

On the pragmatics of social theory.

The case of Elias's "On the Process of Civilization"

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Abstract

This paper proposes a new approach to the study of sociological classics. This approach is pragmatic in character. It draws upon the social pragmatism of G.H. Mead and the sociology of texts of D.F. McKenzie. Our object of study is Norbert Elias's *On the Process of Civilization*. The pragmatic genealogy of this book reveals the importance of taking materiality seriously. By documenting the successive entanglements between human agency and non-human factors, we discuss the origins of the book in the 1930s, how it was forgotten for thirty years, and how in the mid-1970s it became a sociological classic. We explain canonization as a matter of fusion between book's material form and its content, in the context of the paperback revolution of the 1960s, the events of May 1968, and the demise of Parsons' structural functionalism, and how this provided Elias with an opportunity to advance his model of sociology.

Keywords

Norbert Elias, history of the book, canon formation, pragmatic sociology

1. Introduction

On October 1, 1954 a 57-year old man was appointed Lecturer Grade II, the lowest rung of the academic ladder, in the sociology department at Leicester University, a provincial British institution (Korte 2011, p. 4). Whilst possessing few publications in academic journals and virtually unknown, this was the first permanent university post accorded this German-Jewish émigré.¹ Yet in less than twenty years, he would become a “sociological classic” alongside Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, and Karl Marx (Linklater and Mennell 2010, p. 384, 404). His name was Norbert Elias and this paper seeks to explain his unusually late and unlikely rise to stardom.

A very German young Jew born in 1897 in the very German city of Breslau (today Wrocław in Poland), Elias began his academic career as a Ph.D. in philosophy.² His doctoral dissertation “Idee und Individuum”, completed in 1924 under the reputed neo-Kantian philosopher Richard Höningwald, already exhibits an intellectual trace that will become a characteristic feature of Elias’ sociological thinking, that is, the rejection of the Kantian dichotomy between the “inner” world and the “external” world of the “mind”. Elias’ turn to sociology in the Heidelberg of the early 1930s, then the center of German sociology and a multicultural academic microcosm (Treiber and Sauerland 1995), has much to do with his wish to find a way out of this philosophical conundrum. At the time, Heidelberg sociology was defined

¹ Elias’s academic work experience included acting as academic assistant to Karl Mannheim at the University of Frankfurt (1930-1933). In 1939 Elias was awarded a Senior Research Fellowship at the London School of Economics, but the war prevented him from working, and in 1940 he was sent to an internment camp. Between 1945 and 1955, Elias had no secure employment. In 1954 he received two offers of academic posts by refugee sociologists like himself, Eugene Grebenik at Leeds University, and Ilyia Neustadt at Leicester. Elias eventually chose Leicester for its location. In 1962 he retired from Leicester as Reader. From 1962 to 1964 he was Professor of Sociology at the University of Ghana. From the late 1960s onwards, Elias held numerous visiting professorships in Holland and Germany.

² Biographical accounts of Elias are abundant, and numerous commentators have drawn a parallel between his theorizing and his life (e.g. Korte, 2013; Mennell 2011; Merz-Benz, 1996). The recently published 17th volume of *Collected Works* (Elias 2014) provides the entirety of Elias’s autobiographical reflections.

by the confrontation between two opposing theoretical orientations. While senior members, such as Alfred Weber, supported the sort of liberal neo-Kantian sociology Max Weber had championed at the turn of the century, younger sociologists, such as Karl Mannheim, followed the *Zeitgeist* and instead turned to Karl Marx for inspiration. Elias supported neither. He decided to explore his own intellectual path. His first systematic immersion in sociological literature, however, was circumscribed to German sources. In 1933, he followed Karl Mannheim, with whom he had become close friends, to Frankfurt. Given the rapid deterioration of the situation in Germany after 1933, Elias rushed through all the stages of *Habilitation*, except for the Privatdozent's inaugural lecture. But it was too late. Elias was forced into exile – too old to begin again as a student, but not quite fit to be a professor. After a difficult two years in Paris, Elias accepted the invitation of his friend Alfred Gluckman to move to England, even though he barely spoke English and had very few personal connections there. In 1935 he moved to England, where he would remain until 1978.

Existing explanations of Elias's singular canonization emphasize individual personality traits,³ the relative autonomy of his ideas, the structuring impact of institutions, historical events such as war and subsequent migratory flows, the effects of his positioning strategy, or a combination of the above.⁴ In this paper, we propose the pragmatic sociology of the book as an alternative explanation of this unusual case. Our pragmatic sources are twofold. On the one hand, we subscribe to today's "Meadian renaissance" (Dunk-West 2014) by exploring G.H. Mead's neo-Hegelian understanding of the subject-object relationship (2011a, 2011b). On the other hand, in the specialism of bibliography proper, we draw upon D.F. McKenzie's pragmatically

³ An explanation of this kind is that Elias was "too much of a stranger" (Bauman 1979, pp. 123-4), or that he had a "counter-ego" (Mennell 2006).

⁴ See, for example, Herberich-Marx 2006, Bucholc 2013.

inspired sociology of texts (1969, 1999).

From Mead, we learn two things. First, we learn that one needs to equate knowing with rational problem-solving in particular contexts of action (Mead 1929, p. 427). This directs our attention to those episodes of heightened uncertainty, when taken-for-granted beliefs are called into question by unforeseen events. Second, we learn from Mead's social pragmatism that objects have agency not because of their thing-ness, so to speak, but because of their sociality. This is because, for Mead, objects such as books are at first social, and only subsequently physical entities. They emerge first and foremost as "social objects", that is, as objects that have a common meaning to those involved in the social act (Mead 2011, pp. 40-41). This is not to say that everyone will have the same opinion about a book, but it is to say that all agree that the object in question is a book. Once this happens, Mead argues, we are able to approach objects in an abstract way, considering for instance their physical characteristics. This is why sociality precedes, both in time and importance, physicality or thingness. This is also why Mead argues that books, as things, emerge from people's engagement with the environment in a relationship of mutual determination. To stress the dialectics of the mutual determination between individuals and the environment, as Mead does, is to emphasize the generative, creative nature of such mutuality.⁵ In turn, McKenzie's thesis that "form affects meaning" helped redefine the sociology of texts along pragmatist lines. After McKenzie, bibliography ceases to be a Platonic quest for the essential text which transcends all its possible material incarnations, and becomes a pragmatic inquiry into exactly those material incarnations.

⁵ Mead writes that, from this dialectical relation arises a: "coordination in the structure of the organism of the individual which is also new – as new as the object" (2011, p. 38). In other words, from the tension between individuals and objects arises *new individuals* and *new objects*.

Our initial assumption is that the pragmatics of social theory should not be overlooked. The formulation of social theory involves the writing of texts. Texts, in turn, exist only in some material form: we say “in this edition of the text”, as if a text could exist which does not have some sort of material support. In reality, however, form and content are related to each other in that the former is the condition of the existence of the latter. To ignore this fact, as in believing theories to be independent of the material form that supports them, is to fall prey to idealism. Yet to focus solely on material forms would amount to materialism, with its well-known limitations and blind spots. A more promising approach involves moving beyond the dichotomy between idealism and materialism, with its hopelessly circular logic, to refocus our attention on the materiality of meaning-production. In particular, it involves endorsing a pragmatic conception of meaning, according to which the meaning of a text emerges from the semiotic relation between the reader, the material form, and the content of the work. Most key works in social theory, with very few exceptions, come in the form of monographs. Despite the vast scope of Elias’s oeuvre, few, least of all Elias himself, would not contend that his *magnum opus* is *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. A pragmatic sociological analysis of *Prozess*, one that takes the materiality of this object seriously, is thus an indispensable condition for a fuller understanding of the rise of Elias in the academic canon.

Although collective and dispersed, human agency retains its center in the figure of whichever name appears on the cover of the book as the author. Of course, there are no authors, or authorship, without books. It is with the coming of the book to our world that individuals gradually acquire the ability to become authors and to benefit from the legal rights and financial entitlements associated with copyright (Febvre and Martin 1958). The association between the work and authorship is a

relatively recent development, one marked by radical instability (Foucault 1969, Brown 1991). Yet this instability is not necessarily a problem. Rather, it can be viewed as an opportunity to gain a more solid understanding of the book as a sociological object. In the case of *Prozess*, this instability urges one to move beyond the seemingly obvious equation between “work” and “author” to investigate how the materiality of the work has contributed to the sociological standing of Elias as a “classic”.

As this is a new theoretical model (Silva 2015), no previous empirical analysis has been used to explore it. Here we test its validity by resorting to a methodological approach favored by intellectual historians and book historians, that is, documentary analysis (Prior 2008; Scott 1990). This methodological strategy is justified by our interest in moving away from “meanings” and towards “agency, usage, and especially intentionality” (Skinner 2002, p. 2), whereby thinkers become fully fledged social agents involved in intellectual disputes with real world consequences. However, as already noted, we go beyond Quentin Skinner and the contextualist Cambridge School towards a systematic account of the materiality of meaning-production.⁶ This entails analyzing documentary primary sources covering both human and non-human agency.

In the first case, we examine how the collective of agents, with Elias at its centre, worked to make *Prozess* the sociological classic that it is today. Primary sources include the manuscript copies and notes used by Elias in the 1930s, and correspondence between the author and various interlocutors concerning the original publication, translation, and re-edition of the book, as well as legal documentation including publishing contracts and translation agreements. These materials are

⁶ On the uneasy relationship between book history and intellectual history, see Skinner (2005).

deposited in the Norbert Elias Archive.⁷ Whenever relevant, we complement these materials with references to Elias's autobiographical reflections (Elias 2014).

Our concern with materiality, however, leads us to consider sources documenting the non-human agency of the *Prozess* as a physical object. These include its various printed editions, including the original 1939 German edition and the reprints of the late 1960s, as well as the first English and French translations of the 1970s. Central to a pragmatic analysis of the book's material form is its size or type, the typeface used in different editions of *Prozess*, and the paratexts, which include introductions and prefaces (Genette 1997). Just as, owing to its invisibility, the art picture frame works by directing our attention to the art work (Gombrich 1979, p.15), so the typographical font performs its function literally in front of our eyes without us noticing it. The book type, in turn, plays a decisive role in the work's accessibility: factors such as a long run, low price, and pocket size all contribute positively to rendering a book more easily accessible to a given readership.

The combination of these two types of sources allows us to reconstruct the history of the successive metamorphoses of the book, from its inception through its multiple reincarnations, in its entanglements with human agents and their power struggles. The structure of this paper mirrors these metamorphoses. The first section discusses the history of the writing of *Prozess*. The second section analyzes the causes and effects of the long oblivion of *Prozess* in the postwar years. The third section explains the book's sudden rediscovery and subsequent canonization in the context of the events of May 1968, the paperback revolution of the 1960s, and the demise of Parsonian structural-functionalism in sociology in the early 1970s. The conclusion

⁷ The Norbert Elias Foundation is the copyright holder of all Elias' published works as well as the Norbert Elias Archive, which is now located at the Deutsches Literaturarchiv (DLA), Marbach am Neckar.

offers a summary of the article's contributions and suggestions for further research.

2. Writing the book

For exactly three years, between 1935 and 1937, Norbert Elias carried out very much the same daily work routine. He would go to work in the Reading Room of the British Museum library and spend the whole day there, consulting the catalogue, reading and taking notes. Interrupted only by a snack at a nearby café, this lonely, resolute routine was motivated by one central aim: to find empirical evidence that would allow him to substantiate the argument against social psychologists who, then as now, believe it possible to make generalized claims about human behavior based on survey data.⁸

This argument was the product of a long process of maturation, in the course of which Elias methodically assimilated a large body of historical knowledge. From this perspective, there is little doubt that *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* is Elias' *magnum opus*, the crowning achievement of a strong mind driven by a brilliant intellect and excellent academic training.

Contrary to what this author-centered perspective suggests, however, the writing of a book is never strictly a biographical affair, motivated by individual intentions, working habits, and intellectual abilities. To say, for instance, that “books are written” can be highly misleading as it conveys the idea of a solitary task. In fact, books are the product of the collaborative effort of a collective of agents, which includes authors, printers, typists, and editors, which makes use of specialized machinery and techniques, such as printing presses and typography. Rather than saying that books are “written”, then, we should rather say books are “manufactured”, which more realistically captures the social-pragmatic character of this entanglement

⁸ “I began my book *On the Process of Civilisation* with a clear awareness that it would be an implicit attack on the wave of studies of attitudes and behaviour by contemporary psychologists [...] I was quite sure that this was wrong, that it was simply an attempt to apply physical or biological ways of proceeding to human beings. The whole process of the transformation of people is hidden from view” (Elias cited in Heerma van Voss & van Stolk 2014, p. 118).

between human and non-human agency in the production of a book.

Elias' engagement in the production of what would become *Prozess* begins not in London, but in Paris, as *Prozess* is believed to be based on research conducted during his stay there (see Mennell et al. 2012, p. xiv). But it is only in London, after a brief stay in Cambridge, that Elias eventually obtains support from the "Central British Fund for German Jewry"⁹ to write his book. With this crucial financial support, Elias sets out to write his *magnum opus*, which gradually comes about as the dialectic relationship between the content of the book and its material form unfolds.

The content of Elias' book was shaped by its polemic nature, a criticism of the behaviorist and individualist premises of contemporary psychology, which mirrored the Cartesian and Kantian dualistic philosophical tradition. But the book was more than a single thesis. It was also a model of a radically new relational or processual sociology (Mennell 1989a, p. 4). To back up this ambitious new paradigm, Elias turned both to research material he had already gathered for his *Habilitation* on the court life, and to the resources of the library of the British Museum. His argument was framed by the familiar distinction between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*. As early as 1919, during his first visit to Heidelberg, Elias had given a critical paper at Karl Jaspers' seminar on Thomas Mann's now classical formulation of this pairing. Richard Kilminster argues that: "Among other things, the task of *The Civilizing Process* is to reframe the range, applicability and realistic usefulness of these terms via the sociological enquiry into their genesis in the European civilizing process in general." (Kilminster 2007, p. 53) In London, he found further empirical evidence of how the German concept of *Kultur* and the French notion of *civilisation* had gradually grown out of nationally specific paths of social development. The bulk of this material

⁹ Commonly known as CBF, a Jewish charitable organization later known as "World Jewish Relief".

consists of French and German books on manners from the 12th through the 18th centuries.¹⁰ Elias' main thesis was that the process of state monopolization of violence in the West and the rise of modern nation states went hand-in-hand with increasingly severe and internalized control of both individual behavior and emotions, as reflected, *inter alia*, in the books on manners.

Articulating such an overarching thesis in the form of a book-length argument involves a constant to-and-fro from the general to the particular. At that time, Elias' English was poor and the book was written in German. His method of writing involved taking notes by hand and then typing up his argument. It was these typed pages that he eventually sent to the printer with the assistance of his father. Writing a text also entails decisions about how to name it,¹¹ about which material to include, and which material to exclude, from the final version of the work. A telling example of Elias' decision-making regarding the book's content are the footnotes he added just before sending the second volume to print. These footnotes reveal Elias' growing familiarity with the Anglo-Saxon intellectual context. He cites a number of Anglo-Saxon sources, from social psychologists, from whom he adopts the concept of conditioning, to turn-of-the-century American sociologists such as W.F. Ogburn and William Graham Sumner (Elias 1982, pp. 356, 367).¹² As Elias added some material, he excluded other excerpts from the final version. A case in point is his critique of *homo clausus* thinking, which never made it to the final version of *Prozess* and was

¹⁰ <http://www.kuwi.uni-linz.ac.at/hyperelias/z-elias/HyperElias-1930-1949.htm> (accessed on 06-07-2015), cf.: <http://www.kuwi.uni-linz.ac.at/hyperelias/z-elias/HyperElias-1930-1949.htm> (accessed on 06-07-2015), namely: 917-919. Proofs of "Über den Prozess der Zivilisation", with additional text and editorial remarks by N. Elias. 1 vol., 2 folders.

¹¹ Elias describes how he came up the title as follows: "I did not sit down and say 'Ah, I must write a book about the civilising process'. Not at all. After I had written perhaps the first three chapters, I said to myself: what title should i give it, now let me think, maybe "On the Process of Civilisation" would be a good idea! I mean there is a different way of working than the highly organized one which people have today. It gives me the opportunity to pick up things, to have new ideas, not to have a closed mind" (Elias in Heilbronn 2014, pp. 157-158).

¹² Johan Goudsblom was the first to notice and comment on this (2003, p. 98).

later published as Part I of *The Society of Individuals* (see van Krieken 2010, p. xi).

Step by step over the course of three years, the book gradually reached its first material incarnation as a monograph: a two-volume book which would have momentous consequences upon its reception. By 1936, Elias had enough material for one volume but felt his work would require a second volume to be complete. Assisted by his father, he arranged for a limited private edition to be printed by Marcus-Verlag, a publisher who worked for the Schulze publishing company in Elias' hometown, Breslau. However, contrary to what is widely believed (e.g. Mennell 1989a, p. 18), the pre-print of the first volume of *Prozess* was produced not in Breslau, but in Gräfenhainichen, a small town 68 miles southwest of Berlin.¹³ Elias circulated copies of this pre-print among friends and prospective reviewers, including Walter Benjamin. All the existing evidence suggests that Elias wrote it and had always conceived of this work as a two-volume book, not two separate parts. When in 1936 Elias asked the refugee association for an extension of his scholarship, his argument was that the book was not yet complete. It required another volume to bring it to an end (Heerma van Voos and van Stolk 2014, p. 119). In late 1937,¹⁴ Elias completed the second volume in London: his aim was to have the whole work published the following year by Academia, a Czech publisher. But in 1938 Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia, destroying Elias' chances of having his book published in Prague. In 1939, with the help of his father, he had both volumes printed in Breslau. But printing was not enough: in order to get the book published, Elias still required an editor. He eventually found a publisher in Switzerland, Fritz Karger. Karger, another exiled

¹³ Norbert Elias Archive, entry no. 1937-G-ger-1 (access date 03-07-2015).

¹⁴ Pace Aya 1978, p.223, then Sica 1984, p.50 who, influenced by the fact that the preface is dated 1936, claim the book was completed in the fall of that year: the most likely explanation for the date in the preface is that it was written upon completion of the first volume and references to the contents of the second volume were made before the final manuscript was ready (see Kilminster 2007, p. 93).

German, had just founded a firm in Basel to publish émigré works – Haus zum Falken. Again with the assistance of his father, Elias managed to have the printed sheets sent to Switzerland. In the binding process, the “Printed in Germany” legend had to be blacked out with Indian ink. (Mennell 2011, p. 89)¹⁵

The material form of the work is a condition of its existence – in the case of *Prozess*, a material form comprised of two folio volumes. It is, of course, a form prone to misinterpretation. Several reviewers of this first edition, because they focused on only one of the two volumes, missed the gist of Elias’ argument or at the very best, like Raymond Aron, suspended their judgment until the publication of the whole work (see Goudsblom 1977, Aron 2003). The typographic features of this edition of *Prozess* are also noteworthy, with the printer at the Schulze printing house following the typographic conventions of the time.¹⁶ As to the book format, the large 8VO (“octavo”) book size was chosen, a format created by Aldus Manutius in the late 1400s that transformed the book into a portable object but still of sizable proportions (6”x 9”, or 23.8cm x 15cm). These physical and typographic features made the act of reading each of the 839 printed pages of the first edition in German a grave, serious, and exacting experience, that is, typical of the academic atmosphere of the *interbellum* period. This is how, on the eve of World War II, the first edition of *Prozess* appeared.

¹⁵ Some copies were retained for export to Germany with the intact impressum and sold after World War II in this condition (as “printed in Germany”). See Norbert Elias Archive, entry no. 1939-B-ger-2 (access date 03-07-2015).

¹⁶ The typeface is perhaps the best known German modern face, the serif typeface “Walbaum”. Originally created in 1810 by Justus Erich Walbaum, this typeface was revived in the early 20th century, first in Germany and then in the Anglo-Saxon world (Macmillan 2006: 180). The German representative of the neoclassical trinity of design types alongside the French Didot and the Italian Bodoni, Walbaum types are sterner than either Didot or Bodoni. They lack spur serifs on C, G, S and s; a foot serif on b, and a beard on G. As a result, both roman and italic Walbaum types are wide and therefore readily legible (Burt 1959, p. 46).

3. A classic interrupted: 1939-1968

Can you speak louder? I can't hear you.

Elias' recurrent nightmare of a voice on a telephone (Heerma van Voss & van Stolk, 2014, p. 135)

Within months of the publication of *Prozess* in Basel, the lights went out all over Europe once again. The consequences of World War II for a book on civilization written by a Jew in German, employing the typical academic material form of the 1930s, would be disastrous. Few copies were published, fewer were sold, and a very small number were circulated (Karger 1977, pp. 23-24). For many years, *Prozess* would be forgotten. Read only by a handful, sparsely reviewed and cited, hardly used in college classrooms, Elias's *magnum opus* would remain virtually unknown until the early 1970s. If the death of a book equates with its demise from collective memory and discourse, then we have reason to say that *Prozess* was nearly dead for the first three decades of its life. In this section, we discuss the reasons behind the lingering and quasi-universal oblivion of *Prozess* (and of its author), reasons that have much to do with the book's form and content.

The period between 1945 and the 1960s is marked by Talcott Parsons' hegemony in sociology. Parsons' and Elias' careers could hardly have been more different, both in eminence and influence. Parsons' experience as a newcomer in Europe in the interwar period helps to explain his being so deferential to the European intellectual tradition. By contrast, Elias always saw himself as part of that tradition, which may account for his confidence and boldness from the inception of his career. Yet while Parsons soon came to dominate sociology from the achievement of his Harvard professorship, and especially from the publication in 1951 of *The Social*

System, Elias remained at the margins of professional sociology until the mid-1950s (Goudsblom 2003). Unsurprisingly, whilst Elias strove to have an active intellectual life during this period, he was little regarded. Reflecting their authors' careers, the careers of Parsons' and Elias' first great books could hardly have been more different either.¹⁷ Although Parsons' *The Structure of Social Action* was written and published at around the same time as *Prozess*, it soon became a centerpiece of sociological theory and canon-formation. *Prozess*, in turn, was bound to suffer from long neglect. Maybe the contrasting ways the two books deal with the central tradition in Western epistemology from Descartes through Kant is what accounts for their contrasting destinies. While *Structure* is profoundly shaped by Kantian assumptions, *Prozess* can be seen as an empirically informed rebuttal of the Kantian philosophical tradition and its sociological implications (Mennell 2011, pp. 184-5). The radical rejection, in *Prozess*, of the governing epistemological paradigm of the postwar period was, one might speculate, ahead of its time. It is only in the late 1960s, with the re-emergence of anti-Cartesian, processual approaches, that the tide began to change in favor of *Prozess*. Regarding the content, we should count its focus on manners and civilization, its long-term, non-dualistic approach, its peculiar conceptual apparatus, and Elias' "disdain for scholastic disputation", which failed to "explicitly engage the opinions of other writers" (Goudsblom 1977, p. 75), as important factors accounting for the book's spectacular failure to resonate with sociologists during this period. Yet another disadvantage was the complete lack of a mathematized, quantitative side to Elias's sociological model. Neither the admirers of the "Grand Theory", nor the practitioners of abstract empiricism would support Elias' manner of doing sociology

¹⁷ On Parsons' career and interests before *Structure*, see Camic 1991. On Parsons's post-*Structure* hegemony until 1968, see e.g. Wallerstein 2007: 436. For a sympathetic evaluation of the impact of *Structure* on American sociology, see Alexander 1988. For an overview of the reappraisal of Parsons' work in the 1980s, see Holmwood 1983.

(Mills 2002).

From the perspective of the book's form, when accounting for its limited reception, two aspects stand out. The first has to do with its size and typography. A long, oversized relic of the interwar period simply failed to attract the attention of the few who were actually able to lay their eyes on a book.¹⁸ The second factor has to do with the language in which it was written. Although things improved considerably after 1956 when Elias got his lectureship at Leicester, and with it a series of instruments for disseminating his work that he did not have access to before, the fact remained that, without a translation into English, the reception of *Prozess* was limited to a German-speaking readership. Yet in this respect, Elias himself is partly to blame. Several attempts to have *Prozess* translated from German into English in the 1950s and 1960s failed owing to Elias' exceedingly high standards regarding the translation and his later plan to expand the original version with a new section on masturbation (Mennell 1989, p. 23, see also Fontaine 1978, p. 250).

This combination of substantive and formal characteristics, which failed to resonate with the intellectual context and the institutional dynamics of the early postwar period, explains in large part the book's long period of neglect among sociologists. Of course, the fact that few of the numerous sociologists who came under the influence of Elias at Leicester made use of his ideas, and fewer still actually referenced Elias directly, did not help either (Goudsblom 1977, p. 49). All this was about to change, however.

¹⁸ Goudsblom reflects on his own experience in the following terms: "those who had [...] entered into a university career in the late fifties and early sixties [...] were far more inclined to turn to contemporary American sociology for an alternative [to the introverted, parochial attitude of their teachers and seniors] than to dig up an 800-page book which was hard to come by and which, by its typography and format, had a flavour of the past. As a consequence, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* remained practically unread" (1977, p. 55).

4. A classic is born

The main facts of Elias' career change in the late 1960s, early 1970s are well known. Upon his retirement from Leicester in 1964, and after having spent two years in Ghana, Elias held several visiting professorships in Germany and the Netherlands. In 1969 the Swiss publisher Francke reissued *Prozess* in a two-volume facsimile hardback edition. In the early 1970s, a French translation appeared and a few years later *Prozess* was eventually translated into English. Elias was awarded the Adorno prize in 1977 and rapidly became a celebrity, especially in the Netherlands and Germany.

In this section, however, we argue that more attention needs to be paid to the materiality of the work if we are to fully understand this sudden turn. We need to examine how the book's form and content interact with the initiatives of its author, as well as the relevant institutional and normative factors, to give rise to something distinctively new, that is, a sudden break with the past in the form of a new classic work – (“*Prozess*, the sociological classic”) – by a new classic thinker – (“Elias, the sociological classic”). Historical discontinuities such as this often take place in the context of wider crises, to which they may well end up contributing. It is no coincidence that the end of the dormant period of *Prozess* happened to coincide with the second crisis of Western modernity and the end of the predominance of Parsons' modernist sociology (Wagner 1994). In fact, one of the merits of Elias is to have taken advantage of the heightened uncertainty and the possibilities created by both these crises, to advance the case for his conception of sociology. But to focus on Elias' efforts exclusively would be a mistake for it would lead us to ignore the reality of the materiality of meaning-production.

To understand the materiality of meaning-production is to understand the

metamorphosis undertaken by *Prozess* between the late 1960s and the mid1970s, a period in which, as result of the cooperative efforts of a multitude of human agents, the work was reborn in a radically new material form. Pivotal to this was the paperback revolution of the 1960s. The emergence of mass circulation literature was considered by many at the time as the most significant cultural development of the postwar period, inaugurating a new era of democratization of knowledge and mass culture that would eventually lead to the reconfiguration of the social order itself (Escarpit 1966). Concretely, the paperback revolution can be traced to the first Penguin editions of literary classics of the 1930s (McCleery 2002). In the 1950s and early 1960s, however, the paperback market soon expanded beyond literary titles to include scientific ones too. As universities massively expanded their intake, so the production of scientific and intellectual books increased exponentially, benefiting from the major shift in publishing of the mid20th century (Weel 2007).

The events of May 1968 are another social transformation that powerfully shaped the metamorphosis of *Prozess*. The significance for sociology of the student revolts in Paris cannot be overlooked. The universities were among the institutions most affected by this change, in particular the social science departments. Among social scientists could be discerned a growing discontent with the modernist discourse that had prevailed since 1945. A sense of crisis then emerges, one involving not only the social order in most Western countries, but also the modes of studying it. Structuralism gave way to a multitude of theoretical perspectives, post-structuralism included, in a movement that was as liberating (from modernist certainties) as it was a source of anxiety. In this context of crisis and epistemological doubt, contextualist, historicist, and socially sensitive modes of thought began to regain currency. In this tumultuous situation, Elias' work fell on fertile ground. In Elias, students and readers

found a sociologist who was neither interested in universal pattern-variables nor in arid statistics, but in exactly the sort of problems of which most of them were now keenly aware, that is, the entanglements between changing codes of behavior and morality and large-scale institutional change in the political sphere.¹⁹ In this context of crisis – social *and* social-scientific – suddenly, and unexpectedly, *Prozess* came to embody a new paradigm, especially in countries such as the Netherlands, where existed a relatively small sociological market combined with rapid social change and a deep transformation of morality.

Crucial to Elias' establishment of his place in the new cartography of the discipline is the reissue of *Prozess* in 1969 by Francke in Berne, Switzerland. This despite the fact that it was not reviewed in any Swiss or German sociology journal at the time.²⁰ A review in English by Martin Albrow was published in 1969, but went quite unnoticed (Albrow 1969). Formally, this facsimile edition of the original 1939 volume is unremarkable, but for one crucial aspect. The Francke edition includes a new preface by Elias, completed in July 1968 at Leicester, where Elias positions himself vis-à-vis: “the man who at present is widely regarded as the leading theoretician of sociology, Talcott Parsons” (Elias 1978, p. 226). The significance of the new preface is as much a matter of form, namely its relative position in the body of the book,²¹ as it is a matter of content.

Elias begins by pointing to the problem of process-reduction, i.e. the pervasive

¹⁹ Elias' followers, such as Bram van Stolk and Cas Wouters, were themselves champions of a new morality, as well as a new approach to sexuality, love, and family in then conservative Dutch society.

²⁰ Goudsblom (1977, p. 57). Yet Wolf Lepenies did write a positive review in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* on November 25, 1969. Lepenies was then a junior colleague of Dieter Claessens, who was in all probability involved in the Francke edition of 1969 and edited *Was ist Soziologie?* in his book series at Juventa a few years later (see Mennell et al. 2012, pp. xiv-xv).

²¹ In the German editions (Francke, Suhrkamp) the preface is printed at the front, while in the English (Urizen) it appears at the end of the first volume. The French translation does not include this preface.

tendency to conceptually reduce processes to states: “By reducing to two different states what was shown empirically in *The Civilizing Process* to be a process and interpreted theoretically as such, Parsons deprives himself of the possibility of discovering how the distinguishing particularities of different societies to which he refers are actually to be explained” (1978, p. 227). He illustrates this tendency with examples from “concepts of dominant contemporary sociology”, from Parsons’ notion of “social system”, to concepts such as “structure, function, norm, integration, and role”, which, in Elias’ view: “all represent in their current forms attempts to conceptualize certain aspects of human societies by abstracting their dynamics, their genesis, their character as a process, their development” (1978, p. 244).

It is in this crucial paratext that Elias introduces a key conceptual innovation for the first time: the concept of *homo clausus*, which points to the central insight of figurational sociology. Like Mead before him, Elias vehemently rejects the “conception of the individual as *homo clausus*, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside”, but unlike Mead, he refers directly to the implications of this misunderstanding for the sociological tradition: “Its derivative includes not only the traditionally *homo philosophicus*, the image of man of classical epistemology, but also *homo economicus*, *homo psychologicus*, *homo historicus*, and not least *homo sociologicus* in his present-day version. The images of the individual of Descartes, of Max Weber, and of Parsons and many other sociologists are of the same provenance” (1978, p. 249). It may have taken Elias 30 years to assert his position in the field, but this preface stands as one of the most ambitious and unrelenting attacks on an existing sociological paradigm in the 20th century. Elias’ initial adversity to questionnaires and quantitative methods, dating back to early 20th century social psychology, also proved most contemporary,

in line with critical discussions of “fads and foibles” in postwar social sciences dominated by American research patterns (see Sorokin 1958). Far from being for the 21st century reader a dated discussion, as some suggest (Mennell et al. 2012, p. xix), from a genealogical perspective, for Elias to have taken on Parsons at that particular point in this way suggests a conscious (and successful) strategic intervention to enter the sociological debate of the time, and eventually the sociological canon.

At this point, however, *Prozess* was still far from being widely read, discussed, and taught. It was not yet, in other words, a sociological classic. The prohibitively high price of the Francke edition partly accounted for this, a hardback oriented more to libraries than to mass market publishing. Not surprisingly, pirated (or *samizdat*) copies of *Prozess* soon began to appear everywhere in Germany. These pirated editions (known in Germany as *Raubdrucke*) were produced on photocopiers and bound at a very low cost. If this afforded *Prozess* a new audience, we should not forget the disruption the *Raubdrucke* provoked via accepted notions of authorship, editorship, and so on. The students and radicals responsible for these pirated copies extended their political claims to participatory democracy into the text itself, appropriating it wholesale: “as both producer and consumer, but also as editors, with introductions and critical bibliographies. Indeed, beyond providing texts which were difficult or expensive to obtain, lay an attack on the monopoly on property rights held by large publishing houses” (Mercer 2011, pp. 633-34). Whilst Elias was certainly interested in having his ideas disseminated, there were limits to this. In reaction to having the expensive Francke edition pirated all over Germany, in 1976 Elias arranged for the German publishing house Suhrkamp to bring out a more affordable paperback edition. It was a timely decision. Finally freed from its archaic pre-war form, the work reaped the benefits of the paperback revolution to reach a new

generation of readers eager to rediscover a classic refreshingly attuned to their present-day concerns. It is important to note, however, that this first paperback by Suhrkamp is also a facsimile of the pre-war original.²² This suggests that the typeface is a second-order, albeit significant, framing element of the work when compared to this type of edition. The mass market paperback reincarnation of *Prozess*, brought about in a situation of generalized social crisis and socio-scientific upheaval, eventually imposed itself on the sociological establishment. Still a physical and a social object, *Prozess*' materiality was now "social" in an entirely new sense. The book had now a totemic quality for the sociological community, which projected ideas of theoretical prowess, methodological exemplarity and intellectual merit into its material form and content. Its content, but also the material form supporting it, became exemplary of a certain way of doing sociology. No longer merely a two-volume study on manners and civilisation, *Prozess* had acquired an entirely new meaning for the sociological community – the print pages of the Suhrkamp paperback edition of *Prozess* now embodied the work of Elias, the sociological classic.

Within months of its publication on 15 June 1976, 20,000 copies were sold (Korte 2001, p. 25).²³ Sales have never waned until this day, turning *Prozess* into an international best seller, translated into more than 20 languages. The history of these translations is a key aspect of the fusion between form and meaning which led to the canonization of *Prozess* in the 1970s. First it was translated into French. The history of this translation, however, takes us back to 1939. As it turns out, one of the few

²² Only in 1997 did Suhrkamp publish an entirely new German edition, with a new typeset, in the *Gesammelte Schriften*.

²³ "After the publication of the Suhrkamp edition, W. Martin Lüdke noted with pleasure in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* of October 16, 1976 that now at last the book had become really available to the public. At the end of the year, Elias appeared on television. I was told that, after this broadcast, Volume I of the Suhrkamp edition was rapidly sold out. A feature in *Der Spiegel* of February 7, 1977 underlined his public success" (Goudsblom 1977, p. 60).

people to read *Prozess* upon its publication was Raymond Aron, then a lecturer of social philosophy at the University of Toulouse, who reviewed it in 1939 (Aron 2003)²⁴ Although we find no trace of this book anywhere else in Aron's work, *Prozess* left a positive impression upon him. When Jean Baechler, the editor of the series "Archives des sciences sociales" at Calmann-Lévy asked Aron, his former teacher, 30 years later for advice on whether to have it translated, the response was an enthusiastic yes. Soon after, the two volumes of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* were published as separate books, under the titles *La civilisation des mœurs* in 1973 and *La dynamique de l'occident* in 1975. Thus, within two years: "a set of handsomely produced volumes was made available to the French public, at a moderate price" (Goudsblom 1977, p.68).²⁵

The history of the translation into English is no less revealing of the extent to which becoming a classic is as much a question of theoretical prowess and literary style as it is a question of resonating materiality. Despite some questionable translation options, an American publisher (Urizen Books) eventually translated *Prozess* in two volumes; *The Civilizing Process* in 1978, and *Power and Civility* in 1982. Reviewing the first volume, Zygmunt Bauman has no doubts about the significance of this translation to the sociological community of interpreters: "The *Prozess* is not only Elias' *magnum opus*, but indeed the *chef d'oeuvre*, Elias's disciples proclaimed, and [the] sociological community at large is now coming to admit it to be. Making it available to the English-speaking world is an event of

²⁴ See also the exchange of correspondence between Elias and Aron in 1939 in <http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/docs/pdf/Figs/35.pdf> complete footnote, also available at <http://www.cairn.info/revue-vingtieme-siecle-revue-d-histoire-2010-2-page-97.htm#pa4> (access date 03-07-2014).

²⁵ There were, however, some questionable decisions made by the editorial team at Calmann-Lévi, including, for no apparent reason, several sections missing from Part III (Feudalization and state formation) of the second volume.

tremendous cultural significance” (1979, p.121).²⁶ Despite its flaws, the cultural import of this translation was further reinforced by the fact that it remained the only entry point for English-speaking audiences for 30 years.²⁷ In 2012 an attempt was made to bring the work to the public in all its integrity. A team of Elias scholars constituted by Stephen Mennell, Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom, and Richard Kilminster edited the *Prozess* translated by Edmund Jephcott directly from the first German edition, and in comparison with the text of the *Gesammelte Schriften*, into English for *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, an editorial initiative of the University College Dublin Press.

As D.F. McKenzie pointed out, however, such attempts at recovering the essential purity of the work suffer from one fundamental difficulty. They fail to acknowledge the fact that the material form is not an obstacle, but the condition of survival of the work (McKenzie 1999, p. 61). From a pragmatic sociological perspective, *Prozess* is but a metonymy of all its material incarnations, with their impurities, imperfections, and flaws. Yet it is due to them that Elias went from being a provincial lecturer to becoming a sociological classic in less than a decade. It is only by taking the materiality of meaning-production seriously that one can fully appreciate how Elias’ work connected with the French “history of mentalities” in the 1970s (see Wieviorka et al. 1998, pp. 89-90, Joly 2012), and with the agency-structure debate of the 1980s (Giddens 1984, pp. 121-122).

²⁶ Some have suggested that Elias’ reception in the United States has been jeopardized because of the title of the second volume, *Power and Civility*. This would have led “American scholars” to: “assume that the static concept of “civility” (roughly in the sense of “politeness”) was his central idea” (Mennell et al. 2012, p. xvi). Although titles can be misleading, and *Power and Civility* is definitely not the best rendition of Elias’ original German title, readers do go beyond the title page. In this sense, there must be other, more convincing reasons for the relatively poor reception of Elias in the US.

²⁷ The 1994 Blackwell edition of *Prozess* was produced by scanning the original two English volumes, thus reproducing all the typographical errors from the 1978-1982 edition. In 2000 Blackwell published a new revised edition, but several inconsistencies remained.

Prozess' ranking as one of the most important sociological books of the 20th century, could hardly have happened were it not for its 1970s revival as a paperback.²⁸ Likewise, Elias would never have come to be regarded "as having one of the world's most original and penetrating sociological minds" (Bryan Wilson cited in Mennell 1989, p. 3) were it not for the often tumultuous ways in which the materiality of *Prozess* interacted with individual and institutional agency from the mid1930s, as it was manufactured in unfavorable conditions in pre-war Europe, through the 1950s and early 1960s, when it failed to resonate with the discipline, to the crisis-ridden mid1970s, when it finally joined the gallery of the great books of the sociological tradition.

²⁸ <http://www.isa-sociology.org/books/books10.html> (access date 03-07-2015).

5. Conclusion

“The increased demand for books in a society is itself a sure sign of a pronounced spurt in the process of civilization; for the transformation and regulation of drives that is demanded both to write and read books is always considerable.” Norbert Elias (2012, p. 443)

In this paper we have attempted to show how the pragmatic concern with the materiality of meaning-production helps explain the singular canonization process of Norbert Elias. Existing explanations emphasizing individual and/or institutional factors, from Elias’ positioning strategy to disciplinary fragmentation, need to be complemented with a pragmatic sociological analysis of the ways in which they interact with the material and technical aspects of *Prozess* as a thing.

Besides offering a fuller account of Elias’ singular process of canonization, this paper aimed to call the attention of historians (and sociologists) of academic disciplines and ideas to the relative merits of the “turn to things” (e.g. Miller 1983, Appadurai 1986, Strathern 1988). Historians may benefit from a theoretically informed account of the ways in which the scope and success of intellectual interventions depend upon their materiality (Stocking 1965, Collini 1988, Novick 1988). Sociologists such as Andrew Abbott (2001) may benefit from our analysis in several ways. First, the elegant fractal models Abbott has imported from mathematics are nevertheless too rigid to capture the actual distribution of power positions in sociology. Rather than the recurrent nested dichotomies (agency vs. structure, qualitative vs. quantitative, etc.) that structure natural and social sciences alike, our analysis points to the existence, at least in the case of the social sciences, of distinctively dialogical, uneven, and culturally relative paths of disciplinary development. Second, rather than endless generational cycles of regurgitation of old ideas (Abbott 2001, p. 17), with little or no space for genuine conceptual innovation, a

fuller appreciation of the pragmatics of social theory would allow Abbott's sociology of disciplines to account for historical discontinuities, such as that spearheaded by Elias' canonization in the mid 1970s in sociology. We posit that the mechanism responsible for this discontinuity is thoroughly social-pragmatic, involving the fusion of form and meaning to be found in *Prozess*. As the form and meaning of *Prozess* merged, it ceased to be a book like any other and became a "sociological classic", thus challenging the structural stability of the discipline and of interdisciplinary boundaries generally. This comes with a fuller appreciation of the extent to which in the social sciences, and particularly in sociology, discussions about the discipline's past shape and condition present-day research agendas, teaching syllabi, and modes of collective understanding (see Lepenies 1981). By investigating the case of Elias' *Prozess*, we have addressed but one of the authors that figure in the sociological canon, an imagined community of illustrious predecessors (e.g. Connell 1997, Baehr and O'Brien 1994; on the sociological canon and book history, see Silva and Vieira 2011).

Sociologists of ideas may also benefit from a clearer understanding of how the origins, meaning, and relative import of those ideas cannot be dissociated from their materiality. This is certainly the case with macro-sociological approaches, such as Randall Collins' sociology of philosophies (1998), that have more to say about "networks" among philosophers than about the content of those philosophies (see also Collins and Guillén 2012). On the other hand, micro-sociological approaches, such as Charles Camic's and Neil Gross' "new sociology of ideas" (2001), whilst exhibiting greater sensitivity to the content of the ideas under study, tend to reduce these ideas to strategic choices (Camic 1987, Gross 2008). Even Patrick Baert's recent positioning theory (2012), despite correctly focusing on the effects of intellectual interventions by

individual agents rather than on the motivations behind them, has little to say about the materiality of the processes through which these effects impact communities of interpreters.

Since at least the late 1970s, some of the most innovative work in the social sciences and humanities has focused upon the entanglements between human agents and things in order to avoid the pitfalls of humanist modes of thinking (e.g. Latour and Woolgar 1979). As an exploration of the materiality of *Prozess* as a thing, this paper participates in this post-humanist conversation. However, if the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey has been an important source of inspiration for the Actor-Network-Theory of Bruno Latour and his associates, our pragmatic sociology is distinctly neo-Meadian (2011a, 2011b). Moreover, as the citation above makes clear, this neo-Meadian emphasis on the entanglements between things and people is very close to Elias' own understanding of the meaning of a society's increasing demand for books. For both figurational and pragmatic sociology, as we read books we become a book-reading society, with all the psychological and sociological consequences that it implies. It is due to such seminal insights that Elias, no less than Mead, is nowadays considered a sociological classic.

That is not to say that Elias' canonization has been entirely successful. Apart from Germany and the Dutch fascination with Elias, where figurational sociology is a significant research programme to this day, Elias's influence elsewhere is nowhere near as comparable as that of Durkheim, Marx, or Weber (see Goudsblom 1977, Mennell 1998, p. 278ff). Accounting for Elias' second-rank position in the canon is the fact that *Prozess* is not "exemplary", in the sense of being generally replicable, as for instance, Durkheim's *Suicide* is. Bauman seems to be aware of this when he writes: "*The Civilizing Process* [...] is a superb specimen of the sociological style

long forgotten, of the breadth of historical and cultural vision an average modern sociologist has been trained to do without” (1979, p.123). The product of a bygone era, nevertheless *Prozess* still ignites sociological imaginations today.

Yet to understand the book’s capacity to resonate with the sociological community today is not to say that this has always been the case. Entrapped in an unwelcoming material form for several decades, it took several material incarnations for *Prozess* to eventually resonate with the discipline in the mid1970s. To offer a genealogy of these metamorphoses is to explore the materiality of meaning-production. This strategy has enabled us to clarify the process by which Elias has been canonized in sociology. Our central claim is that, *ceteris paribus*, without an affordable, long-run edition of the work, its content would never have resonated with the sociological community at large. In the right material form, however, *Prozess* became an instant classic. To become a classic entails a special kind of relationship between form and meaning. If the Bible is a special book because if God is Word, then Word is God, sociological classics are special insofar as the relevant community of interpreters believes their material form to embody a specific sociological meaning. In the case of *Prozess*, this meaning is that of figurational sociology. As with all other approaches, its supporters are willing go to great lengths to protect it. Pragmatic sociology sets itself the task of desacralizing such efforts without rendering them meaningless.

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