A CONTINGENT TRANSMISSION OF SOCIOLOGY: ENCOUNTERS WITH NORBERT ELIAS

My path has crossed with Norbert's many times, sometimes directly and at others indirectly; during certain periods we saw each other frequently, but there were also gaps of many years. Our points of contact were both personal and intellectual, a criss-crossing of accidental strands over the years through which I became familiar with many of his theories and absorbed some of his ways of thinking, but without ever consciously studying his writings. In the big picture Norbert undoubtedly contributed, albeit contingently, to my becoming a sociologist.

In a sense I have always known Norbert. He and my father had been close friends long before my birth, having met originally in Breslau in 1922. Though younger than Norbert my father also attended a 'humanistisches Gymnasium' in Breslau, receiving like Norbert an extremely thorough grounding in the classics and in cultural history. Like Norbert he also studied medicine in Heidelberg, where he was influenced by an outstanding Professor of Anatomy, Kallius. After giving up medicine to concentrate on philosophy Norbert maintained his strong interest in biological processes whilst my father retained his interest in philosophical questions despite specializing in embryology. Their friendship was consolidated in Heidelberg where they often talked while walking along the Philosophenweg, discussing their many shared and overlapping interests in philosophy and science, concerns to which they returned for many decades afterwards.

My father came to England in 1933, securing a research position in Cambridge the same year that he was thrown out of his job as a lecturer in Heidelberg. Visiting Paris in the mid-thirties, he was horrified by the destitute condition in which Norbert was living, and was determined to bring him to England. This involved both persuading a reluctant Norbert, who felt no connection with this side of the Channel, and, since my father did not yet have British citizenship, arranging for someone to act as guarantor in sponsoring Norbert to the immigration authorities. Patrick Murray, an Australian zoologist colleague of my father (and nephew of the Oxford classicist and H.G. Wells supporter Gilbert Murray) willingly assumed the role and Norbert duly arrived in England.
My father and Norbert remained in close contact in the years before and during the Second World War. They were interned together in 1940 on the Isle of Man, and at the end of that year Norbert acted as witness at my parent’s wedding. The first time my mother (also a medical researcher) met Norbert he enchanted her with the history of the fork, describing its changing use in renaissance Venice and under Henry VIII, and explaining to her how the number of prongs had increased with the development of table manners. It was a story and an occasion she remembers to this day, and one which was frequently retold to me as a child, though at the time she thought it was somewhat odd for a guest to expound at table on the utensils he was eating with.

Norbert spent much of the war in Cambridge. The London School of Economics was evacuated and Cambridge became the home for a wide circle of emigres and social scientists who appear, from my parents’ accounts, to have led a buzzing intellectual and active social life with discussion groups and rounds of parties. My mother remembers a day on the river with my father and Norbert when ‘Asik’ and Grebenik, students of Norbert’s, swam along behind their punt, and clung on to its side while Norbert fed them all the sandwiches she had made! On another occasion they walked to Granchester: it was a depressing day—very grey and rainy, but Norbert was telling my mother the history of noseblowing or some aspect of courtly society that was to appear in *The Civilizing Process* and she forgot all about the weather. Norbert’s shoes, however, were completely wet through. She loved to listen to him; an inspiring storyteller, he had the capacity to hold his audience and lift them out of themselves. She recollects with fondness that, unlike many male intellectuals of his generation, he talked to her as an equal. He took her own work seriously and encouraged her, much as he did with me forty years on.

There were also other characteristics that cast a different reflection. Whenever my father lent Norbert his flat in Union Road, seemingly a frequent occurrence, he would invariably return to find all the saucepans burnt. In spite of his outlook on culinary culture, Norbert could not cook and relied on heating up tins of processed food. Either he forgot to add water, or while they were warming he became so engrossed in a more intellectual pursuit that he completely forgot all about them. Another instance: like all the other ‘friendly aliens’ Norbert had to register with the police every week. This was something he detested (no doubt a humiliating experience) to such an extent that he tried to avoid going anywhere near Cambridge police station on any other occasion, or he would run past it if he really could not avoid St Andrews Street. My mother maintains that Norbert was nervous of the police, and had a special aversion to a certain Sergeant Wilson. It was as if he found it difficult to assimilate his own maltreatment.
Norbert was thus a presence in my childhood. A signed copy of the original German 1939 edition of Über den Prozess der Zivilisation (the Preface includes an acknowledgement to A. Glucksmann, D. Med.) sat in my father's bookcase, next to volumes on the history and philosophy of science, to be joined very much later by English translations of Norbert's other publications. I grew up with a vague understanding of what Norbert meant by figurations and developmental processes though I would not have been able to express them in my own words. I thought of him as a rather eccentric elderly man with his check-tweed jacket and thick glasses, wagging his finger at me while animatedly telling a story about some quite everyday thing which seemed more significant than I could grasp. Perhaps this was because I was a bit nervous of him too, on account of what I took to be his glass eye, replacing the eye he had lost in a skiing accident. But he seemed so old (in fact he must have been in his late fifties) that it was hard to imagine him skiing, diving, or even swimming.

The next regular set of encounters with Norbert was not until the early 1970s when I became a lecturer in the Sociology Department at Leicester. As a student at the London School of Economics I was very impressed with his article on 'Problems of involvement and detachment', arguing in a second-year undergraduate essay that its distinctive perspective on the issue of objectivity offered a way forward and out of the sterile debates that were then raging about value freedom. It was pure coincidence (or was it?) that I ended up in the same department as the old family friend. 'Don't hesitate to sparkle a bit when you come here' Norbert wrote in a congratulatory letter after I got the job. He enclosed a copy of Was ist Soziologie? and asked if I would be interested to take on the translation. 'It's a good book, if I say it myself,' he wrote, 'but few people understand what it is all about'. It was perhaps fortuitous, given the problems that eventually beset the translation of Norbert's works into English, that my German was nowhere near being up to the task.

By this time my outlook on sociology was very different from Norbert's. My PhD thesis was on structuralism; I was involved in the student and Vietnam movements, was 'third worldist' and about to become a feminist while at Leicester. From where I stood, the scholarly nature of Norbert's sociology, his configurational framework, and his encyclopaedic knowledge were undermined by being so determinedly apolitical. I disagreed with his insistence on the detachment of sociologists and I could not conceive of 'a civilizing process' as anything other than evolutionary and eurocentric, since I imagined (incorrectly) that it must counterpose a presumed 'backward' or 'primitive' state to a more civilized western/capitalist one. It also seemed difficult to view the twentieth century, especially from a life trajectory such as Norbert's, under an overarching
perspective of civilizing and individualizing sociogenesis.

The differences between us were, however, no obstacle to discuss; on the contrary, they were the substance of much stimulating debate. For his part Norbert attempted to convince me of the sterility of structuralism, emphasizing that social process was both the core of society and of the analysis of society. We agreed on the importance of conceptualizing patterns of social relations, but his were processual and developmental while mine were elaborated as series of interconnected structures and contradictions. Throughout the discussions, though, he always listened to what I had to say and treated my views with respect, even if he had little time for Lévi-Strauss or Althusser. I did not feel that my ideas were being dismissed by Norbert as misguided youthful arrogance. However, there was always that niggling impression that you were being enlisted as a potential convert to Elias's sociology. There were not many problems that Norbert had not already thought about, if not already solved! In 1972 a colleague and I at Leicester put on one of the first Women's Studies courses in Britain. Departmental opposition meant that it had to be voluntary for both staff and students. When I told Norbert that I now wanted to research and write about women's subordination cross-culturally and historically his face lit up with enthusiasm. He had always thought that gender relations were a basic feature of social structure, he told me, even if this had been ignored by most mainstream sociology. But the real question for me, he insisted, should be the changing balance of power between the sexes. I was delighted at such encouragement, which contrasted so strongly with the far more common derisory reaction. But the delight was soon tempered by the sensation that my project was in danger of being taken over, and depoliticized in the process. In fact, Norbert told me, while we were walking across Victoria Park away from the university, he had already written a book on the subject himself, in which he had developed a longue durée historical analysis. But, by great misfortune, the manuscript had been left in a pile of papers on the floor and incinerated (At the time I took this story with a pinch of salt though subsequently it turned out to be entirely true). Nothing remained apart from some fragments about ancient Rome, and as we walked round and round the park he expounded on marriage, property relations, and the state in classical antiquity. How typical, I thought to myself, that he already knows it all, better than I ever could.

Norbert's interest in young people was genuine and this attracted them to him. He engaged with their work, encouraged them, supported them in new or unfashionable avenues of research, and inspired many with a confidence they were otherwise lacking. Curiously, his conviction in the value of his own work
was combined with a generosity towards the less well worked out ideas of young scholars. He was as quick to acknowledge a good point as to criticize a bad one.

The Leicester department was amongst the most vibrant during the 1960s and 1970s and numerous eminent sociologists passed through it during those years; all will have their own memories of the place and interpretations of its internal dynamics. By the time I arrived, Norbert and Ilya Neustadt were already on bad terms, though Norbert was very careful not to line anyone up ‘on his side’ against Ilya. Nor was there ever any overt conflict. The departmental seminar was the occasion for the most open airing of their differences, or so it seemed to me. I felt sorry for the poor unfortunate invited speaker whom the two men treated as a vehicle for their own debate. Each would make criticisms and ask questions from his own position which were really aimed at each other while being directed at the sometimes bewildered football in the middle. It was such a waste that two colleagues who went back such a long way should have come to this impasse. It also seemed out of character that Norbert, who tolerated, with such little rancour, the lack of interest in his work by British sociology at large, should take offence at what was really a much more parochial slight.

During the later 1970s and 1980s, after we had both left Leicester, Norbert continued to send me copies of his books which were now being published thick and fast, but still mostly only on the continent. Once on holiday in Switzerland I turned on the radio to hear quite by chance an hour long program about Norbert and his work. By this time he was steadily gaining the recognition he deserved, and a significant following, in the Netherlands, Germany, and even France. Britain continued to lag behind. It seems deeply ironic that appreciation by British sociology came so belatedly and only after other countries had already given their seal of approval. Suddenly people were discovering Norbert’s insights into the body, violence, appetite, games, and the interconnection between cultural, social, and physical processes, and so forth. Yet all these were available to an earlier generation if only they had been interested, and Elias could have been claimed as a major British sociologist. The history of Norbert’s forty years in Britain says far more about Britain than it does about Norbert, highlighting a half-hearted welcome of foreigners and grudging acceptance that they might have something to offer. Never accepted as ‘one of us’, I often wondered how Norbert resisted the temptation to include something about his own treatment in his work on ‘established-outsider relations’.

By the time of his ninetieth birthday celebrations in Apeldoorn and Amsterdam Norbert’s standing was assured, and he was showered with official honours as well as the accolades of European and North American sociologists. But he remained solicitous and welcoming to everyone he had invited, no matter their renown. He talked with me at length about my father
who had died two years previously (although he was eighty, Norbert saw this as a very premature death) and arranged for presents to be bought for the young daughter of a colleague who came along to the parties and whose birthday was on the same date as his.

When working recently on gender and temporality I read Norbert's *Essay on Time* for the first time, and wondered again at the skill with which he integrates physical, social, historical, and cultural processes. It was a truly exciting read, the analysis of the development of the calendar was quite brilliant. Perhaps most impressive of all was his attempt to theorize time. Virtually all the other authors I consulted had included time merely as part of an attempt at 'grand theory', a total conceptual framework for interpreting 'society' as such. Time appeared as an epiphenomenon of the overall framework, devoid of substantive content, and it was a simple matter to predict in advance the analysis of time that would 'go with' any given theoretical framework. Unlike Norbert who really does take time seriously as a problem in itself, despite the connection he makes between the civilizing process and developments in the control over and measurement of time.

Always developing theory on the basis of substantive material; analysing the cultural, individual, emotional, social, and political as necessarily interconnected and mutually defining dimensions of life; insisting on process, structure, and change. These are amongst the important lessons to be learned from Norbert's approach to sociology. His capacity to see the big stories in apparently small events and 'little' things is no less important, and equally to be emulated. Norbert's interests were enormously wide-ranging. Whether it was fox hunting, spitting, embarrassment, or personal pronouns, Norbert was always able to interpret and explain his subject matter in a way that revealed a significance one might never have imagined. Others would have dismissed much of Norbert's material as unworthy of serious investigation, but he was interested in everything and could illuminate even the most unlikely topics, causing his audience to see them in a completely new way.

In my first encounters with Norbert as a child I had not been wrong to suspect that he saw the significance of mundane things, although I could not appreciate then the importance of this capacity.

When Norbert historically situated the notion of 'genius', such as Mozart's, as a social phenomenon which could only first arise at a particular time and place, as an interlocking of personal and social trajectories, I sometimes wonder how he saw and understood the vicissitudes of his own twentieth-century life, his own cultural production and transmission. Perhaps, the way our intergenerational
lives criss-crossed at different and peripheral points in his personal trajectory, is what makes me want to ask him the question.

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NOTES


3 'Asik' was the nickname of Rado Mysler, a sociology student who later committed suicide. Eugene Grebenik went on to become Professor of Sociology at Leeds University.

3 Norbert Elias, Edmund Jephcott (trans.), Reflections on a Life, In the 'Biographical interview with Norbert Elias', there are some quite striking disjunctures between his intellectual projects and life circumstances. He describes himself (pp.52-53) as 'deeply involved' in writing his book on the civilizing process at the very time that Jews were being deported to concentration camps, including his own beloved mother, whose fate he never came to terms with.