

## [About War, Elias and Nihilism]

Interview by Daan Heerma Van Voss and Daniël Van Der Meer

## I

A bust of Norbert Elias on the bookshelf, a photo portrait of Menno Ter Braak on the wall. They watch over his shoulder as idols should do. Two tutors of the same student. Elias taught him to belief in the most important theories that cover centuries, if not millennia, and tried to summarize human activity in sociological models. Ter Braak taught him about Nietzsche, about writing, about nihilistic problems, the lack of truth. Joop Goudsblom taught himself how to combine these two. Between the two portraits you find books, so many that the wall is hidden behind the covers. How many study rooms will live up to their name these days?

The stillness in the room is being broken by constant hammering at the other side of the wall. The neighbors are renovating their house. On both sides of the wall the vacuum cleaner is doing his work. Goudsblom: «My experience is that this sound never lasts for long».

Johan (Joop) Goudsblom (1932), Professor Emeritus of Sociology, is raised as an only child in Krommenie, a village in the Dutch province of Northern Holland. Already on his sixteenth his first articles about the Zaanse<sup>1</sup> windmills where published by the local newspaper. He studied social psychology and pedagogy at the University of Amsterdam. Just like Ter Braak, Goudsblom wrote for *Propria Cures*<sup>2</sup>. He made his debut as an aphorist: *Pasmunt*, a collection of poems, notes and aphorisms, was published in 1958. Two years later Goudsblom, 28 by that time, got his PhD cum laude on his study about *Nihilism and culture*. From 1968 until 1997 he was professor of sociology at the University of Amsterdam.

The career of Goudsblom is largely determined by the work of another sociologist, the German-British Norbert Elias (1897-1990). His theory of civilization, where civilization is seen as an ongoing process of increasing interdependence, formed from the sixties the basis of the so-called Amsterdam School. Goudsblom invited Elias frequently to the Netherlands and was the biggest Dutch defender of his theory.

The influence of Elias is also shown in the scope of the interests and the publications of Goudsblom. And that scope is increasing the older Goudsblom becomes. In 1992 *Fire and Civilization* appeared, an intellectual tour de force in which he describes the human progress according to the relationship between man and fire. In 1997 followed *Het regime van de tijd* (*The Regime of Time*), where he shows the same ambition in relation with time. Currently he is working on his memoirs, of which some fragments have been published in *Tirade*, a magazine co-founded by him.

<sup>1</sup> Zaanse is a small community located in the north-east of Amsterdam, on the shore of the river Zaan [editor's note].

<sup>2</sup> *Propria Cures* is a Dutch satirical student newspaper, established in 1890 and published weekly in Amsterdam [editor's note].

*Memoirs, a difficult genre...*

[He looks serious and thoughtful, a combination that seems invented for him]. The most difficult question - he says - is of course: what is a good memoir? And then, once you used the word «good», you can continue to do so. Good memoirs must be well written. They must be well put together, etc... Good is problematic. What I am looking for is to write my memoirs in a way that I think: this is how it happened. The younger I am in my life story, the fewer sources I have at my disposal, the fewer memories too. In my school-time I kept diaries, but unfortunately I wrote more about my mood than about facts. When Bram de Swaan recently read an excerpt from the memoirs, he gave an appreciative comment: «There is not one word too many, it makes the impression it is wholly truthful». And I do really believe in it. This is the way it happened. I am a hundred per cent sure.

*Does writing cost you a lot of effort?*

The difficulty is in the fact that I want to meet the two criteria of De Swaan.

*Why should it be bad, a word too much?*

Because it easily degenerates into excessive writing. The nowadays columnists often use too many words; I want to keep it as compact as possible. I have a conservative sense of language.

*There are different types of memoirs: some are focused on politics, some on society, and others only focus on the life of the author. To what genre belongs yours?*

About myself. About myself until this day. That is of course somewhat problematic with my pace of writing. I must either live very long or have to write very fast. [He laughs, behind his folded fingers]. Inevitably, I will write something about time and society, but that will be of secondary importance. It is just like an old movie: it is shot to record the behaviour of children, but it is inevitable that you will see how the garden was and if it is shot before or after the renovations of the house.

*What historical events from your childhood do you remember?*

From my early childhood I only remember lose incidents and memories. May 10, 1940 I remember very well. One of the first events of the war was the bombing of the military airport in Bergen<sup>3</sup>. That was almost within sight of my parents' house. In the morning we heard the commotion and we saw the airplanes. We went outside. Dressed we stood in front of our house, just like our neighbours. But what made the biggest impression was a little girl, she must have been four years old, who was raised by a woman who said: «Today it is the birthday of this poor girl and nobody thinks about it».

*Has the war made a big impression in your memories?*

A large-scale war has something formative, there is no denying. But it is not really bound to special moments, more on things like clothes and food. I am a frugal man. Clothing should not get dirty or ruptured with no reason. The compost layer is a good solution for me: Everything I don't eat goes to the worms, still a good destination.

*Is thinking back about war time emotional for you?*

Oddly enough yes. I feel many emotions when I think about the war, not necessarily about the parts of the war that I experienced. Me and my family where spared from the greatest misery. But sometimes the seemingly random moments can let my tears flow. I hope it won't happen now, but you are warned. Through my wife, whose

<sup>3</sup> Bergen is a municipality in the province of North Holland, not far from Krommenie. [editor's note]

parents died after the last transport from Bergen-Belsen<sup>4</sup>, I am much more aware of the extent and depth of the horrors. I was with her, the first time she returned to Bergen-Belsen. It was one of the most touching events of my life. I also remember, and that does more justice to the whims of my war emotions, that my wife and I on the way back from holiday stopped at the Grebbeberg<sup>5</sup>. I had never been there, and wanted to see the graves. I had seen war graves before, in France and in Limburg<sup>6</sup>, but at the Grebbeberg I started crying. [His voice raises and is in between surprised and indignant]. That is crazy. I was suddenly so involved in the national feeling that we had gained during the war. They were still our boys. Terrible.

*How did your wife react at these moments?*

She was much more laconic. She did not cry for things like that. That was also the case in Bergen-Belsen: I cried, she did not.

*On the feast of your fifty year marriage your wife held a speech. She misspoke herself: instead of Bergen she said Bergen-Belsen.*

That is right. She didn't even noticed it. I told her later. A special slip of the tongue. I don't even know how many people noticed it then. I have never talked about it to anyone. Later I thought: maybe I misunderstood? But I have never checked it. Why should I? [He stands up and asks to restrain the intimacy of our conversation].

*What events do you think to be characteristic of the past decade?*

Every trend provokes a counter-trend and they occur simultaneously. The trend is the continuation of the twentieth-century imperialism, you can think of the invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan. The countertrend: the irreversible failure of these undertakings. Force majeure and impotence. The same applies for wealth and welfare, which in this decade had only increased. At the same time the financial and ecological debts have only increased. Force majeure and impotence. The national events of the decade cannot be seen separately from the international events. The national autonomy is very low, we float along the same river as the surrounding countries. I also think that the classifications of decades is very random, they are of little importance to me.

*And the political murders of Fortuyn and Van Gogh?*

Individual events are overestimated. In the nineteenth century, there were plenty of political murders, especially in Eastern Europe. In the United States, long before the Kennedys were assassinated, political figures were assassinated frequently. I do not deny the symbolic drama of such events, but I do not think the decade is characterized by these events. The real effects have not been great. The consequences have become particularly noticeable in the discussions that have come out of these events and the way politics used them for their own good. These are developments that are not bound to this decade.

*You once described yourself as an aphorist looking for systematic.*

I think every good aphorist is trying to. An aphorism is a patch that needs a broader framework to lift itself. «A sociologist is a hunter of myths», Elias said. Also an aphorism.

*Have you ever believed in the myth of the truth?*

In the library of my father was a book called *In Search of the Truth* written by Mr. Burger. These were descriptions

<sup>4</sup> Bergen-Belsen was a concentration camp near Hanover in northwest Germany, located between the villages of Bergen and Belsen. [editor's note]

<sup>5</sup> In the Dutch War Cemetery on the Grebbeberg hill, east of Rhenen, are buried more than 400 Dutch soldiers who died during the fights against Germans on the Grebbeberg, in May 1940. [editor's note]

<sup>6</sup> Limburg is a province of the Netherlands, located in the southeastern part of the country. [editor's note]

of great scientists. Newton, Curie. People who made great discoveries and contributed to approaching the truth. That is how I started: reading these books, it was obvious that I went to University. Reading Ter Braak, at my nineteenth, my faith in truth was undermined.

*Already in your first aphorism the nihilistic problematic is intertwined. «Objectivity; disastrous squinting in which we see both sides of the coin at the same time».*

Yes absolutely. I am trained in objectivity. Trained means: it is acquired.

*How can anyone do science when, at the same time, he is convinced that all knowledge is relative?*

[Turning back his chair and pointing to the portrait of Tar Break, on whose lap rests a cat]. I have learned a lot from him. He has chosen for literature and against science. He could have been a professor. For him it was a conscious choice not to do so. For me the opposite is true: I could have chosen for literature but it became science, sociology. I have always believed in my choice. I have always been passionately. At the same time I am convinced that science rests on a foundation that is not too strong. All knowledge is enveloped by uncertainty. As an idea the truth has fallen into pieces. And those pieces are for the aphorist.

*Did the fall of your faith of truth come gradually or suddenly?*

Gradually. But I do remember I was excited reading Ter Braak. I had the idea: the way Ter Braak writes, that is the way it is. That this is contrary to the implications of his work, I was not aware at that time.

## II

The second time we were at his house, a few days later, we still can here the drilling in the walls. Goudsblom calls it «a strange situation». He chuckles, the fragile shoulders participate. We sit on the leather couch that is in front of his desk, the professor sits in his swivel chair. We wait until the noise decreases.

*In Nihilism and Culture, your thesis, you give a history of nihilism and you explain how nihilism is embedded in our culture. Your definition of the nihilist is based on Turgenev Fathers and Sons: «A nihilist is someone who bows to no authority, who accepts no principles no matter how respectful that principle is». In this definition «a nihilist» can also be replaced by, for example, «an intellectual».*

Yes, but then it will be an idealizing definition.

*But that is it not also the case with the definition of a nihilist?*

To the extent that the definition is an infeasible one. You cannot imagine someone that lives without any principle and a total lack of authority. Do not forget: this is a definition of a novel. Turgenev let it say by one of his characters, Bazarov. Actually it is not a definition but a creed.

*What do you think of that creed?*

I think nihilism goes beyond creeds. I don't recognize the pride Bazarov feels for nihilism. Nihilism, in my view, comes from a genuine not-knowing. It borders on despair, it has something existential. I feel therefore more for

Nietzsche, who describes nihilism as a necessary evil, an unavoidable problem. At the same time it became a way of life for him; he doubted everything, out of love for the truth. Recently I thought of an aphorism that tries to capture everything in four words: nothing is the best.

*In Nihilism and Culture you describe the genesis of nihilism as: «The individual finds in culture a conception of truth which he states higher than his own group truth, he rejects the group truth in the name of this higher truth; if this now appears ultimately unattainable, then follow the nihilistic problemacy». You can read this quote as schematically genesis, as well as a summary of your intellectual formation.*

Certainly. Occasionally, I deviated from the nihilistic route of doubt and searching, and threw myself with conviction in polemics and political discussions, especially in my *Propria Cures* period. Now I have been lucky to live in a time when politics does not interfere with my life. I have not faced a choice similar to that made by Ter Braak when he saw the rise of the Nazis in Germany. I have been able to withdraw myself in the academic world, where doubt is an advantage. I had to deal with troublesome, radical students, but they are not comparable to the SS of Himmler. [He looks at us boldly in the eye, and laughs heartily, and we too]. Science has given me a lot of knowledge and insights. A more sociological look at myself learned that I was rather innocent. I had to do it all by myself. That's why I considered social interaction initially as something that did not quite belong to me. An outsider, yes, but for that perhaps with a better look at why people seek mutual contact.

*You use the word «innocent». That sounds like a kind of punishment, like a teacher addresses a thoughtless student*

[He is silent for a moment]. Yes. That may be so. There is something very stranded in me. Not only in relation to others. I'll not unlearn to be angry with myself, the tendency to self-blame runs deep in me.

*And what is the greatest reproof?*

That I let myself easily impress, that I don't intervene in time and not hard enough. I'm not enough autonomous. But gradually I'm at a stage where all attempts at self-improvement I've given up.

*Then Elias. Last year you said that three phases can be distinguished in your relationship to his work.*

Well, to be precise, there are four in total. The first phase I share with you, and with everyone, is that of ignorance. The second is introduction. The third can be summarized as: polemics and propaganda. The fourth is beyond Elias. All phases cover about twenty years.

*Why did you have the idea that Elias and his theories were worthy to propagate?*

I had the idea that we have the theory of evolution of sociology in our hands: inevitable, there were and are no competitive, comprehensive alternatives. Some interesting additions have been made – take for example the work of Pierre Bourdieu – but his work combines perfectly with the theory of Elias. Elias, in short, looks at societies and people from a developmental perspective, it is a historicizing way of committing sociology. The civilisation process, stretching over centuries, is not efficiently designed, but the result of social processes. Without this vision, I had not dared the topics fire and time. On a more personal and intellectual level Elias meant for me a kind of liberation, with him as an example, I could slightly loosen myself from the nihilistic problem to really believe in something. He didn't understand what I saw in that nihilism, understood nothing of that struggle. Elias was a man with a mission. Of course it is attractive, especially for a sceptic, to follow someone who is engaged in the pursuit of his mission.

*Why Elias's work was never fully accepted in sociological circles?*

I think because his work goes against some pillars of sociology, and also contrary to some of the more generally

accepted assumptions on the nature of man. The Popperian model of falsifiable hypotheses was very widespread in the social sciences. In my years of propaganda sometimes I called it «the shooting-tent model»: you put your hypotheses in the middle of the tent, and distribute guns to everyone. The one who gets the most hits, gets the highest praise. Well, Elias breaks with this model, he works on his theory as a means to orientate ourselves in reality. If he had stuck to model of the shooting-tent, he would not never have come forward. And about And about the nature of human beings: especially in the West, it is strongly tied to the image of man that Elias has called «homo clausus» - the man as a completely, autonomous individual. Elias has stressed the importance of social relationships, the development of man in the light of groups, of mutual contact. These two objections against Elias, supplemented by the tendency to reduce history to fashions, biographies and anecdotes, counted heavily.

*If someone in the period of propaganda and polemics had suggested that you practiced propaganda, not science, what would have been your answer?*

In personal terms: in those years I could be very touchy. A colleague once referred to Elias as my guru. I found an inappropriate ironic remark. I was really annoyed. Now, it would not touch me. Finally, the word guru means tutor. Tutor, yes, that word is appropriate here. I also think that propaganda and science are not mutually exclusive. Nobody will blame Newton that he made propaganda for his ideas. A scientist must often compete with existing opinions and paradigms.

*In this view, a propagandist the same as someone with a lot of self-confidence.*

[Laughs heartily] But of course!

*And do you remember when you thought, it's been nice with Elias?*

That was not one moment again. Slowly Elias heritage was adopted by others, especially outside the Netherlands. And besides, I found myself too old to be so busy with the work of another.

*In the preface of Nihilism and culture you suggest that your wife has ensured that nihilism is no longer a problem for you personally. How is that after her death?*

Her support is hard to ignore. That's part of my personality. [There is a silence, we let it go]. That is the only event of the past decade that cut time and my life in half: the death of Maria, my wife. On 31 March 2009. And And the preceding discovery of a far advanced cancer. That was in the summer of 2007. To me, these are by far the most important moments of the decade. Without a doubt. [A sob is heard, but it does not lead to further emotions. It remains stuck in his inner self, thus bending it somewhat into a primal sound. We wait a while, and then continue]. On the other hand, I am astonished how little has changed. As we sit here, the three of us, so we could have sat when she was still alive. Only she would have made sure that there was coffee and tea. And she would just come in, because she was curious. I had never made representations of the life after her death, but I thought though: this change is so radical, it will make everything upside down. Whether this is pleasant, or on the contrary, very sad, I don't know. It is twofold, seems somewhat unreal. [He looks at us, to Elias, Ter Braak and outside]. But then, what is not?

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[Translated by Gert Hage]