

Oliver König

The Civilising of the Female Ego

Conference on the occasion of the forthcoming 100th Birthday of Norbert Elias,
23. - 25.6.1995 at the Institute of Sociology of the Hamburg University

Printed in: Figurations No. 4, Nov. 1995.

The title of the conference had not been chosen very fitting, remarked a participant, because the "Ego" in a Freudian sense already represented the civilised. None the less the title represented very well the intention of the two organizers from the Hamburg Institute of Sociology, Gabriele Klein and Katharina Liebsch, that is to bring together two different circles of the scientific community, feminist studies on the one side and figuration sociology in the tradition of Norbert Elias on the other side. So thereby two circles of discussion met, who have a tendency to see themselves as outsiders among the established. The other similarity is, that even though both circles explicitly have an interdisciplinary approach they tend to stay among each other.

This was already quite obvious at the first conference 1991 at the "Kulturwissenschaftliche Institute" of the Essen University, that the Elias-Community held one year after his death in August 1990 (for a report see: *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 1992, S. 188ff.), and is very similar to meetings of the feminist studies circles. While the Elias-Conference in 1991 had been, in a very traditional academic way, male dominated, the Hamburg conference was a female event not only because of the topic. Among the 100 participants there were only 5 men, among them 2 speakers, both of them from a European foreign country, even though all of the Essen participants had been invited. Seen from the standpoint of figuration sociology one could argue, that internal differentiation will continue also among outsiders following the Elias motto: "Die Tore nach unten sollen verschlossen bleiben. Die Tore nach oben sollen sich öffnen" (*Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, 1939, Bd. 1, S. 23).

Not even the Hamburg sociologists did show up. In Austria this would not be possible, remarked Gerhard Fröhlich from Linz. The local colleagues would show up if only out of politeness. So the attempt to break up the barriers between different circles was only partly successful, but it was an interesting meeting none the less.

The conference began Friday evening with the official opening by the two organizers, followed by an official greeting by Christina Weiss, who as a non-party member and outsider became Senator for Culture and Women in Hamburg and has started a lot of productive motion in the cultural scene of the city. She was followed by Ingrid Gogolin, vice commissioner for women's issues at the university, and Hermann Korte, Professor for Sociology in Hamburg and President of the Elias Foundation, which had financially co-sponsored the conference. Then followed a lecture by Claudia Oppitz from Basel, Switzerland, about "Women and gender relations in Norbert Elias' 'Höfische Gesellschaft'". As I arrived not before Friday evening I cannot report about this.

The Saturday program was organized in two parallel plenary sessions, where in the morning and again in the afternoon 2-3 lectures were held under a specific focus. Because of this agreeable timetable one was not confronted with the typical 20 minutes speech marathons of other sociological conferences. There was more than an hour's time for each lecture and the following discussion. Also most of the speakers stayed for the whole conference and did not race to the train station immediately following their lecture, always on the road for the never ending conference tour. So in the discussions it was possible to make connections between the different contributions.

The focus of the first plenary session Saturday morning was named "customs, rules, positions" with lectures about the courtly mistress (Sybille Oßwald-Bargende, Stuttgart), about moral philosophy in letters of the 18. Century (Beatrix Niemeyer, Kiel), and about the civilisation history of eating habits as an expression of gender relations (Elisabeth Meyer-Renschhausen, Berlin).

In the parallel plenary session focussing "body, movement, sexuality" spoke Gertrud Pfister (Berlin) about the importance of sports as an expression of the liberation of the female body as well as an internalisation of constraints. Using the Elias concept of power balance Cas Wouters (Amsterdam) spoke about "the lust balance of sex and love", that is how the sexual libertinage of the sixties can be brought together with the search for lasting emotional ties and relationships, or rather how this balance is figured over time. Uta Ottmüller (Berlin), who has left the academic field for practical (body)work, held a lecture about "body language and body work - Self-restraint and self liberation of women?", that unintentionally showed the difficult gap between (body)practice and theory. While the academic discourse very often is cut off from social "reality", the practical field tends to be speechless or subject to the language rituals of theory, which in both cases neither provides contrasts nor communication between the two worlds.

Saturday afternoon had sessions focussing on "marriage and family" and "identity and authority". Ulrike Prokop (Marburg) spoke about "elements of female authoritarianism", using the work of two important figures of the bourgeois (middle class?) feminist movement, Gertrud Bäumer und Marianne Weber, which led to quite some protest in the discussion. Even though Ulrike Prokop did not mention Elias explicitly, at this point the explosive effect of his concept of power balance for women's and gender studies became quite obvious. To talk about a power balance will differentiate between more and less power, but does not know any figurational position without power, which automatically leads to the concept not only of male but also of female authoritarianism. This was followed by a lecture about "feminist identity politics" by Susanne Maurer (Tübingen), but I preferred the parallel session about "marriage and family", where after a lecture about "generative patterns in the civilising process" there followed another contribution to the power debate. Using very interesting material from manners manuals and law Stefanie Ernst (Münster) spoke about bourgeois marriage in the 18th and 19th century. In this presentation a problem stood out quite clearly, which characterized most of the other lectures as well. The question of the connection between social (and theoretical) discourse on one side and social practice on the other side was not even asked in most of the cases. Caught between construction and deconstruction, between "negative" images of the past and "positive" pictures of the future, gender studies are in danger of losing their object. For example, in the micro analysis of power in marriage it is not very wise to mistake the chauvinist male discourse with family practice. For this arguments sake psycho dynamical and psychotherapy concepts, especially from the field of family therapy, would widen the perspective for feminist studies as well as for mainstream sociology.

Sunday morning sessions were addressed to the comparison of sociological theory. Focussing on "disciplinary process and individualizing process" Elias was compared with Foucault (Hilge Landweer, Berlin) and Beck (Bärbel Meurer, Bielefeld). The parallel session about "incorporation and social order" was dedicated to the comparison of Elias with Pierre Bourdieu, whose complex analysis of culture and power relations is a challenge for feminist studies. The lectures of Gerhard Fröhlich (Linz, Austria) and Ulrike Döcker (Vienna, Austria) both dealt with the chances and limits of the concepts of Elias and Bourdieu for gender studies. Besides the Elias concept of power balance, this includes specially the Bourdieu concepts of habitus as an incorporated structure, of the agglomeration of different sorts of capital, and of the dynamic field, in which the social distinctions are enacted. Both authors are, in contrast to most of "classical" sociology, characterized by giving much attention to the bodily structure of society, which "naturally" opened their analysis for gender issues much more than in other theoretical concepts. Even though for both of them gender issues still are somewhat secondary conflicts, especially the complexity of Bourdieus concept should be made fruitful, rather than blaming it for its male bias, which of course can be found. Ulrike Döcker (Wien) did both by showing, that specially in Bourdieus ethnological studies about the Kabyl society, which he himself sees as the basis for his ethno sociology of France, the female part of this world is not represented. Bourdieus theory of practice would thereby be only a partial (male) objectivation, waiting for its female completion.

In the final lecture of the conference Annette Treibel (Bochum) again pointed out the explosive effect of the theory of power balance, as the idea suggests a kind of equilibrium, which especially feminist studies argue against. Taken seriously the concept of power balance and similar ideas of Bourdieu

lead to the question of female participation in "Herrschaft". In comparison the theory of female participation ("Mittäterschaft"), as formulated by Christina Thürmer-Rohr, to which Annette Treibel referred to at this point, falls short to this, by splitting up the destructive sides and projecting them on men in generally, thereby formulating a kind of seduction theory.

The difficult relationship of feminist studies to Elias - between Engagement and Distance - became clear in still another way. Treibel pointed out, that affective engagement without the sweat of scientific work does not go very far. Also she pointed out the tendency found in most of the contributions to this conference, to be occupied predominantly with social discourse and thereby loose contact with social practice (in a Bourdieu sense). She formulated this in the idea of figuration ideal and figuration reality. Between the formulation of gender utopias and female identity politics social "reality" is in the danger of disappearing, as well as sociology as a "reality" science (Wirklichkeitswissenschaft). To much utopia and figuration ideals make it more difficult to get a clear view of identity stress both in female and in male life courses.

Treibel also pointed out the exaggerated distinction of women's studies against women's movement, as it grew out of the struggle for academic acceptance. The balance between engagement and distance, between political action, personal affection and sociological analysis, has to be restored again and again. At the end of Treibels lecture the pendulum swung again to the side of engagement and solidarity among women. Identity politics succeeded against a more distanced sociological point of view in the sense of Elias, where the emphasis is more on the unplanned results of intentional activities.

In the final plenary session the remaining participants all shared the wish for another conference of this kind. It would be worth it.