“Problems of involvement and detachment” --- Norbert Elias and the investigation of contemporary social processes.

John Lever & Ryan Powell

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At the end of the *Elias for an open sociology* conference in Amsterdam in 2012, a discussion emerged...

Stephen Mennell summed things up on the Norbert Elias Foundation blog some weeks later, stating that figurational sociologists have...

‘...often seemed inhibited by our own reputation for pursuing relatively “detached” sociology and long-term perspectives, rather than the short-term policy-oriented research that is "bread and butter" for much of mainstream sociology.’
A key point in our thinking was Richard’s (2004, 38) observation that while younger researchers...

‘... will probably experience their relations with others... in ways that will make the methodological imperative of greater detachment and suspension of value-judgments... seem simply inflexible and even authoritarian...

...sociologists still wedded exclusively to the greater detachment, fantasy-control, ideology banishing model of scientific activity will find the contemporary kinds of sociological activity and preferences... decidedly disconcerting’.

Richard went on to argue that sociologists of a ‘contemporary sensibility’ may be better able than earlier generations to live with this ‘seeming incongruity’ – and this was widely debated at the time!
Contemporary applications of figurational sociology...

- Studies on violence
- Media and communications
- International relations
- Environmental sociology
- Life course research
- Social & public policy
The politics of figurational sociology...
Involvement and Detachment
Involved-detachment?  
Detached-involvement?
Differing outcomes for the lower strata of society, problem families and neighbourhoods, for example...

This work can be linked to theorizing on civilizing offensives and civilizing campaigns...

Distancing from the present is also reflected in method...

Elias was far more creative, innovative and sensitive than this dominant approach suggests...


In adhering to a long-term perspective via a ‘detour via detachment’, some scholars have arguably lost sight of Elias's engagement with both the contemporary and the micro spatial-level...

By way on contrast, we see the spaces of the:

- home/family
- the ghetto
- the neighbourhood
- and ‘ethnic enclave’
- & the workplace, for example

...as legitimate spaces for sociological enquiry.
• This strand of contemporary research has also sought to synthesize Elias’s theories with those of other theorists.

• And we believe commitment to research-theorising demands the constant application and testing of Elias’s work.

• Taken together, this growing body of work in the field of social and public policy seeks to expose contemporary ‘myths’, whilst striving to ‘provide more realistic knowledge about the ways in which human beings are bonded together’ (Goudsblom, 1987: 334).
Richard’s observation that those making use of Elias’s insights must apply the principle of cognitive evaluation to achieve an appropriate level of detachment seems a good place to end...

Thank-you & thank you Richard!

Conclusion

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