

The concept of figuration or configuration in Norbert Elias' sociological theory

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ABSTRACT

This essay explores the concept of figuration or configuration developed by Norbert Elias with the purpose to overcome the antinomies of structural functionalism and methodological individualism. The relationships of the concept of configuration with the categories of interdependency, function and coercion are studied within the context of his sociological theory. Based on the consideration of simplified models of game competition, the author's process oriented perspective and its relevance for solving the false opposition between society and individual.

key words: Norbert Elias, Figuracional and Process Sociology, figuration, configuration, individual and society, interdependency

Throughout his intellectual trajectory, Norbert Elias (1897-1990) sought to overcome some of the antinomies he found in the sociological thought of the XIX and XX Centuries. One of these antinomies refers to the difficulties of thinking social evolution without resorting to the teleological and essentialist penchant that characterized Sociology before its establishment as a science. To Elias, the legacy of traditional ontology can be found, both, in theoretical perspectives which, highlighting social change, consider movement as governed by an inexorable end or purpose, as well as in those perspectives, which, stressing the mechanisms of stability reproduction and conservation, consider social change as a disturbance of order. Although the first orientation, common to the work of the founding fathers, allows one to better see "the forest than the trees", its own assumptions end up neutralizing the notion of change. Once the *telos*, which gives meaning to the process, is reached, the movement ceases to have a purpose. On the other hand, key notions of this conceptual framework, such as those of progress and development, are mere speculations and beliefs regarding the evolution and improvement of social life, rather than scientific facts. Disputing this standpoint, the dominant theories of XX Century Sociology formulated explanations, which, based on the supposition that societies were predisposed to reach equilibrium, emphasized the means through which social systems

guarantee their own existence and control desegregating elements. Thus, through a different path, stability, considered as a superior value, ended up reducing long term processes to phases and, then, to static and fixed types.

The borrowing of patterns from Physical and Natural Sciences in order to construct models of sociological investigation had also contributed, according to Elias, to reinforce the essentialism implicit in both conceptions. The search for a fixed, “ground zero” point of departure from which transformations would begin blurs the procedural character of social phenomena by presupposing the existence of permanent structures subjacent to change. Elias attributes the inadequacy of such models, borrowed from Physical and Natural Sciences, to the fact that human societies represent a higher level of organization, whose configuration cannot be simply deduced from less complex levels, such as that of organisms and machines, for example.

Another thing that contributes to naturalize social reality derives from the reifying structures of language. One speaks and consequently thinks by means of objectifying nouns, which end up isolating and paralyzing the processes and relationships to which sociological concepts refer. In this way, two constitutive characteristics of processes and relationships, namely, interdependence and incessant movement are blurred; like when “we say *the wind is blowing*, as if the wind were separate from its blowing, as if a wind could exist which did not blow” (Elias 1999:112). Our discourse and thinking habits lead us to treat the concepts of “individual” and “society” as “isolated and reposing objects” or, at best, as objects of processes. Thus we also separate, with a similar naturalist bent, the individual and society, as if individuals could exist without society, and society without individuals, giving way to unfruitful and endless discussions on the issue of which came first into being. The reduction of processes to static conditions obscures the understanding of the human webs in permanent transformation, leading to the perception of societies and individuals as separate entities. It is against such hypostatic character of common language, which reverberates also in the sociological concepts constructed with scientific purposes that one needs to be on guard.

According to Elias, a new approach, based on the understanding of social life as a process, would be capable of promoting the conceptual unification of such oppositions considered as irreducible by structural-functionalism and the so-called “methodological individualism”. To this end, he suggests to begin investigation by analyzing neither the aggregate actions of isolated individuals, nor societies as external structures imposed upon individuals, but rather the connections among individuals and societies. Thus, the categories of individual and society would come to express only “differences in the viewpoint of the observer, whom at times may focus on the persons that form the group and others on the group formed by them” (Elias 1995:63).

The challenge posed to sociological theory would be the construction of empirically based figuration models, which, overcoming the “imaginary gap between the individual and society”, would allow us to understand the links existing between them as realities that truly constitute them as such. With this purpose in mind, Elias developed the category of “configuration” or “figuration” which, detached from heteronymous forms of knowledge, becomes an important object of discussion since its first use by the author, in 1933.¹ In this article, we will explore that concept within the context of Elias’ theory regarding the relationships of interdependence between individuals and societies and, therefore, in close connection with his conceptions of coercion, power, function, knowledge, dilemmatic processes, and social change.

The concept of configuration and gradients of power

Figurational and processes theory² is one of Elias’ most important contributions to Social Sciences. It focuses on the understanding of the structures that mutually dependent human beings establish, and the transformations they suffer, both individually and in groups, due to the increase or reduction of their interdependencies and gradients of power. Thus, instead of analyzing the conducts of isolated individuals –at times personified as geniuses, heroes, prophets or sages –, figurational and processes Sociology aims at the understanding of webs of social ranks.

In a 1984 evaluation of his own work, the sociologist sustains that the concept of figuration “was explicitly created to overcome the confusing polarization of sociological theory in theories that placed the *individual* above society and those which placed *society* above the individual” (Elias 2001b:148). He chose precisely a term not contaminated by contents and meanings originated in the matrix of classic sociological strains and adequate to qualify a perspective he believed would be capable of solving the old ontological antinomies – individual-society, agent-structure.³ In brief, through this resource he sought to “avoid the idea inherent in many traditional terms that individuals and societies are fundamentally distinct” (Elias 1995:63).⁴ Figuration is a generic term used to represent the “web of interdependences formed among

¹ Elias submitted his dissertation in Heidelberg in 1933, published as a book in 1969, in German, with the original title *Die höfische Gesellschaft*.

² *Prozess und Figurationstheorie*.

³ It is easy to identify in Elias’ work similar concerns as those Durkheim had in relation to the use of words that belong to everyday vocabulary in order to express strictly sociological concepts.

⁴ In *Quest for Excitement*, published in 1986, Elias was conscious of the fact that “figuration was a new term, which many did not yet understand”.

human beings and which connects them: that is to say, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons” (Elias 1990:249).⁵

The conception of individuals as isolated and independent monads has, nevertheless, a social basis, namely, the incapacity that all and each member have to control the relatively autonomous order they form, and the interdependence that binds them – an ever stronger interdependence, the more complex configurations become. For this reason, Elias considers it necessary to substitute the traditional notion of the solitary individual, the *homo clausus*, inherited from the classic strains of contractualism and rationalism, for that of open human beings: *homines aperti*. The latter notion is in the plural form since a human being is fundamentally oriented toward others, more or less dependent upon and in need of others with whom he establishes multiple nexuses, as others coerce him.

Similarly, impersonal concepts, such as *society*, result from the perceived incapacity of individual mastery over configurations, which makes them appear as a sort of super-human entity whose own dynamics is of a supra-personal nature. Thus, the widening and differentiation of the chains of interdependence makes it harder for individuals to recognize globally a configuration as a web that they themselves constituted. Members of a given configuration perceive them as “external things” or dehumanized structures because of the constraints that the former exercise upon them. To say that “social units, such as nations, races or classes are, in fact, prior to and exist independently from all individuals” (Elias 1994:75) is equal to sustain, in a reversed fashion, the mythological idea of a state of nature inhabited by isolated individuals.

In summary, “the concept of individual refers to interdependent persons; the concept of society to interdependent persons in the plural form” (Elias 1999:136). The overcoming of these kind of polarizations would create the conditions for everyone to recognize himself/herself as a human being among others “and society as a figuration constructed by numerous interdependent individuals” (Elias 2001b:149). Thus, it is Sociology’s duty to “make the individuals of any association understandable to themselves and in relation to one another” and to highlight “the mechanisms of interdependences, which from a figuration develops” (Elias 2001a:217). This explains the importance of studying and understanding configurations, which no longer have value or have disappeared. It is through this process that one arrives at the “ultimate identity of all individuals, without which any human relation carries within it something of the times when

⁵ Human beings who engage in a civilizing process participate in such configuration. The struggles that form such configuration are carried out between the prey and the hunter, the dog and the prey, and, secondarily, among the dogs and the hunters themselves, according to the courage of each one of them. In some circumstances, animals whose actions serve as references to human conduct may constitute configurations. Elias examines, for instance, the figuration formed in England by those who hunt foxes to sport together with his dogs and horses.

individuals from other societies were conceived only as strangers, and in many cases not even as human beings” (Elias 2001a:218).

The concept of configuration cannot be dissociated from the categories of interdependence, function, and coercion. Individuals as well as groups are interdependent because each one fulfills some of the others’ needs. At the same time, the control of resources that allow the fulfillment of the needs of others expresses itself in relations of power, and in the coercive capacity of each of the parts involved. Thus, a configuration exists when two or more individuals or human groups establish some kind of link fostered by the dependences they have on one another, and which render them capable of exercising some form of reciprocal constraint. These individuals or groups may be a sovereign and his subjects, different social classes or ranks, businessmen and workers in a factory, husband and wife, parents and children, nations and their citizens, or any interconnected persons or groups that function as means of support or restriction, with regards to the intents of each other. The distinctive place that some people – such as absolutist monarchs and their rivals, prophets or heroes – occupy in their struggle to achieve or maintain power positions does not render them autonomous from the web they form with other members of the figuration.

The differences of power among groups or individuals derive from the fact that some may detain higher proportions of the resources needed by the others. Because this is a characteristic of all human relations, power occupies the center of sociological research.⁶ Configurations can be more or less complex, stable, durable, harmonic, and regulated. They can possess one or many levels of integration, high or low power differentials, and large or small number of participants, whom, in turn, may also belong to other configurations where they may exercise different roles.⁷ Relationships of subordination and superordination characterize fields of domination within configurations, in such a way that “webs of interdependent men and human groups act together or in opposition in a determinate direction” (Elias 1990:249).

When a considerable difference in the gradient of power or, in some cases, a power monopoly, as a matter of fact or of right, exist, we have a configurations of established and outsiders. Such modality tends to exhibit, almost universally, the auto-attribution of superior human

⁶ Empirical research aims at “establishing which conditions render men interdependent in a given situation, and how such interdependences modify under the effect of the changes of the figuration as a whole” (Elias 2001a:214).

⁷ In spite of the apparent similarities between game theory and figurational theory, the latter does not emphasize mathematical operations of power probabilities as much as the former. Models have, according to Elias, didactic purposes, as they are nearly visual examples of figurations. The presentation of simple configurations in the form of games makes it easier to perceive the degree of difficulty that the more complex ones represent for sociological analysis. These complex configurations should have larger number of components and levels of integration, with larger possibilities of establishing alliances and, mainly, a great fluidity of changes in power relations.

characteristics by the established. Through the empirical study⁸ of two groups of residents of a small English worker community, which moved there at different periods, it was possible to verify the process of exclusion of the members of the outsider group – the group that moved-in last. These people were excluded from all kinds of social interactions, of a non-professional character, by the group, which moved-in first. The early group of residents tended to drive away members of the second group, attributing to all of them characteristics of their “worst” segment, that is, of their anomic minority. It was used as a means to stigmatize, and thus marginalize them from the social relations that they – the established – maintained among themselves. As long as the established group is able to successfully create and disseminate a maculate image of the *outsider* that the members of this group themselves begin to take as their own, the figuration is maintained, the cohesion of the established grows stronger, and the very unequal relations of power are sustained. The negative attributes conferred by the established to the *outsiders* and adopted by the latter, as well as the self-conferred positive attributes of the established, become part of the individual personalities of the members of such groups, a sort of a “second nature”. Mutually exercised coercions turn social attitudes imbedded in the individuality of human beings, and make them appear as if they were their natural impulses. A nearly automatic self-control fuses with the structure of their personalities. In several figurations the outsiders – such as, for instance, plebeians, slaves, certain ethnic groups, pariahs or *favelados*⁹ – cannot aspire to become members of the first strata, considered as “superior” also in regards to human qualities. In such type of figuration, one of the groups is in a well-established position of power, which is disputed, although with little chances of success, by the other. Their interdependence derives from this relationship.

The social scientist’s task is “is to explore, and to make men understand, the patterns they form together, the nature and the changing configurations of all that binds them to each other” (Elias 1956:234). In other words, to reveal the way in which such human beings connect to each other in their alliances and conflicts, and the kind of network they form, considering their ambitions of power and status. In sum, it is not possible to understand the condition of the established unless by considering them in their links with the outsiders or, in other words, by analyzing the figurations that keep both groups interdependent. It is also through the study of the changing processes of power balance that is possible to understand the actions of each of the groups and their members

The French Court society provides us with a good illustration of the gradients of power and the network of interdependences established in the configurations. The Court is the central figuration of this structure of domination. Its existence does not derive from the particular will

⁸ Together with John Scotson, a schoolteacher interested about youth delinquency.

of the king; on the contrary, the king governs through it. The royal persona is the balance point of social tensions that defines the absolutist structure. The interdependences created by the conflicts of aristocrats and members of the bourgeoisie – and their byproduct, the need of distinction – generate a conduct based on the growing self-control of impulses and natural appetites. In this context, all contenders submit the other's behavior to a permanent surveillance, through observation, seeking to predict their intentions and probabilities of social promotion, and the risk they represent to the position of the established. The refinement, in constant process of improvement, was one of the sides of this configuration's rationality, which extremely diminished the chances of the outcasts, barred from learning or even imitating (with the necessary refinement) the conduct of the courtesans. This simultaneous increase of self-control and interdependence among the members of the figuration characterizes the so-called civilizing process.

Human species and development

Figurations are, in general, very plastic; they consist of continuous flows or, better said, processes whose transformation potential varies, and may end up producing structural changes of an evolutionary nature. Evolutionary Sociology explains movements by other movements, and not by a first unmoved cause. The idea of a causal connection among phenomena is, most of the time, a *post factum* inference. For this reason, a retrospective investigation whose purpose is to identify a genealogical order cannot affirm, "the early configurations needed to transform necessarily into those which are subsequent to them" (Elias 1999:177).

The needs that reciprocally connect human beings and the roles the latter play in each other's lives enable the possibility of their development as a species. It is through those needs and functions that social processes connect to biological ones. The process of learning, socially accomplished, materializes natural potentialities of the specie, emancipating her from changes that are exclusive of genetic transmission. In this way, Elias reaffirms Durkheim for whom living in society is what makes us human. Thus, Sociology's task cannot be the same as biology's, for while the latter studies "individuals as representatives of their species or as isolated persons" (Elias 1999:78), the former seeks to understand individuals within society.

Biological evolution, history, and social development are "three different but inseparable layers of a process which comprises humankind, and whose pace of change is diversified" (Elias 2001a:38). Nevertheless, social movement is slow or even imperceptible when the parameter of

⁹ Favelados is a Brazilian word used in reference to the people who inhabit the Brazilian slums or favelas.

measure is the duration of a human life. Thus, “it is possible for social figurations formed by human beings to change so little throughout generations that they come to be perceived as unalterable” (Elias 2001a:38). This is especially true when thousands of people form the figurations. What is peculiar in the world of the living beings is that humans, in their interactions as individual organisms, establish numerous social formats without suffering, for this reason, genetic modifications.¹⁰ This makes social development a unique process, which, despite having at its base the evolution, that gave birth to *homo sapiens*, is just a possibility that could only materialize through learning – that is to say, through social relations. For this reason, it is also a reversible process, which does not necessarily culminate in a progressive, unidirectional or constant advancement.¹¹ Questions like “why such configurations reproduce themselves” and “what ensures their continuity” cannot be answered empirically. The use of evidences that put the weight of the explanation on specific individuals or social structures, attributing the legitimacy and extension of the figurations to the individuals’ qualities and abilities – like courage or ambition – or to the functionality and stability of the latter are not sufficient. On the contrary, it is Sociology’s duty to verify when and why figurations guarantee the social existence of their members, even though they might appear to be “irrational” to observers of different epochs.¹²

Sport-games and figuration models

Sport-games can teach us a lot about the interactions between groups and individuals. Games may have more or less universal rules and be practiced by distinct individuals or groups. People who assume the role of players in a team do what is expected from the position that each one of them occupies in the game; on the other hand, they contribute in a particular way by means of their specific abilities, motivation, and creativity, among other things. The game is, in part, independent from all and each one of the players, but this does not make it external and autonomous, as it cannot exist without the players. In a match, players do not disregard their partners or rivals; on the contrary, they act based on the actions of both. A team cannot exist if it renounces to perform individual actions, and the purpose of sports would not make sense if the teams do not play against each other. The concept of configuration does not apply only to conflictive and unstable social relations, nor is it based on the idea of harmony and balance, as proposed by system theory. Elias sees in the movable configuration of a soccer match a graphic illustration for the concept of figuration, which may contribute to the analyses of the actions of

¹⁰ See *The Symbol Theory*, London: Sage Publications, 1991.

¹¹ The counterpart of the civilizing process is the decivilizing process.

¹² It is only possible to refute contemporary criticisms of hereditary succession, and its descent-based principle of selection, when one understands that in such figuration the king finds legitimacy in the equal distance he must show in relation to the different states and their conflicting sectors. This not only works

groups that interact by means of a more or less controlled intrinsic competition. It is possible to discern two types of interdependence in such illustration: one which connects the members of each team, and another which connects the two teams. Both form figurations. If during a match we could perceive the moving of a single player, as if all the others were invisible, such movements would be unintelligible to any observer. Each and all players' actions connect constantly and reciprocally. Sports are organized activities submitted to defined rules, which create and contain the tensions that make the major and typical ingredient of all sports.

The main purpose of these rules is to avoid easy victories or frequent ties, both of which would reduce the tension and excitement of spectators and increase the predictability of the spectacle.¹³ The dynamics generated in such a figuration should allow it to evolve within defined patterns and to achieve maximum tension and expectation in regards to the uncertainty of the outcome. Nevertheless, there are also configurations without rules, where interdependence appears in the form of antagonism, "enemies play a reciprocal role" and, therefore, they constrain one another. In the model of primary competition, proposed in *What is Sociology*, interdependences are not regulated and the goal of each group is to eliminate the other. This is an extreme situation, "a last resource in human relationships" (Elias 1999:86), and only as such can its structure and dynamics be understood.

Elias elaborates simplified models of competitions and games: with or without rules, of two or many people, of one or several levels. Each of the possibilities presented by these games represents a process furnished with a structure capable of being analyzed and explained, even if seeming chaotic. Persons dancing interdependently are a didactic illustration of configuration, as "no one will imagine a dance as a structure outside of the individuals. Different people may dance the same configurations. Nevertheless, there is no dance without a plurality of reciprocally oriented and dependent individuals" (Elias 1990:250). This applies to States, cities, families, capitalist, feudal or communist systems and so forth. In a game, each player, individually, must make decisions about his/her moves in interdependence with the others. A considerable increase in the number of participants would make each one more "aware of his/her incapacity to understand and control the game", which, in turn, tends to greater disorder. In the end, the following things could happen to the configuration: disintegration, reorganization in small groups, or the formation of a more complex configuration, endowed with more levels and where new opportunities of strategic planning, influence, and observation present themselves.

as a form of pressure upon the sovereign, but also, in the conscience of the members of several strata, elevates him above the groups in relative equilibrium (Elias 2001a).

The tendency of our time is that “more and more groups and thus more and more individuals” come to depend on “one another for their safety and fulfillment of their needs”, so that the capacity of understanding that the persons involved may have is surpassed. In a somewhat frightening parabola, Elias ponders:

“At the beginning there were thousands, then millions, then more and more millions walking together in this world, their hands and feet chained together by invisible ties. No one in charge. No one standing outside. Some wanting to go this way, others the other way. (...) No one can regulate the movements of the whole unless a great part of them is able to understand, to see, as it were from the outside, the whole patterns they form together. (...) Thus, what is formed is nothing but human beings acting upon each other, and it is experienced by many as an alien external force not unlike the forces of nature” (Elias 1956:232).

Dilemmatic Figurations

Figurations may become dilemmas by means of uncontrollable dynamics. In this case, they may have unplanned and undesired consequences for those involved in them, as well as produce catastrophic trajectories. Fear and insecurity caused by the perception of danger tend to intensify such outcomes, since the more frightened people are the less they are capable of understanding and containing menacing factors. In regards to the physical universe, the knowledge that humankind has been accumulating increased its capacity to master what was formerly perceived as a threat. Thus, explanations that are more adequate replaced magical and mythical ones. Such a process of rationalization has not occurred to the same degree in the field of the human sciences. Social relations are still poorly understood and, certainly, uncontrollable. This uncertainty crystallizes in conducts, which make the possibility of the destruction of human survival units an even more eminent possibility – a central theme in Eliasian Sociology.

One of Elias' essays – *The Fishermen in the Maelstrom* – is very meaningful in relation to the issue of dilemmatic situations and the connections between knowledge and action. He takes as his point of departure an Edgar A. Poe tale on two fishermen who are in a boat which is drawn into the center of a maelstrom. While one of them is able to gain enough mental distance from the situation in order to analyze it and save himself, the other remains emotionally fastened to it and, paralyzed, ends up being swallowed by the maelstrom. Analogously, the increase of the interdependence and the use among nations of organized force make human beings vulnerable

¹³ The agreeable tension promoted by sport activities responds to the unfulfilled need of excitement in highly pacified societies, such as the contemporary ones where emotionless routines may enfeeble the

and insecure. It becomes harder for people to observe the course of events as detached observers – that is, capable of controlling their strong feelings towards events that may profoundly affect their own lives, and toward which they have little or no control. Emotional involvement makes it harder to understand events. People or groups who end up involuntarily confining themselves to a dilemmatic condition – a vicious circle that tends to reproduce itself – furnish magical and mythical explanations related to the perception of high levels of danger. The chances of breaking this vicious circle increase when a relative detachment makes possible the exercise of control over the threatening (natural or social) factors. Elias' hope is that dilemmatic social processes will be overcome when the parts involved in these situations understand the dilemma itself as interdependence before they are swallowed by it.

Cycles of violence are dilemmas which engender in the figuration an “ascending impetus” that culminates either in the victory of one of the groups, a draw, or mutual destruction of the groups. The dilemmatic dynamics is intrinsic, as in all unplanned processes, and they are called “double dependence” or “double binding” processes (*doppelbinder*). The impasse is inherent to that configuration where one or both parts are incapable to prevent the development of the hostilities through which they connect, and which leads them to increasing aggression. During the Twentieth Century, the strong feeling of a collective identity was, for most human groups, associated to their respective Nation-States, given the configuration of individual Nation-States. Thus a monopoly of political power by one of these units over the remaining could not produce a stable situation or a situation of global peace, as resistances would inevitably occur. Elias criticized Sociology's contemporary propensity to leave the study of the relations among States to Political Science, limiting itself to the analyses of processes that are internal to societies understood as Nation-States. Such tendency makes it harder to consider higher levels of integration: the figurations formed by interdependent Nation-States or the phenomena known today as globalization.

Conclusions

The concept of configuration refers to the ideas of process, dynamics, and interdependence of mutually referred actions – be it between two or more people, between individuals and groups, or among groups, regardless of their dimensions. When we are dealing with a group of human beings so large that its limits may correspond with those of a nation or a world-religion, each of its members fulfills their needs and participates of its nexuses in countless manners. Such interdependences extend to levels of integration ever more complex: family, friends, neighborhood, commercial establishments, professional activities, health and religious institutions, city, state or supra-national organizations. Yet Sociology should not lose sight of

the individual who participates in different ways in each of these levels and, in turn, is influenced by the actions triggered by thousands or millions of other individuals.

A dance and its performers are a graphic image of a figuration as each individual performs in accord with the other, and with the group of performers from whom he or she depends on. At the same time, they all depend on the roles they play for them and for the audience, as well as on the music, emotions, and dimensions of the stage, the planned and rehearsed evolution of the steps, the errors, and the illusions provoked by the light or movement. To understand dance as a structure that is external to the individuals who perform it can only sound strange when one considers the impossibility of separating it from the figuration formed by the dancers. It is precisely this seemingly obvious idea that Elias elaborates in his figuration theory, by showing that there are neither individuals without society, nor society without individuals. Each individual has society as a constitutive part of his or her “self”, even when he or she intends to be unique and independent from the others, or when he or she feels separated from the others by an invisible wall. This is so because the latter mode of existence materializes only when the configuration makes possible a high degree of individuation and demands of its members a high level of self-control of their natural impulses and emotions. The growing division of functions and the ever closer connections between persons, which compel them to “carry-out their lives and social existence together with the lives of others”, are reticular forces capable of producing a tension which leads society to transformation. It is up to Sociology to determine the meaning of such transformation.

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