

The Question of Time for Norbert Elias: Challenges of an interdisciplinary concept and approach towards time

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Abstract

Norbert Elias is one of the great scholars who calls attention to the need for interdisciplinary studies related to actual societies' challenges. He was one of the precursors of 'Figurational Sociology,' through which human relations are studied in a processual way (micro and macro-social aspects). Elias's focus was to understand these concepts, not as a state of fixed and immutable things, but to understand them in terms of their process. In this report, it is pointed out that the 'civilizing process' ended up imposing on individuals a greater number of activities as well as greater dependence and complexity in the social relations network. Such factors required a common denominator to regulate such relationships. In this case, the denominator was called 'time'. By studying time, we may contribute to correct this erroneous image of a world with watertight compartments such as nature, society, and individuals. These are mixed and interdependent and require an interdisciplinary approach. Interdisciplinary studies of time and what to expect of the future are still waiting to be done.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, interdisciplinary study, time, future narratives

Norbert Elias is one of the great scholars who calls the attention to the need for interdisciplinary studies related to actual society's challenges. He published his first work entitled 'The Civilizing Process' in 1939, but he only gained academic and public recognition in the 1970s. Within this concept, Elias establishes relationships between the constitution of the State and the formation of individual conscience and self-control, explaining how society transforms, throughout its development, external coercion into self-coercion.

Elias was one of the precursors of the 'Figurational Sociology' through which human relations are studied in a processual way (micro and macro social). The figurative sense is used to illustrate networks of interdependence between individuals and the distribution of power within them. It is important to point out that Elias does not have a static view of these configurations and seeks to capture them in a continuous process of constitution and transformation. In this sense, configurations cannot be planned, programmed, or predicted because they are built and resized all the time. He even makes an analogy of the configurations with a ballroom dance, where people's actions when dancing are dependent on the place and the momentum of the dance (1994b).

Another aspect that supports this statement is that for him - actions and authors are not treated separately, just as individuals and society are not dissociable. Elias denounces the false division between human and natural sciences as a product of the development of closed and specific knowledge. Consequently, it becomes more difficult to capture the multiple relationships established between humanity and time, which requires an interdisciplinary approach.

For Elias (1989, 1993, 1994b), 'knowledge' is developed through social configurations throughout the evolution of society. Time also appears as a by-product of the evolution of our society. This evolution does not necessarily mean progress, but it is formed by progress and setbacks and, in the case of time, it is based on the development of the human capacity for synthesis and symbolic representation. It is important to note that Elias does not use the terms 'development,' 'evolution,' and 'progress,' in the sense of an automatic need or intrinsic to society (meaning used in the 19th century). He refers to such terms to explain, empirically and theoretically, structural changes that happen in society in the end. 'Time' is postulated as one, among several elements, that have accompanied the evolution of humanity.

Elias aims was to understand these concepts, not as a state of fixed and immutable things, but to understand them in terms of their process. Nevertheless, Elias (1994b: 216) pointed out 'there is still a lack of empirically-based theories to explain the type of long-term social changes

that take the form of a process and, above all, of development.' Thus, it seems that science still lacks instruments to capture events in a procedural and interdisciplinary way. To establish new paths in the understanding of the relationship between man and time, Elias uses research and investigations that explain how temporal configurations undergo changes and what functions they acquire in the course of social development.

The principles of 'Figurational Sociology' not only influenced several thinkers like Eric Dunning, Richard Kilminster, Jonathan Fletcher, Mike Featherstone, Stephen Mennell, Roger Chartier, Johan Goulsblom, among others but brought a new way of looking and approaching concepts in movement and interdisciplinary. It is noteworthy that in England, when Elias was in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester, he met and worked with other important sociologists of that century, for instance, Anthony Giddens, John H. Goldthorpe, and Ilya Neustadt.

In Elias' vast work, the most diverse themes are discussed, from sociology, state formation, and sociology of sport, loneliness, fear of death, symbol theory, and even leisure. Such a variety and topicality of themes demonstrates an author concerned with issues that continue to influence our society. Specifically, regarding the question of time, Elias raised reflections between the history of civilization and time in 'The civilizing process.' In 1984, the book '*Sobre el Tiempo*' was published in German and then translated into Spanish. Especially in this work, Elias contrasted philosophical, naturalistic, and historical approaches, constituting an interdisciplinary way of approaching time, and trying to overcome the gaps produced between different areas of scientific knowledge.

When Elias (1989) makes comparisons of how different civilizations determine the time, he establishes universal functions for the way it coordinates human experiences between nature and society. Furthermore, Elias describes constraints-imposed overtime on society that link individual psychological structures with broader social structures.

When writing 'The civilizing process,' Elias (1994b) relates the constitution of the State since the Middle Ages, through the collection of taxes, police, armed forces, law, and others, with the elaboration of temporal aspects present in the formation of conscience and the individual self-control. In other words, state regulation would have accompanied the development of internal rules present in the formation of subjectivity and in the coordination of activities in society. Time, in the perspective of the 'civilizing process' is a fundamental network of a configuration of social relations developed by civilization.

Consequently, the growing importance given to time in our society tends to be the result of the social development itself that made it a primordial item for regulating life in society. What Elias (1994b: 207) especially writes in the 'civilizing process' is the establishment of time as the condition for the 'civilizing process.' Time was crucial for the development of a society, whose networks of actions were increasingly intertwined with each other, for instance:

The need for the synchronization of human conduct in broader territories and the need for a spirit of foresight with regard to longer chains of actions as never before ... there is also a manifestation of the large number of interlocking chains and interdependence, covering all the social functions that individuals have to perform, and the competitive pressure that saturates this densely populated network and that affects, directly or indirectly, each person's isolated act. This rhythm can reveal itself, in the case of the employee or entrepreneur, in the profusion of his scheduled meetings and meetings and, in the worker's, the exact timing and duration of each of his movements. In both cases, the rhythm is an expression of the huge number of interdependent actions, the extent and density of the chains composed of actions individuals and the intensity of the struggles that keep this entire interdependent network in motion. Elias (1994b: 207).

In this report, it is pointed out that the 'civilizing process' ended up imposing on individuals a greater number of activities as well as greater dependence and complexity in the social relations network. Such factors required a common denominator to regulate such relationships. In this case, the denominator is called 'time.'

In fact, according to Elias (1993: 208), it was not the currency that characterized the transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern Age, but the change in the rhythm and extension of the movement that qualitatively changed the structure of human relations in society. It is in the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance that the individual self-control of emotions and time is strengthened.

In this sense, the most accentuated concern with time, and with current temporal measures, seems to stem from processes of urbanization, commercialization, and mechanization of society. Mainly, when it based itself on great dependence on instruments created to measure time and less dependence on measures based on natural phenomena. For Elias (1989: 64, 65), the 'civilizing process' demonstrates that the broader and more interdependent human action is, the greater its dependence on time.

With the increasing urbanization and commercialization, it became more and more urgent the requirement to synchronize an increasing number of human activities and to have a continuous and uniform period as a common frame of reference for all human activities. It was the task of the central activities (profane and religious) to prepare this reticule and ensure its functioning, which depended on the orderly and recurring payment of taxes, interests, salaries, and the fulfilment of many other contracts and obligations, as well as the numerous festive days.

Therefore, time seems to be an essential element in the coordination and integration of current social relations, since the number of activities to be synchronized in modern times is greater and in increasingly complex networks. Because of the greater dependence on temporal measures, there is an overemphasis on temporality and the feeling is that there is a shortage of time.

Faced with a social process as long as time, Elias points out that studies on this theme must be associated with the history and development of humanity, because 'time is a network of relationships, often quite complex and that substantially, determining time is an integrating activity, a synthesis' (1989: 67). Present in several communities and since more remote times, time is a social convention that has accompanied our development. Researching time, starting from a critical, historical and procedural approach, contributes to a more integrated view of the advances and setbacks of our social constructions.

In general, time settings and measurements provide pattern, uniformity, and repetition for organizing our daily routines. In this sense, the word time means to Elias (1989: 56) is a 'symbol of a relationship that a human group (that is, a group of living beings with the biological ability to reconcile and synthesize) establishes between two or more processes, among which it takes one, as a frame of reference or measure for the others.'

The regularity and sequence of time measurements made it possible to demarcate routines and activities within the same time code. Time and activity are correlated because measurements of time allow a certain regularity and predictability in the face of life, movement, and activity. Thus, to mark positions and periods that follow each other in a succession of happenings, society had to find a process, with patterns of repetition and regularity in a successive and non-repetitive way. 'The repetitive modules of this sequence then serve as normalizing guidelines of reference, with the help of which it can be indirectly confronted with the sequence of another process, the phenomena not directly comparable, saying that those guidelines represent the repetition of the same' (Elias, 1989: 19, 20).

Consequently, Mondays are repeated after Sundays, working days are intertwined with days off, in a sequential model that allows people to organize and schedule their activities according to the time-being. The regularity of temporal measures can thus offer greater predictability of daily life.

Such demarcations of time are also products of the accumulation of knowledge that occurs throughout history.

However, Elias (1989: 207) postulates that symbolic and synthesis levels were necessary as prerequisites for the development of the current temporal system. That is, the improvement of the capacity for generalization and abstraction would have made progress in time measurements possible.

Elias states that 'what we call time is, first of all, a frame of reference that serves members of a certain group and ultimately, all humanity, to institute recognizable rites within a continuous series of transformations of the respective reference group or also, to compare a certain phase of a flow of events' (1989: 84). Therefore, time fulfills the functions of orienting man before the world and regulating human coexistence.

According to Elias, watches are human inventions already incorporated into the symbolic world of man as a way of guiding and integrating physical, biological, social, and subjective aspects (1989: 23). However, when one forgets that they are human and historical inventions, of how or why the first clocks were built and of the transformations they underwent, such constructions are likely approached as if they had a natural existence, alien to man. Nevertheless, for Elias, 'in a world without men and living beings, there would be no time and, therefore, neither clocks nor calendars' (1989: 22).

With this and other statements, it is clear that for Elias (1989), civilization is the builder of time. One cannot understand one without the other. In the same way, time and subject cannot be dissociated. In the approach of Elias, time must be understood in the social context where it is produced and in interaction with other elements of social life (1993). To this end, the articulation of interdisciplinary and intersubjectively aspects is required to enter such networks of social configurations.

For Elias (1989: 150), the question of time 'at the bottom is simple, like that of time, it is proof that the social past is forgotten.' In other words, when time is rescued historically, man can rethink his life and transform it, as he is the subject of the process of building his own history and of time. Because we are not born with a ready temporal sense, temporal organizations have to be learned along with other cultural aspects. According to Elias, 'time learning' in a highly industrialized society requires

seven to nine years to develop, that is, for the individual to decipher the complex symbolic temporal system that guides social life(1989: 154). Such a system also influences our 'look' at reality, making it essentially temporal. As explained by Elias:

In our type of society, man's life is measured with exact punctuality. A temporal social scale that measures age (I am twelve, you are ten), the individual learns it and integrates it, as a social element, in the image of himself and others. This subordination of temporal measures not only serves as communication on different quantities, but also reaches its full meaning as a communicable symbolic abbreviation of human differences and transformations known in the biological, psychological and social (Elias, 1989: 80).

Likewise, consciousness, emotions, and subjectivity are affected by the way each society structures its time. The impact of the temporal organization on human relationships varies from season to season and extends to varying degrees on society. Today, the impression is that without time to coordinate our activities, we would not be able to carry them out. Nevertheless, with time to organize them, one lives running against the clock. The temporal demands postulate accelerated rhythms, and it seems that the possibility of having a society that respects different temporalities and rhythms remains utopian.

In previous civilizations, it was common to find people who did not know how to answer about their age, time, day, month, or year in which they were or had been born. 'In societies without a calendar and, therefore, without precise symbols to designate the sequence of unrepeated years, the individual could not have a definite knowledge of his own age,' says Elias (1989: 17).

However, in modern society, individuals develop such a rooted, global and omnipresent temporal consciousness that, 'this individuation of the social regulation of time brings, in an almost paradigmatic way, the expressions of a civilizing process' (Elias, 1989: 32). It is likely that the constant concern with time, awareness of the passage of time, the brevity of relationships, together with a life where everything depends on schedules, illustrate an increasing dependence on time that seems to pass faster and faster.

It is impossible to know a certain culture, without analyzing the networks of relationships built among individuals, and their organization of time. The way in which each culture organizes time reveals fundamental aspects of the organization of that society. Likewise, 'the omnipresent time awareness of members of relatively complex and urbanized societies is an integral part of their social model and personality' (Elias, 1989: 176).

In addition, time has been treated as something that involves mystery, enigma, and supernatural powers, as if it were necessary to unravel it in order to understand it. Elias affirms that this enigmatic characteristic of time comes from the complexity of human relations and affirms that 'from human coexistence, something results that men do not understand, which presents itself as enigmatic and mysterious'; this is 'time' (1989:21). Elias (1989) uses the term 'social coercion' to explain how in industrial society a new model of time arises and guides our subjectivity. With the temporal disciplinarization presents following the constitution of identity, modernity produces time as 'the speed of clocks, calendars, and schedules, it boasts in this society, the properties that encourage constraints that the individual imposes on himself. The pressure of these constraints is relatively little apprehended, measured, balanced and pacified, however, omnipresent and inevitable' (Elias, 1989: 32).

A temporal organization based on self-coercion required discipline until it was incorporated into subjectivity. For Elias, 'the transformation of the external coercion of the social institution of time into a pattern of self-coercion that encompasses the entire existence of the individual, is a graphic example of how the civilizing process contributes to model a social attitude that forms an integral part of the individual's personality structure' (1989: 21). In the civilizing process, external coercion turns itself into self-coercion and time has come to impose its dominance not only externally, but also mainly internally. This way, the question by Elias is 'how does this happen, that we constantly think about time? That time has become part of our consciousness (1987: 143). We constantly live the memory that is now noon and will soon be one hour'.

By studying time, we may 'perhaps contribute to correct this erroneous image of a world with watertight compartments. Study that turns out to be impossible, when it conceals the axis that nature, society, and individuals are mixed and are interdependent' (Elias, 1989: 25). To overcome the dichotomy of science and capture time in all its multiplicity, Elias suggests the following:

A basic idea is necessary to understand time: it is not about man and nature, as separate facts, but about man in nature. This makes it easier to investigate what time means and to understand the dichotomy of time. World in nature (natural science study area) and human societies (human and social science study area) lead to a split in the world, which is an artificial product of an erroneous scientific development (Elias, 1989: 18).

As a category that should not be restricted to any particular discipline, but that it is part of human knowledge as a whole, time challenges us in the construction of means that can overcome the division of sciences and

integrate man and time. Elias' texts (1984, 1989, 1993, and 1994a, 1994b) do not bring a closed theoretical systematization about time, nor do they intend to exhaust the richness of the topic. On the contrary, Elias already warns about the dangers of establishing a psychology or sociology while repeatedly reproducing the ideological division of science (1989: 180).

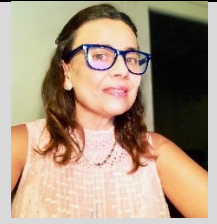
At the same time, Elias criticizes the existing division between Social Psychology and other Psychologies, pointing out that such separation is erroneous and the product of an ontological gulf between individual and society, in addition to hindering integrated and time-critical studies (1989: 157). Elias goes so far as to affirm that Psychology should be the link between natural and human sciences, since the structure of the human psyche, society and history are inseparable, complementary, and can only be studied together (1994c: 41). For Elias, it is in Psychology that lies, then, the possibility of building the bridge between natural and social sciences.

Difficulties are many. One of them refers to communication problems between different specialties - hinder the study of those who have, in time, their object of investigation. Besides, it seems that 'studying time can perhaps contribute to correct this erroneous image of a world with watertight compartments. Study that turns out to be impossible, when it conceals the axis that nature, society, and individuals are mixed and are interdependent' (Elias, 1989: 25).

The tendency of each group of scientists to consider their domain as sacrosanct and as a fortress to protect intruders with a gap of conventionalisms and ideologies common to that specialty obstructs any intention to relate the different scientific areas through a common theoretical framework. As things stand, it is difficult to break down these barriers, when we deal with the problem of time (Elias, 1989: 110). Elias (1989: 97) points 'in the practice of human societies, the problems of determining time play an increasingly important role; in social theories, the attention paid to the themes of determining time is relatively minimal.'

As the common denominator of activities, the organizer of events, the regulator of everyday life and an increasing number of actions, and in increasingly complex networks, it is no wonder that it is considered one of the greatest constructions of humanity. What we may not have foreseen is that this organizer of social relations, like any other human invention, could also be used as an instrument of social control. To capture the ambiguity of time is possible using interdisciplinary methodologies and approaches - necessary for life in society and as a possible cause of suffering for itself, too. Interdisciplinary studies of time and what to expect of the future are yet waited to being researched.

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