

BACIS ELEMENTS OF FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

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Abstract: Elias is probably one of the last representatives of classical sociology. He believed that many of the problems and difficulties faced by sociology stem from the categorical apparatus it uses. Hence, he tried to make his own contribution to enriching it. Among the concepts that were characteristic of the sociology developed by Elias are figurations, processes, habitus, civilization, relations, networking, power relations, interdependencies, established/outsiders, involved/detached, etc. These concepts are radically different from the concepts that were standardly used in sociology in the second half of the 20th century. Among them are society, system, structure, role, action, interaction, individual. Elias introduces the term figuration in order to relativize the dichotomies of the type individual - society, processes and structure, subjectivity and objectivity, in which entities not only differ, but also oppose each other. Figuration denotes the dynamism of relationships between people and encompasses changes in interdependencies over time. If four people sit at a table and play cards – they constitute a figuration. Their actions are interdependent. Although it may seem that the game exists, in itself, it is quite clear that the game and the flow of the game in time are conditioned by the networking of individuals. If four relatively equal individuals play, each of them has a certain degree of autonomy in the game. The interdependence of the players is a prerequisite for the existence of figuration. Interdependence can be based on cooperation, as well as competition, and even conflict. The relations of interdependence in figurations are dynamic and changeable. With each action of the individuals who make up the figuration, the balance of power in the figuration can change. Figuration as a concept was not developed by Elias all at once, in one essay, but rather it constantly matured as an analytical tool. Elias returned to it throughout almost his entire career and constantly developed and refined it. In doing so, Elias distinguished between configuration and figuration. For the combination of structural and procedural connotations, he preferred to use the term configurations. Configuration referred more to emergent organic structures such as DNA, while figurations are highly complex dynamic structures and processes that occur in society. Through them, Elias studies the most complex and intricate processes of integration of society, that is, of individuals in relational networks. Figurations lay at the foundation of the sociology that Elias developed, that is, figuration sociology. In this article, we will become acquainted with its basic characteristics in more detail.

Keywords: figuration, interdependencies, processes, figuration sociology

1. THE BASIC CHARACTERISTICS OF FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Figuration sociology can only be understood through pluralities, through the constant and numerous interactions of social agents with other individuals, groups, organizations, institutions. The concept of figurations, with its network approach and refusal to analyze social relations relying primarily on social structure, comes close to the concept of fields in Bourdieu's theory (Jitschin 2023). In figurations, psychic and social processes are in symbiosis, they are intertwined, they occur together, and not separately from each other. At the level of epistemology, figuration sociology is a challenge for both philosophy and theoretical sociology. It does not view concepts such as logic, rationality, science, state, economy, individual, etc. in an absolute and timeless perspective. On the contrary, for figuration sociology, all these categories are social products, created in long-term dynamic figuration processes (Featherstone 1987: 201). Hence, Kilminster calls figuration sociology also post-philosophical sociology (Kilminster 2007; Gornicka, O Rieggain, Powell 2019).

If we see football as a figuration, the grouping of one team makes no sense unless the grouping of the opposing team is also observed. The individual play of any player makes no sense unless it is placed in the context of the team he plays for, but also of the opposing team (Elias 2007: 110). Hence, sociology should not observe people individually as homo clausus, but should take into account the figurations that constitute them. The atomistic representation of society is based on the inability to imagine that specific network structures such as marriages, parliaments, economic crises, wars, etc. arise from the networking of individual behavior (Elias 2007: 112). Elias (1993) deals with the individual-society dichotomy in his book *Mozart*. With his talent, Mozart influenced the development of art history, but he was also influenced by the dominant musical practices of the time in which he lived. He perfected them and with his talent made innovations in them. So the history of art is not just a sum of the personal achievements of the most talented artists, just as it is not just a sum of the social structure in which they were socialized.

In dynamic figurations, power is not substantial, but relational. It fluctuates between those who constitute the figuration (Elias 2007: 110). Elias emphasizes the omnipresence of power in interpersonal relations (Bianchi 2023). It creates interdependencies, and figuration itself is a structure of mutually oriented and interdependent people. Elias preferred to write about interdependencies, not interactions. Interdependencies shape figurations, which can have a variety of forms. If imagined as dances, they can be minuet, tango, rock and roll, etc. (Nyhan, Hermann 2003: 94). The concept of figuration points to constantly shifting patterns of interdependence in which people (allies and opponents) fluctuate in a constantly shifting equilibrium. In this sense, it can be said that Elias shows greater sensitivity to the fluctuating balances of power in human interdependencies than Foucault (Featherstone 1987: 203). The term figuration can refer to relatively small groups, but also to groups consisting of thousands and millions of interconnected individuals (Inglis 2024). Figuration is therefore suitable for the analysis of macro-processes such as learning within a peer group, as well as macro-processes such as the marginalization of a given group in society (Rigg et. al. 2007: 213). Figuration is made up of a teacher and his students in a classroom, a doctor and his patients in a therapy group, guests in a tavern, children in a kindergarten, etc. But figuration also includes the inhabitants of a village, a metropolis, and members of a nation. In such cases, figuration is more difficult to notice, because the chains of interdependence that people form are longer and more differentiated (Elias 2007: 111). Sociologically speaking, figuration involves constant changes in patterns of behavior, regulations, tendencies, counter-tendencies, boundaries of interpersonal relations, etc. It is the word of “individuals,” “agents,” “societies,” “social changes,” “power,” “structure,” which develop spontaneously and in symbiosis. Although it is a sum of all the previously mentioned elements, figuration cannot be reduced to any of them (Dunning, Hughes 2013: 52). Along with membership in figurations, individuals build their own individual, but also collective identity. As it passes from one phase of individual and social development to another, identity experiences constant development and transformation (Waterstradt 2023: 55).

The theoretical perspective that Elias developed is called figurational or process sociology. Individuals, social networks, social groups, and the universe are part of a continuous process. They are in constant dynamics. Individuals are born, mature, age, and die. Hence, sociology needs to develop a terminology that will analyze such dynamics (Elias 1987). Figurations indicate social forms, structures, attitudes, values, beliefs, norms that, when viewed from a long-term perspective, are in a process of constant change. Figurations encompass changes that occur over several successive generations, in social structure, culture, etc. In order to understand changes, they need to be viewed from a long-term perspective. This is exactly what Elias does by analyzing the transformation of human behavior, manners of eating, from the Middle Ages to the present day. This process of constant transformation of behavior includes the intertwining, interdependence of macro structure (the transformation of the state) and micro structures (the transformation of the structure of the person, the discipline of behavior, with a shift from external to internal control of behavior, accompanied by the replacement of physical force with the imposition of a sense of shame. This process is unplanned and nonlinear. The direction of change is a synthesis of changes that occur over several generations. This process is unplanned because it involves many people and many generations, and the more people and generations it involves, the less each of them individually has an influence on the process (Elias 1978). In addition, although individuals are rational and try to plan their actions, when the plans of many people, collective entities such as states, etc. collide in social life, the result is usually a dynamic of development that none of the entities in the process planned. History is the unplanned result of the rational plans of social subjects.

2. INTERDEPENDENCIES AND FIGURATIONS

Interdependence is a central feature of figurations, and sociology should be concerned with the study of groups and the long-term transformation of the figurations they form (Bacha 2024). Figurations are unplanned, changing, dynamic-processual, self-regulating, complementary, functional networks of relations (Waterstradt 2023: 55). They are constantly evolving, but they retain their identity as well as the structure of the person, i.e. of the individuals who create them. Individuals and society are in mutual correlation. The subjectivity of individuals is created through symbolic markers that society inscribes in their bodies. Each of the individuals is born into a complex network of social relations. People are connected by fluid interdependencies of bio-social connections. They have partly innate, and partly socially installed needs to seek companionship, understanding from other members of society. Sociability is important for the survival of individuals (Dunning, Hughes 2013: 51). Activities that seem autonomous are actually interdependent, as are separate aspects of individuals' lives.

The life of individuals is dynamic and changeable. The characteristic of changes is that they are contradictory, fluid, unplanned and unpredictable. Structures and processes are unplanned by-products of the intertwined, deliberate acts and intentions of interdependent individuals. If we imagine any dance, a mazurka, a minuet, a polonaise, a tango or rock “n” roll, we are presented with the prospect of mobile figurations of interdependencies of people in the hall where the dance takes place. It is easier to imagine cities, states, families, capitalism, communism, feudalism as

figurations. Each of these figurations has its own degree of complexity, related to the chain of interdependencies of the individuals involved in the figuration. Figuration transcends the dichotomy between the individual and society. We can talk about play in general, but no one can imagine that play can occur outside the individuals who play it and in that sense conceptualize it as a structure outside the individuals or as an abstraction. Different people may be involved in a game, but without a plurality of reciprocally oriented, interdependent individuals there is no play. Like any figuration, play is relatively independent of the specific individuals who form it here and now, but it is not independent of the individuals as such. It would be absurd to say that a game is a mental construct abstracted from and independent of those who play it, but also of those who observe it (Elias 1994: 214; Dunning, Hughes 2013: 54). When individuals enter into figurations, they have their own plans, as do the other members of the figuration. The plans of the members of the figuration not only differ, but can also be contradictory, even conflicting with each other. For example, when two individuals play chess, each of the players takes into account the state of the pieces on the board, but also the plans for future moves of the opponent (he assumes the plans of the opponent, but can never fully know whether the opponent has exactly such plans or others). After each move played by the opponent, the players revise their plans for future moves. When one opponent is dominant, he establishes control over the game. But when there is a balance of chess knowledge of the two players or an imbalance of power relations in society, then the game becomes uncertain. If we imagine many players involved in a collective game, the figuration becomes much more complex. Everyone enters it with their own plans, intentions, calculations, but the outcome is the result of a multitude of interdependent plans, intentions and actions. It is often unexpected and unplanned. Such figurations are not under the control of any of the subjects participating in them. The more individuals are involved in a particular game, the more complex the game is, and the more uncertain the outcome. Society is much more complex than a single complex figuration with many participants. Individuals participate in many figurations simultaneously, and the games have an impact on each other. Events in one game can affect the moves of individuals in other games (Elias 2007: 63).

3. THE PLACE OF PROCESSES IN FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Elias, among other things, used the term figuration to avoid getting bogged down in the analysis of the correlation between the group and fixed givens. An example of this is structure, which as a term implies a commitment of the group to factors that are very static, and are located outside it. What we call structure is actually a pattern, or figuration, of dependencies between the individuals who form the group. Figurations are neither solely processes nor structures. Structures are networks, or fluid entities (Jarvie 2006: 29). More precisely, figurations are interdependent patterns of behavior that are very close to social action (Hernes 2004: 36). Individuals live in and between figurations. They are the type of networks that incorporate individuals and patterns of dynamics, that is, the pattern of processes that occur when individuals engage in games that have a high level of differentiated interdependence (Michael 2017: 89). The pattern of dynamics in the interdependence of individuals creates different forms. This creates different expectations from individuals. For example, the dynamics of interdependence create different forms of sports, and the expectations of individuals who play different sports and occupy certain positions in them are different. Figurational networks shape the behavior of individuals and the meaning they attach to their actions. Power asymmetries create tensions and shape the behavior of individuals.

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