continuous polemic against this kind of high-brow fatalism, which he found in abundance in his neo-Kantian teachers' talk of cognitive 'limits' to human knowledge.

When Elias set out to study the civilizing process in the 1930s, not only was he animated by the urgency of the major social problem of the time - the breakdown of European 'civilization' and the drift towards war (cf. Elias 1989:45/6) - but also he began with a *political* subject of his own youth: *The Civilizing Process* opens with a comparison of *Kultur and Zivilisation*, which alludes amongst other things to the fierce battle between the French oriented *Zivilisationsliteraten* and exponents of the idealistic German tradition in his mind. Maso confuses the scientist's detachment with aloofness from politics, that is, the *Unzeitgemäßheit* of the German academic intelligentsia.

V

Turning specifically to Ernst Cassirer, Maso lists a number of criticisms made by Elias of omissions in philosophical treatments of knowledge and shows how each one does not apply to the work of Cassirer, thus proving that at least in relation to Cassirer, Elias was unfair to philosophy. These include studying science as a long-term process; science as historical not eternal; the importance of pre-science for the development of science; the inadequacy of the model of the individual knowing subject; the fallacy of regarding mathematical physics as the paradigm model of a science; the link between language and thinking; and the importance for humans of symbols. But Maso is reading these Eliasian themes back into Cassirer. All that Maso has shown is that Cassirer did indeed locate these issues, *as problem areas*. Maso disregards the fact that Cassirer still dealt with them in a Kantian fashion, albeit a modified one, whilst Elias

appropriated them in a sociological fashion. This is a crucial difference. Maso accentuates the similarities in the works of Elias and Cassirer, whilst neglecting the differences.

Nowhere has Cassirer articulated any original theory of social development, social power or the struggles of real groups of people in societies to account for the cognitive changes that he delineates. Like the other Marburgians, he was prepared to study the actual findings of science and the history of culture and genuinely tried to blend empirical, historical evidence with the discussion of principles. As Cassirer himself put it in the Preface to the third volume of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*: 'As in my earlier works, I have tried to avoid any cleavage between systematic and historical considerations and have striven for a close fusion between the two' (Cassirer 1929:xvi). In his programmatic statements at any rate, Cassirer claimed, against traditional Kantianism, that fundamental categories are not permanent but are open to constant development.

But beyond this and superficial similarities of terminology, the comparison between the two writers ends. In attending closely to empirical historical materials, Cassirer probably went about as far as it is possible to go in philosophy without ceasing to be a philosopher altogether. But his work – brilliant and breathtakingly erudite to be sure – still remained 'the philosophy of this or that subject. Far from departing from the apriori and the transcendental method in the direction of a developmental sociology, as Elias did, Cassirer *extended* them to a study of the ideal forms and categories of language, myth, religion, folklore, magic and astrology. He was interested in demonstrating the forms and categories of the human mind from its early beginnings.

Cassirer refers again and again to the energy of the 'human spirit' which 'gives form to reality' which is otherwise chaotic (1923:78-79 and *passim*). The fundamental structure of his studies of human culture was transcendental-philosophical and prefigures later developments in philosophical anthropology. This is very clear from his own description of how his programme was intended to 'amplify' and to 'extend' Kant:

Thus the critique of reason becomes the critique of culture. It seeks to understand and to show how every content of culture, in so far as it is more than a mere isolated content, in so far as it is grounded in a universal principle of form, presupposes an original act of the human spirit. Herein the basic thesis of idealism finds its true and complete

confirmation. (Cassirer 1923:80)

It is difficult to imagine a statement of intent further from the sociology of Norbert Elias than this. For all of his career, Cassirer never resolved the tension in his work between the evidence of long-term cognitive change that he found in the history of sciences and human culture and the 'timeless', invariant principles he sought to extract from them.⁴ The absurdity of claiming that such principles had remained the same throughout history and would presumably remain so even in any possible future society, despite changes in dominant interests and social purposes, was a criticism levelled at Cassirer's work long ago (see Stephens, 1949:174).

Maso executes a sleight-of-hand in trying to equate Cassirer's idea that various cultural activities cannot be reduced to each other, with the concept of 'relative autonomy' sometimes used by Elias (Maso, p.37). But the superficiality of this parallel is revealed when it is related to the *basis* of such an autonomy in both writers. Elias had specific ideas about this in his theories of levels of integration and civilizing processes, but Cassirer's attempt at grounding the different fields of culture conspicuously fell back into a reductive, philosophical idealism. As William H. Werkmeister pointed out, all of the fields are for Cassirer 'only functions of the same integrating mind, and in and through its diversified products this mind reveals itself and reveals the world of experience as an expression or manifestation of mind' (1949:796).

Elias's observations on symbol formation in *The Symbol Theory* (1991) and other writings, on the other hand, come at the problem from a practical-social point of view, in an evolutionary perspective. For Elias, since human beings are part of the process of biological evolution and continue it, symbols are partly tangible sound patterns of human communication, made possible by the biological precondition of the human vocal apparatus. At the same time, symbol formation is bound up with practical social communication, orientation and group survival. For Elias, conceptual symbols such as 'nature,' or 'time' are very high level syntheses,

⁴ Towards the end of his life, Cassirer began to move away from the 'panlogism' of the Marburgers and from the language of 'critical idealism'. In his last work, *An Essay on Man* (1944), Cassirer expressed sympathy with a form of realism, in which the existence of objects independent of the scientist was stressed; and also argued that human symbols had an important functional value (Cassirer, 1944: ch III). In these two ideas, anyway, the later writings of Cassirer could be seen to have come closer to those of Elias. But, at the same time, in the same work, as Fritz Kaufmann (1949:817) pointed out, Cassirer also reached out towards Dilthey's objective idealism and philosophy of life, as well as towards the 'more metaphysical prefigurements' of Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. These directions, on the other hand, are decidedly discontinuous with Elias's sociology.

having embedded in them traces of earlier stages of social and scientific development.

Elias is interested in the 'sequential order' of stages in a long-term inter-generational knowledge process whereby symbols become socially standardized and form, for later generations, reality-congruent knowledge. The ascent to that level of synthesis is for Elias a product of the whole development of humankind and is a process which exceeds the scope of any one individual cognitive act of 'abstraction' (Elias, 1992: 174ff; 184ff). Elias is not trying to uncover logical invariants, on the lines of Cassirer, nor for him are symbols the product of the 'human spirit'. Their two approaches are on different tracks. Each has a completely different theory of abstraction. It therefore seems to us that Maso's throwaway comment about Elias's *The Symbol Theory*, that it 'in many respects seems only a summary of Cassirer's 'philosophy of symbolic forms'', (p.41) is a judgement that has not been thought through properly and is irresponsible.

Maso mentions (p.39) that Elias said in an unpublished interview (Heilbron 1984) that in his student days he had read Cassirer's book *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* and had expressed an 'affinity' with his work in general. What Maso does not make clear is that in the interview the 'affinity' is linked by Elias to several things: Cassirer's work was moving away from metaphysics, Cassirer also came from Breslau and Elias knew one of his sons. Elias was in fact related by marriage to Cassirer, even though he never met him (Schröter 1993a). If Maso is right that the unacknowledged philosophical foundation of *The Civilizing Process* lay in Cassirer's relational epistemology, it seems very surprising that Elias would have laid so clear a trail to the source of his inspiration. What is more likely, however, is that Elias talked freely about an 'affinity' with Cassirer because it was so obvious to him that what he (Elias) was doing was basically different from Cassirer's approach.

There is backing for this interpretation in statements by Elias about Cassirer in correspondence with Mike Featherstone, editor of *Theory, Culture and Society* in 1986, which he has kindly made available to us and given us permission to quote. The following passage is worth quoting at length because of its importance for the present controversy. Elias is responding to part of an earlier letter from Featherstone in which he mentioned that in a paper on the concept of the 'field', Pierre Bourdieu had described it as a 'relational' form of thought and had cited as other exponents Cassirer, Lewin, the Russian formalist Tynianov and Elias.

Featherstone had agreed with this interpretation. Elias replied:

If Bourdieu really links my work to that of Cassirer, it would indicate a rather grave misunderstanding of Cassirer's work, as well as of my own. I have very high regard for Cassirer. He was a man of integrity and of exceptional intelligence. If I had been born in his generation, I too probably would have remained a philosopher and a neo-Kantian and I too would have never found my way out of the metaphysical trap. I would have believed, as Cassirer never ceased to believe, that science deals only with phenomena or, in other words, with appearances (which was still the essential contention of Cassirer's Einstein book) and would never have found my way towards becoming a sociologist and thus towards dealing with real events, such as power struggles between human groups, such as cycles of violence formerly in England and now, for instance, in Lebanon or with long-term social processes such as state formation processes, of knowledge growth, of urbanisation, of population growth and of dozens of other processes, now in the centre of process sociology, its theory, its empirical work and its practical applications. Cassirer has presented in an admirably clear manner the fact that Einstein recognized the relational character of physical time. One could possibly say that his, Einstein's, theory of time had a relational character, although Einstein was by no means consistent in that respect, for he still treated time sometimes as if it were an object that could shrink. Cassirer was merely the philosophical interpreter of Einstein's theory of time which, in order to avoid calling it relativistic, one may call relationist. But although Einstein recognized the relational character of physical time, he was still very far from recognizing the instrumental character of social time and thus of time in general which I have tried to present in my book on that subject [*Time: An Essay*: RK/CW] This approach to the problem of time was entirely beyond the horizon of a neo-Kantian philosopher and in fact contrary to his view on time. It is highly misleading to use 'relationism' as a purely formalistic category, disguising fundamental differences of substance (*Elias to Featherstone*, 15 November, 1986).

Elias's sociology does indeed work with a relational model of society and we think that Maso has done a service in highlighting the importance of this aspect of Elias's work, which is not always appreciated. But Maso does not actually prove that it came from Cassirer, insofar as

an epistemological model can be derived and applied. Maso dazzles the reader with detailed displays of his knowledge of the personages and works of neo-Kantianism, but this masks the weakness of his proofs. He cites no hard evidence of the derivation. His 'proof' consists in simply assuming the connection is established and asserting it several times until the reader forgets that it has in fact yet to be substantiated. A careful reading shows that he relies on *ad hominem* arguments and rhetorical tricks.

Even before he has expounded Cassirer on substance and function, Maso says, for example, 'the sociological paradigm of Elias's main work was *clearly* based on the epistemological conclusions Cassirer drew from [etc]' (p.42, our emphasis). He says that Cassirer's insights '*undoubtedly* played a decisive role in the development of Elias's thinking' (p.52, our emphasis) which is simply begging the question. Talking about Elias's observations about individual and society in *The Society of Individuals*, Maso says 'that these ideas are wholly in agreement with the epistemology of Cassirer contained in *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff* 'is obvious' (p.51, our emphasis). Furthermore, as pieces of evidence for the derivation of important ideas in Elias from Cassirer, Maso's citing of the fact that both writers were fond of the metaphors of Pallas Athene emerging from the head of Zeus and of sailing between Scylla and Charybdis, is simply ridiculous. As is the example of their common use of the metaphor of the melody and its single tones (Maso p.51) because this was a common example in the writings of the *Gestalt* school and was widely used in those days.

There are basic differences in the use of relational models. Such models in geometry, chemistry and physics, which is what Cassirer mostly had in mind in *Substanzbegriff und Funktionsbegriff*, will not have the same character as ones in sociology, because the subject matter of the sciences differs. Cassirer argued that concepts of things or forces in the physical sciences do not represent the essence of an object as such, but are 'instruments produced by thought for the purpose of comprehending the confusion of phenomena as an ordered and measurable whole' (1910 (1923):166). In other words, concepts of things are merely a means for stating relations, a view that effectively states that objects are fictional. There is a world of difference between this conception and Elias showing the shifting, relational nature of the power balances between real interdependent social groups in a figuration.

We disagree with Maso that *The Civilizing Process* can primarily be defined by its use of

a 'relational model'. Maso overlooks that Elias's discussion of the substance/function theme in relation to individual and society in his essay 'The Society of Individuals' of 1939, is basically connected with the *processual model* which gives the *Civilizing Process* its title. It is telling that Elias preferred the term process sociology to figurational sociology, because process inquiry represents a higher level of synthesis than figurational investigation (Elias 1985: 276). Elias describes the 1939 essay as 'sketches...conceived as a part of the comprehensive theory contained in volume 2 of that book' (Elias 1991:viii). It was not that Elias simply *applied* 'a functional-relational model' to social processes, as Maso says (p.52). What he achieved was an understanding of people *in terms of processes*, individual, social and biological. The 1939 essay was composed as part of the theory developed at the end of *The Civilizing Process*, after a complex interplay with evidence. It is not, as Maso says, in a philosophical fashion, a discussion of the 'theoretical foundations' of the *Civilizing Process*, if by this is meant discussion of an epistemology derived from philosophy and forming a starting point for the theoretical and empirical investigation of human societies.

The question of the intellectual origins of the relational aspect of Elias's work (and indeed other aspects) is a complex problem, which cannot be solved by fiat. When Elias came on to the intellectual scene in Germany in the 1920s, the debate about the epistemological implications of Einstein's relativity theories in physics had been going on for some time and shaded over into the cognate subject of perspectivism (Bendix, 1970:101ff; Lichtheim, 1974:85ff). In the early essays of Mannheim, for example, dating from 1922-28 (Mannheim, 1952; 1953; 1982) there are discussions of the importance for sociology of the relational view of the world. The idea is widely discussed in various formulations in these essays, the word 'relationism' appearing first in the essay 'Competition as a Cultural Phenomenon' in 1928 (1952:191-229).

The textual and circumstantial evidence is reasonably strong in favour of Mannheim, not Elias, as the first sociologist systematically to see the importance of relational models. Whether he got the inspiration from Cassirer is not known, although this is possible. Mannheim attended lectures by Cassirer in Berlin between 1913-15 (Woldring, 1986:6). Mannheim's doctoral dissertation, 'The Structural Analysis of Epistemology' of 1922 (Mannheim, 1953:15-73) shows familiarity with the work of the Marburg School in general, although Cassirer himself is not

explicitly cited there, at least in the available English translation. As a student, Mannheim reviewed one of Cassirer's books (Woldring 1986:7). In an unpublished essay dating from 1924-25, Mannheim cites several of Cassirer's works whilst discussing the relational idea of 'conjunctive knowing' (Mannheim 1982:280,285). In *Ideology and Utopia*, Mannheim mentions the compatibility of his relationism with quantum theory and the Einsteinian relativistic picture of the universe. Mannheim says explicitly there that that trend in the natural sciences 'in its unformulated relationism is surprisingly similar to our own' (Mannheim 1929:275; see also Mulkay, 1979:15).

In our view, Maso writes Mannheim out of the story far too peremptorily, commenting cryptically that whilst he made good use of the concept of relationism, he gave it a 'completely different meaning' (Maso:49). But Mannheim's relational view of society was at the core of his attempt to build a sociological epistemology and a science of politics (Simonds 1979:10-14). Relationism (which Mannheim tended to use interchangeably with perspectivism) signified that 'all of the elements of meaning in a given situation have reference to one another and derive their significance from this reciprocal interrelationship' (Mannheim 1929:76). For Mannheim, the different perspectives had to be seen as a '*function* of a certain social position' (ibid:252, our emphasis; see also Mannheim, 1929:16-20). Viewing society and knowledge in this way, enabled him both to show how that relativism only arises if one assumes a timeless location outside these interrelationships; and to expose as situationally determined or partial, the claims to absolute knowledge of politicians. Although Elias integrates Freudian insights differently, he and Mannheim shared a fundamentally relational view of society (Mannheim, 1929:253ff; Rehberg, 1979:147; Kilminster, 1993:88ff).

The point is that Maso had to gloss over the affinity between Elias's work and Mannheim's relationistic sociology, because its publication dates prior to that of *The Civilizing Process* undermine Maso's claim that Elias was the first writer systematically to employ relationism in sociology. At the same time, Mannheim's contribution had to be minimized just in case someone pointed to him as the possible source of Elias's relational model, thus considerably weakening Maso's argument about Cassirer. Maso is determined to find a plausible source of Elias's relational thinking in a *philosopher*, because it suits his polemical purpose, which seems to be to revel in the irony of Elias's supposed continuation of the very philosophy which he

claimed to have left behind and always vigorously denounced.

Because evidence is at a premium, it may not be possible definitively to settle these issues. For his own reasons, Maso has tried to place a premature closure on the matter by dubiously nominating Cassirer unequivocally as Elias's 'source'. On the available bibliographical and circumstantial evidence, however, it is just as plausible to suggest that Elias got his relational inspiration from Mannheim. On the other hand, it is equally possible that the discussions of relational thinking and references to Cassirer, particularly in Mannheim's essay 'A sociological theory of culture and its knowability (conjunctive and communicative thinking)' dated between 1924-5 (Mannheim,1982) were the result of his having learned of these matters from Elias, with whom he had just become good friends. It is a further possibility that they had both simultaneously imbibed the same problem area from a common sociological-philosophical culture in which it had become widely discussed in various forms and were both trying to develop relationism along sociological lines.

VI

Turning now to the issue of substantialism, traces of which Maso claims blight Elias's theory of civilizing processes, being the legacy of his failure fully to carry through into sociology the relational-functional epistemology of Cassirer. According to Maso, for Elias a basic 'animalic substance' exists in all people, which consists of 'wild, untamed drives' (p.58). Treating these drives as innate, as Elias does, gives them a substance character, thus falling back into the metaphysics he was trying to overcome. Maso advocates that the concept of 'drives' in Elias should be replaced by 'dispositions'. This would render superfluous the 'metaphysical' speculations in the research of the figurational school about whether the level of self-controls has decreased or increased in recent decades, or looking for 'functional equivalents' for the state in the simpler societies where highly 'civilized' conduct also occurs. Rather, one would study, for example, the circumstances which have led, respectively, to a relatively weak or a relatively strong development of dispositions towards aggressive behaviour (p.59).

That may sound as if Maso is making an important contribution to the debate about Elias's work. But one's belief in his interpretation and hence in the correctives to the theory he suggests, begin to falter as one comes to check out the quotations from Elias that Maso uses as

he tries to establish his case for the substantialist 'basis' of Elias's work. To make his case, Maso has to find places where Elias, despite his best intentions, apparently still clings on to substance thinking. Maso quotes a lot from the latter part of section I of Part I of *The Society of Individuals* (Elias,1991b). Here Elias is in fact making a strong plea for *not* thinking about *society* in terms of substances: 'it is necessary to give up thinking in terms of single, isolated substances and to start thinking in terms of relationships and functions' (p.19: German edition 37-38; quoted also by Maso:51).

In this text, for the sake of an argument which aims at dissolving erroneous notions of substance in the human area, Elias refers in passing to physical and animal data as apparent 'substances' - which they relatively speaking are, *in comparison with social data*. In making his case for substantialism in Elias, Maso relies heavily on the occurrence of the word substance in these asides. When Elias writes of humans that 'everything that gives their animal substance the quality of a human being, primarily their psychical self-control, their individual character, takes on its specific shape in and through relationships to others' (Elias 1991:32) it is obvious from the context that he is in fact talking about what, from an evolutionary point of view, people have in common biologically with each other and with some other living creatures. This surely does not permit Maso to conclude that 'this idea that people possess an 'animalic substance' has become a *cornerstone* of the image of human beings in the civilizing theory' (Maso:56, our emphasis).

Later, Elias mentions four types of constraints as *central* to his approach of human problems and, correspondingly, also of the problem of civilization. These are (i) constraints based upon 'the specific animalic nature of people' - examples are hunger, sexuality, aging, (ii) constraints following from dependencies upon non-human natural processes, and (iii) the (social) constraints that people in living together exercise upon each other. Elias also mentions (iv) self-constraints, to which type what are usually called reason [*Verstand*] and conscience belong. He writes that self-constraints

differ from the natural drive constraints because biologically only a potential to develop self-constraints is given. If this potential is not actualized by learning, thus by experience, it remains latent. Degree and mould [*Gestalt*] of its actualization depend upon the society in which a human being grows up, and change in specific ways in the course of the development of mankind. At this point the civilizing theory sets in. The

interplay of the four types of constraints, their constellation changes. (Elias 1989:47)

This 'animalic' level that people share with other living creatures, is what in Elias's theory of scientific differentiation he referred to as a dynamic 'level of integration' (Elias, 1987). Nowhere does Maso discuss this theory, which is of crucial importance for understanding how Elias handles this question. In the 1939 essay Elias was drawing attention, in a preliminary way, to something that he later developed much more fully in *Involvement and Detachment* and in *The Symbol Theory*, i.e. that all humans are biologically more-or-less the same, possessing a dynamic, animalic level due to the evolutionary process, although the relational, figurational patterns they make socially are not reducible to this level. Maso can only conceptualize this idea in the more static and Kantian form of 'the limits of biological possibilities' (Maso:59, 'de grenzen van biologische mogelijkheden').

What humans have in common with certain living creatures due to the ongoing evolutionary process, this slowly changing biological level, can be conceived of as shaped by the pattern of self-controls developed in societies, which defines the different qualities of being human. As human networks such as warrior societies, court societies and middle-class societies change, so, Elias says, do the '*types_of_individualities*' (Elias, 1991: 31, our emphasis). Maso has found the word 'substance' alright, but it just connotes for Elias something that we have in common with animals, as a biological level. This level is changing too, but at a much slower pace compared to the higher, social level. The former level can thus *appear* to be unchanging, or fundamental, in such a way as to constitute a basis to society.

Elias grasped the coincidence of these different change continua and their relative speeds of movement, but refused to name the biological one a substance, as a working concept. To do so would indeed be to take the road to reductionism, which could then even imply an overtone of metaphysics. But in our view Elias avoids this pitfall. Elias's conception of 'levels of integration' was a model deliberately created to avoid the metaphysical connotations of terms such as object, substratum, subject-matter or substance in conceptualizing the fields investigated by the sciences. As Burkitt (1993) has convincingly shown, Elias was much more successful in eliminating metaphysical residues from his theories than was Foucault, with whose theory of power Elias's work has sometimes been superficially compared.

To avoid substantialism, Maso continues, Bourdieu has used the concept of 'habitus' in

order to indicate that individually people's dispositions are relatively stable and at the same time they partake of a 'collective' habitus. Maso insists that Elias uses the concept only to indicate a behavioural constant, not to get at a 'desubstantialized image of people' (p. 56). What Maso does not say is that long before Bourdieu, Elias used the concept of 'habitus' (Elias 1939, vol I: lxxiii;lxxv,lxxvii; vol II: 315,316,319,320,333,387,388,484) which is, incidentally, not a German but a Latin term, which gained currency among academics in the Middle Ages (Fletcher, 1993:16). In the English translation of *The Civilizing Process* it is not directly translated as habitus, but rendered mostly as 'make-up' and sometimes as 'psychological apparatus' or 'personality structure'. In the last essay in *The Society of Individuals*, entitled 'Changes in the We-I Balance', written in 1987 (Elias, 1991b) the term is further elaborated into a four-fold 'social', 'psychical', 'traditional' and 'national' habitus and accurately translated as such, although not consistently (Fletcher, 1993:16; see also Elias, 1992:143,150).

Unfortunately, Maso has carelessly misread the concept's meaning in Elias, in such a way as to have undermined his own critique of Elias on this point. Elias simply does not use it to indicate a behavioural constant at all, but in exactly the sense of something which is on the one hand individual and on the other a variation of the collective. It would be an interesting and helpful task to compare the use of the concept in the context of the theoretical frameworks of Bourdieu and Elias. But bringing in Bourdieu's use of the concept of 'habitus' to rescue Elias's theory of civilizing processes from an erroneous substantialism, as Maso does, is a futile endeavour.

Precisely to avoid the connotations of timelessness in the word substance, Elias did in the later years abandon it. We are sceptical that the concept of 'disposition' can do all the extra work Maso wants it to, above and beyond what Elias has already done to illuminate the patterns of self-control and emotion management in human societies. But wouldn't Maso agree that a *totally* 'desubstantialized image of people' is an image of people who are invisible and untouchable, people who live in an imaginary world where doctors have no function? There is a danger in Maso's recommendations of overreacting to a supposed substantialism and producing, as counter-blast, an equally unacceptable 'etherialized' image of people.

Maso argues that Freud tried to replace 'substance ideas' with 'field-ideas', but never really achieved the transition, so trying to give Freud's views a functional-relational character

was always going to be a difficult task for Elias because of these metaphysical/substantialist residues in Freud himself. Maso says (p.57) that despite his attempts to adapt Freud in a relational manner, Elias fully endorsed Freud's ideas about a substantial substratum to the human personality. To try to back this up, Maso offers what can only be described as a preposterous proof. He claims that Elias even believed that the degree of sensitivity that children demonstrate is to be attributed to their 'constitution'. Maso implies that for Elias, therefore, as far as the individual is concerned, biological substance determines destiny, or at least that Elias temperamentally leaned in the direction of asserting this.

The sentence from Elias's *The Society of Individuals* that Maso quotes to back his point is: 'A sensitive child can expect a different fate to a less sensitive one in the same family or society' (Elias, 1991:23). Amazingly, Maso disregards the very next sentence: 'But this fate, and thus the individual shape (*Gestalt*) which an individual slowly takes on in growing up, is not laid down from the first in the inborn nature of the baby'. Attending to the context, we find that Elias is once more making a plea for thinking in terms of social relationships and not in terms of a person's natural constitution, as entirely shaping their fate. The particular constitution of a given new-born child 'allows scope for a great wealth of possible individualities' and how its malleable features 'gradually harden into the adult's sharper contours, never depends *solely* on his constitution but always on the nature of the relations between him and other people' (Elias, 1991:22, our emphasis). In other words, what becomes of the distinctive constitution each new-born child is family- and society-specific. Elias is prepared, on empirical grounds, to accept that a person's 'distinctive constitution has an ineradicable influence on his or her fate' (ibid:23). Whereas Maso, in wanting to abandon all traces of substantialism whatsoever, following what he sees is the true philosophical legacy of Cassirer, is in danger of overreacting to a point of absurdity and embracing an image of people as a product only of the web of social functions into which they are born, ruling out in advance the empirical question of the role in the formation of a person's character of their biological constitution (cf Elias, 1991c).

Maso writes in a conclusive tone that during his whole life Elias clung to the idea that people are born with 'wild, untamed drives'; he continues, 'it is one of the fundamentals on which the civilizing theory is built' (p.58). What Maso does is to use Elias's statements in *The Civilizing Process* and elsewhere that social drive controls and restrictions are nowhere and in

no era completely absent, against him to show his 'substantialism'. But to show that different standards of civilization have developed in societies and that children have to learn from adults to behave more-or-less according to these standards, is in no way proof of an erroneous substantialism.

The phrase 'wild and untamed drives' is pulled out of Elias's total *oeuvre* and used by Maso loosely in an ideological sense, to hint that Elias's work embodied an out-of-date image of people as basically wild or animalic, requiring taming and control to become civilized. Although the terms wild and untamed and similar expressions do also inform the evaluative, politically conservative image of humans that Maso is exploiting, Elias really does try to use them in a more precise, scientific sense. For Elias, human beings have, at the same time, a constitutional potential for 'wild' impulses *and* for taming or controlling them for the sake of their living together (see Elias, 1989:47; 1991:145; 1991b:21-22). He writes: 'Every human being has the potential of self-control. No group of people could function over a longer period of time, if their adult members do not succeed in building into the wild and, at first, completely untamed little creatures that are born as humans, patterns of self-regulation and self-control' (1992:146, translation amended).

In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias never simply spoke of *Triebe*, but always connected that word with *Affekte*, thereby indicating that he wanted to separate it from its biological connotations. It is even a caricature of Freud to state, as Maso does, (p.57) that for him individuals were closed systems driven by innate instincts. Elias acknowledged how much his thinking was influenced by Freud's ideas (quoted in Goudsblom, 1977:78). He was also at pains to stress that he departed from him, despite the extent of the debt. In *The Civilizing Process*, he commented that he had not bothered to show the points where his study connected with Freud and the psychoanalytic school, so as not to clutter the analysis with qualifications: 'Nor have the not inconsiderable differences between the whole approach of Freud and that adopted in this study been stressed explicitly, particularly as the two could perhaps after some discussion be made to agree without undue difficulty. It seemed more important to build a particular intellectual perspective as clearly as possible, without digressing into disputes at every turn'(Elias 1939:302).

VII

Maso criticises Elias for only partially explaining the lust for attacking of Medieval knights from societal conditions, implying presumably that Elias sees exemplified here a basic instinct of cruelty in all people - a substance, perhaps? In *The Civilizing Process* at the places cited by Maso, we do indeed find formulations such as 'outbursts of cruelty' and 'the pleasure in killing and torturing others' (Elias, 1978:194) but these are in the context of a discussion of the long-term effect of changes in the standard of controls on the outbursts of cruelty. In this social context no punitive social power existed that could instil in the plundering knights fear of public shame⁵, that is fear of lapsing into social inferiority, which could provide an agency of self-restraint surrounding the expression of violent impulses. The fear they did feel stemmed mainly from that of being overpowered in battle by a superior opponent. Hence, at this stage of development, outbursts of cruelty, says Elias, 'did not exclude one from social life...The pleasure in killing and torturing others ... was a socially permitted pleasure' (ibid). This is the point, not that these knights were *inherently* cruel. The figurational compulsion of the social structure of which the knights formed a part, pushed them in this direction: 'The mutual distrust of human groups, their unrestrained use of violence whenever they expected an advantage of some kind and did not fear revenge, was for many centuries a very general, one could almost say: normal phenomenon'(Elias 1989: 178). It is only at our later stage of the civilizing process, when we view them from our own social standard of control on violent impulses and higher threshold of repugnance, that they can appear, by our standards, to be 'wild and untamed' or, in Elias's word in this context, as more 'uninhibited' (ibid:192).

Maso fails to take account of the fact that whenever Elias is talking about outbursts of cruelty, rapine or lust for attacking, it is always in relation to changing *social standards of control* over such violent impulses. He in no way implies any innate or 'substantist' lust for attacking built into human beings as a constant, as though it were an entity. This is what Maso is reading into Elias when Maso writes that 'A decrease of these outbursts is, according to Elias, not indicative of a decreased aggression, but of greater control of it' (p.58). Maso does not take account of Elias's view that human affects are an inseparable part of the human being as an organism, but are socially imprinted according to the functioning of society. Because he is

⁵ In connection with Maso's remarks on shame and honour in the work of Elias, see Schröter, 1990.

scanning Elias's texts with a static philosopher's idea of 'substance' in his mind, Maso inevitably disregards key passages in Elias, where this conception is expressed. For example, at the beginning of the section 'On Changes in Aggressiveness' in *The Civilizing Process*, from which Maso quotes a great deal, Elias writes:

The manner in which impulses or emotional manifestations are spoken of today sometimes leads one to surmise that we have within us a whole bundle of different drives. A 'death instinct' or a 'self-assertive drive' are referred to as if they were different chemical substances. ... Accordingly, aggressiveness, which will be the subject of this chapter, is not a separable species of instinct. At most, one may speak of the 'aggressive impulse' only if one remains aware that it refers to a particular instinctual function within the totality of an organism, and that changes in this function indicate changes in the personality as a whole (1978:191-92).

In the section from *The Civilizing Process* we are discussing here, Elias is dealing entirely with the *social code* regarding the lust for attacking, or the standard of aggressiveness. There is one sentence in the English translation that begins 'Like all other instincts ...' (Elias 1978:192) but the original German does not speak of instincts here but of 'drive utterances' (*Triebausserungen*). Neither here nor anywhere else in Elias's writings, have we found any statement from which could be deduced the conclusion that Elias thought in terms of an inborn aggressiveness.⁶ Even the word 'drive' was later avoided by Elias for exactly the reason of avoiding the misunderstanding that it could refer to something which is inborn. Later Elias

⁶ An important sentence is translated wrongly in the English translation of the passages in *The Civilizing Process* upon which Maso draws. It reads 'more than earlier we find the joy of battle serving as an intoxicant to overcome fear' (Elias 1978:196)(Dutch edition:265). Elias is commenting on a memoir about battle written by a declassé knight in 1465. What is written in the German original and translated rightly in Dutch can be rendered: 'and it becomes much more apparent than before that the joy of battle [or joy of attacking] serves as a flush [fuddle, intoxicant] of victory over fear'. If the English sentence is taken out of the context in which Elias is discussing the matter, it could be misleadingly read in the way that Maso suggests. That is, it appears that Elias is saying that the joy of attacking is a pleasure seeking drive always present in people and when they act out this pleasure, it blots out - like a drug - their feelings of fear. At a certain point in the development of Medieval society, Elias seems to be saying, this fact of life just reasserted itself. Whereas, the German original and the correctly translated Dutch version, indicate Elias's intended meaning, which is that for Medieval warriors the joy of attacking is increasingly integral with the pleasurable experience (the 'flush') of victory in Medieval societies at this stage of development. It was a socially permitted pleasure, integral with the social and personality structure of the time.

preferred concepts like 'emotion or affect utterance' or 'expression'. Indeed, when Elias speaks of different standards regulating the 'joy' in the destruction of others or in the proof of physical superiority, it is always a 'joy' that is inhibited by feelings of shame and repugnance (Elias, 1982:292-3). He criticises Konrad Lorenz for hasty generalizations about a tendency towards aggressive behaviour common to the human species, derived from parallels drawn from observations of the greylag goose, thus neglecting to take into account 'the internalization of learned behavioural controls' (1978a:178), which is only possible in humans and is patterned in many different ways in different societies.

It is strange that Maso ignores just the one aspect of Elias's work for which he is most widely acclaimed and which was arguably the central aim of all his efforts: to establish that people behave as they do not because of inborn forces, but as a result of developmental changes of their societies. Elias notes that the inborn 'fight-flight' reaction, the alarm reaction we share with our animalic ancestors, is easy to misinterpret as an aggressive drive (1992:149). He adds: 'One has to distinguish clearly from such biological universals, the long-standing custom of human beings to settle inter-tribal or inter-state conflicts by reciprocal killings known as "wars"'(ibid). Elias's aphorism gets to the point: 'It is not aggressiveness that triggers conflict, but conflict that triggers aggressiveness' (1989: 226).

It is worth referring again to Elias's longer view of the development of human societies as part of and as continuing the general process of biological evolution (Elias, 1991; 1987b) in order to counter Maso's rather narrow philosophical focus on the substance/function epistemological issue. In this perspective, Elias sees humans as an evolutionary breakthrough. For the first time in the evolutionary process mainly learned ways of steering behaviour came to be dominant in relation to unlearned ways. Elias points out that humans, like other living creatures, retain some unlearned types of behaviour in virtue of their place in the evolutionary process, including smiling, groaning and crying in pain. But in the human case, 'innate and species-specific means of orientation have almost disappeared' (1987b:345). Unlearned emotional impulses in humans 'are always related to a person's learned self-regulation, more specifically to learned controls of emotions (ibid:360). These considerations bring home how strongly Elias wanted to do justice to both the biological and the social-psychological processes in a careful theoretical synthesis. To refer to this attempt as an example of substantialism is a travesty of its

dynamic subtlety.

VIII

Maso uncritically cites (p.59) as though these critiques were definitive, work by Thoden van Velzen, Rasing, Jagers and Corbey about stateless societies, as providing further evidence to undermine the theory of civilizing processes. Maso maintains that these critiques reinforce his conclusion that wholesale changes need to be made to the theory, some of which we have already discussed. We have no space here to go into the controversies surrounding the work of Elias and the research tradition he inspired, but for the sake of balance it is important to note that these and other criticisms have been answered (see Goudsblom, 1984). We would also refer readers to Mennell (1992:ch 10) who has reviewed the debates about Elias's theory under the four headings of arguments from cultural relativism, stateless civilizations, 'permissive society' and barbarization. We are not saying that Elias's theories are beyond criticism, nor that all the objections have been definitively answered. Our point is simply that the state of the debate is not as closed as Maso suggests.

Maso says that eliminating the concepts of drive and affect from Elias's theory and substituting dispositions, would render superfluous 'metaphysical speculation' made to save it (p.59). He is apparently referring to the debate in the 1970's in the Netherlands about whether the relaxation of self-controls in recent times points to a reversal of the civilizing process and discussions about whether in simpler societies, institutions other than the state can also act as an external control of people's behaviour.

It is difficult to see how the sociological studies by the writers implicated, which deploy empirical evidence in relation to a definite theory (for example, Wouters 1990), can be described as 'speculation'. Also, it is far from clear why this work is called 'metaphysical'. This is presumably because it comes out of the theory of civilizing processes, which allegedly assumes a constant quotient of aggression, sex drive, or whatever, as a 'substance' in humans. It is only if one assumes this, that it is possible to discuss the issue of whether evidence shows the control of it has as having intensified or lessened. We have already refuted this interpretation of the theory of civilizing processes. The increases and decreases and new patterns of control and self-control are always conceived of in Elias and in the subsequent research, in relation to a previously

attained level of control. Elias also envisages a *balance* of *Fremdzwänge* and *Selbstzwänge* in different societies and points up the *discontinuous* ways in which self-controls are played out in different social situations. Therefore, Maso's observation that this research in the Eliasian framework consists in 'metaphysical speculations', strikes us as a wild, untamed accusation.

Acknowledgement: We are very grateful to Michael Schröter for his comments on an earlier draft.

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