

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

THOMAS SALUMETS, ed., *Norbert Elias and Human Interdependencies*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press. 2001, xii + 272 p. \$75 (hardcover), \$29.95 (paper).

This volume is a refreshing and long-overdue exposition of figurational sociology, showcasing the perspectives of a cadre of leading proponents of the approach. Salumets expands the conceptual scope of Elias's thoughts on interdependency, sociogenesis, civilising processes, power balances, habitus, and State formation. It is a tour de force treatise on the theoretical insight of one of the most neglected sociological thinkers of the 20th century (at least on this side of the Atlantic), including key biographical information about Elias, critical inspections of his work, and a series of attempts to reframe the empirical boundaries of figurational sociology.

The contributors are clearly advocates of the kind of historical, empirically-sensitive, and reflexive sociology that Elias championed. The chapters cover a full spectrum of subjects ranging from social etiquette (chapter 3), to gender and sexuality (chapters 8 and 10), to American civilising processes (chapter 13).

Organizationally, the text has three major sections. The first five chapters expound upon the nature of human interdependencies, and are further interlaced by the concepts of self-restraint and affective management. Quite progressively, the authors illustrate how figurational life exposes people to the ebb and flow of socially produced pressures to self-regulate behaviour. While they are not in complete agreement as to the force or direction of civilising processes (a concept Scheff de-emphasises in chapter 5 through his inspection of shame and interdependence), there is consensus regarding the pervasive trend toward inner containment in Western cultures (this dictum structures, as Arditi notes in chapter 4, even quasi-private forms of "virtual" interaction on the Internet). The next four chapters are centrally dialogical with Elias's conception of *homines aperti*. By interrogating a series of literary and historical texts (as Elias frequently did in his analysis of long-term civilising processes), the authors underscore how human interdependence is embedded in fiction and non-fiction alike. They find further evidence to admonish the *homo clausus* model of social thought that Elias himself so assertively eschewed. The final four chapters contain a melange of thought on the ongoing formation of social/institutional power relations and nation-States, from varying figurational perspectives and standpoints. Each chapter in this section offers compelling theoretical insight regarding established-outsider

relationships, power balances, and the monopoly mechanism, with Blomert's chapter on the banking business especially indicative of how many figurational sociologists have given further conceptual depth and breadth to Elias's work.

Quite importantly, by elucidating the form and content of mutual dependencies in social life, the contributing authors also collectively flesh out Elias's concept of the figuration. The authors explore Elias's description of a figuration, and locate the networks that form human interdependencies within a litany of cultural contexts spanning time and space. They skilfully present how a figurational perspective interprets social interaction as historical, ongoing, micrological, co-determinant, and broadly interlinked.

This book would not be ideal for the reader unfamiliar with the central tenets of Elias's thought. It is not, quite evidently, a primer in figurational sociology nor is this one of the book's explicit mandates. Although the chapters are tied, and rather deftly, by the meta-narrative of human interdependency, one should possess a solid understanding of the corpus of Elias's sociology to fully appreciate the level of the text's insight. Kemple's chapter on the social self illustrates this well, as does Kuzmics's chapter on literature, which require at least a cursory familiarity with Elias's works, namely *The Court Society* (1983), *The Civilising Process* (1994), *The Germans* (1996), *The Society of Individuals* (1991), and *The Established and the Outsiders* (with Scotson, 1965). Equally, it might be argued that few "non-traditional" extensions of figurational sociology are offered in this collection. Save for Mennell's chapter on American civilizing processes, or Arditi's chapter on "Netiquette," the book is replete with mostly classic or in some way "standard" (while intriguing and compelling) applications of Elias's thought.

On a more personal note, I was also somewhat disappointed that relatively nothing in this text highlighted the relevancy of figurational theory in Canadian sociological research. Although Salumets (5) mentioned the growing popularity of figurational sociology in North America, and its suitability for deciphering social life therein, extended figurational interpretations of Canadian social interaction and experience are absent. More is the pity, as three of the contributors respectively teach at the University of British Columbia (Thomas Salumets and Thomas Kemple) and the University of Calgary (Stephen Guy-Bray). This omission does not, in any way, diminish the value of the respective contributions. However, for Canadian scholars still in need of convincing that figurational sociology is germane in contemporary research on Canada society, Salumets could have fashioned a more compelling case.

This book is arguably one of the best edited collections on figurational sociology. As a proponent of figurational sociology, I believe that Salumets and the contributors should be lauded for producing such a timely, provocative, and eclectic text. For anyone seriously interested in or curious about figurational theory, this is a must read.

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