

## [Norbert Elias at the University of Leicester]

*Abstract:* The main aim of the paper is to investigate the role and contribution played by Norbert Elias in the early years of the new settled sociology department of Leicester. Starting from the file on Elias kept by the University of Leicester itself - a file that contains Elias' application, various testimonials, carbon copies of the letters of the Academic Registrar, as well as originals of Elias's letters - the Author aims to enlarge the renowned information about academic career and everyday life of Elias in the English period, adding a new angle, "the bureaucratic one", on this period of his life.

*Keywords:* Norbert Elias, Leicester, Sociology, Biography.

1. In Norbert Elias's autobiographical answers in his interview with Bram van Stolk and Heerma van Voss, there are a number of facts relating to his time in Leicester. To the question «When did you leave London?» Elias replied: «It was in 1954. I had been working for some years in adult education. Now, I received two offers of lectureships in sociology, one from Leicester and another one from Leeds. Characteristically, both came from people who were themselves refugees, but younger than I was, so that they had been educated at English universities. I decided in favour of Leicester, where Neustadt, who came from Odessa, had a chair. It was one of the new sociology departments that were being set up in England at that time. I helped to build up the department at Leicester».

The file on Elias kept by the University of Leicester made it possible to enlarge on this brief information. I should add that it provides an angle, the bureaucratic one, on this period of his life. The file contains his application, various testimonials, carbon copies of the letters of the Academic Registrar, as well as originals of Elias's letters.

2. In my biographical fragment Norbert Elias in Breslau, published in the Zeitschrift für Soziologie (Korte 1991), I pleaded for a kind of biographical writing that was guided by process sociology. I ended by saying that each place in which Elias had lived and worked for an extended period could be described in terms of a specific interweaving of the histories of society, of his work and of his person. However, the difficult task of writing a biography is approached, it always begins with the sources. In Elias's case the sources include his autobiographical statements and writings, his academic work, his poems, reports by contemporaries and other written material.

Sources are indispensable, since, to quote Kossellek, they define what cannot be said. But as a biography does not consist of an enumeration and reproduction of details that are known or have been verified in any case, but in the combining and viewing together of many facts, the real work only begins after the sources have been tapped. The facts, to quote Kossellek once more, are followed by the fiction of the factual. Here, the biographer, or whatever he calls himself, is again thrown back on his own resources.

To gain access to and compare the disparate material is difficult enough. Some sources are easily accessible, others are not. Perhaps, I shall one day write a few anecdotes about how, for example, I managed to obtain copies of the records of doctorates awarded by the University of Breslau, although the export of German-language documents from Poland was strictly prohibited at the time.

At the moment, I am especially interested in Elias's time in exile, and I am trying to find out as much as

possible about it. This involves interviews with acquaintances and contemporaries, but also official sources such as the personal files held by the University of Leicester. One reason why I am concentrating so much on official records is that, in his lecture *Der retuschierte Klassiker* (*The Retouched Classic*) at a conference in Kassel some years ago, Dirk Käsler, rightly in my view, ridiculed the situation in which, up to then, hardly anyone had taken the trouble to inspect and evaluate the records of the University of Munich regarding Weber's appointment to the chair previously held by Lujo Brentano.

At that time, I promised myself that that would not happen to me, and so I am trying, gradually and systematically, to gain access to all the relevant official files. Last winter I was able to inspect the personal files on Norbert Elias held by the University of Leicester. I am reporting on this source today. They are one piece of documentation for a possible account of the part of his life Elias spent in England. I also refer to a number of passages from letters included among Elias's posthumous papers. I found the names of the referees in the register of letters. I have evaluated the correspondence with these people in relation to Elias's application for a post in Leicester, and his teaching there, and I have selected a number of interesting passages.

3. Lectureship/Assistant Lectureship in Sociology at the University of Leicester had been advertised in May 1954. Preference was to be given to applicants «who are qualified in Social Psychology». Elias applied in a letter of 1 June 1954, attaching the application form that had been sent to him, duly filled out. The application reached the University on 3 June. From this application, especially from the entries on the application form, we can add what, to me at least, is new information to the facts already known. First, Elias states that from 1941 to 1944 he was Senior Research Assistant to H.L. Beales at the LSE. And to the question «War services (if any)» he replies: «P.I.D. (Foreign Office) and O.S.S. (USA) Research in German civilian morale».

In addition to his work for the Department of Extra-Mural Studies from 1944, Elias mentions two teaching posts: at University College, Leicester, in 1951-52, and at Bedford College in 1952-53. He does not mention his work for several years at Hillcroft College, although he names Constance Dyson, the Principal of the College at the time, as a referee.

Among his publications, a hitherto unknown title came to light: *Social Anxieties* (Elias 1948), a text said to have appeared in a Bulletin of the Institute for the Scientific Study of Delinquency, at King's College London. I say «said to have appeared» because, despite the help of several librarians and various colleagues in England, I have not so far succeeded in locating a copy or a photocopy of this bulletin<sup>1</sup>. We did find the text itself among Elias's posthumous papers, but we have not so far been able to verify the place of publication.

As referees Elias lists Morris Ginsberg and Barbara Wootton, in addition to Constance Dyson already mentioned. As Barbara (later Baroness) Wootton was staying on the Continent at that time, and thus was off the map as far as an English provincial university was concerned, Elias had to name a further referee and nominated E. Grebenick, a demographer at LSE. Before the references had come back from the people whom the Academic Registrar had asked for them, two other letters, probably sent at Elias instigation, were received. On 17 May, Gertrude Williams, Reader in Social Economics and Head of the Department of Sociology at Bedford College, wrote to say that Elias had attracted notice, above all, because of his «successful results in degree examinations». And F.G. Brook, Secretary for Tutorial Classes in the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at the University of London, wrote that over the past ten years Elias had given «many sessional classes and a number of Advanced Courses», mainly in Psychology, but also in economics, social philosophy and sociology.

Then, the various references came in. They are very similar in tenor, indicating that the evaluation of Elias by people he knew at English universities was relatively uniform. The comments on him were always very laudatory. I shall briefly cite a few highlights from these references.

Barbara Wootton, who had finally been contacted after all and who sent in her reference somewhat late on 22 June, commented: «He is definitely more flexible and more empirically minded than the typical German philosophical sociologist»; and the economist Beales of LSE wrote: «He has never lost faith in the work to which he has devoted his high talents, in spite of discouragements which would have overwhelmed a less tenacious

<sup>1</sup> A copy was retrieved from the King's College archives in 2004, and republished in Elias (2009).

and effective personality». And, finally, the testimonial from Ginsberg: «Dr. Norbert Elias I have known for many years and have read his books and papers. He is extraordinarily well read in sociological and psychological literature. He is an extremely good teacher and would without doubt be a very effective and helpful colleague».

However, Leicester University had also asked Ginsberg for a comparative report, in relation to other applicants. For it was not the case that the post had been advertised for Elias alone, i.e. that someone who knew him there had obtained the job for him. There were several serious applicants, among them Dr. S. Andrzejewski and Dr. Paul Halmos, who both later had tenure at English universities. So it was a question of the order in which Ginsberg would place the applicants. The decisive sentence in his report is: «If I had to place them in order I think I would place Dr. Elias first». So Elias was invited to Leicester for introductory meetings as early as 11 June. On 24 June, the Academic Registrar informed him that the University Council had selected him for a Lectureship Grade II. In the copy of the minutes of the meeting included in the personal file the name Elias is marked with a cross, with the note: £800. On 26 June, Elias wrote that he accepted the post and would be able to start on 1 October 1954.

4. A position as Lecturer Grade II was the lowest rung of the ladder, and the further contents of the personal file concern the promotions Elias received. Two years later, in 1956, he was promoted to Lecturer Grade I. It is undoubtedly not without interest that this happened after Prof. A.G. Pool of the Department of Economics and Commerce, and not the Department of Sociology, had written, in reply to a request from the Registrar: «Dr. Elias's teaching has been highly satisfactory and stimulating. He has the full responsibility for the courses in Psychology taken by Part I and Part II students and he assists Dr. Neustadt in the more general courses in Sociology».

Another two years later, Neustadt, then still a senior lecturer and not yet professor, submitted a letter in which he proposed that Elias be promoted to Reader, «in view of his standing as a scholar, his work for the university and finally of his age». In the file the last part of this justification, «finally of his age» has been marked with a wavy line by the person examining the proposal, since this was not a reason based on academic qualifications. Now, external references were once again obtained. The proposed transition from Lecturer to Reader clearly also had to do with the question whether a person would fit in well in a faculty. For the reports that came back were more concerned with Elias's personality than with his academic qualifications.

Thus, on 13 March 1959, T.H. Marshall, Cambridge, wrote: «That he is a charming person you know very well. He is also learned and has a subtle and distinguished mind. In many ways, perhaps, it is a little too subtle, as was that of Karl Mannheim». But it was his view that, in comparison with two Readers known to him at LSE, Elias would be entirely acceptable as a Reader at Leicester. And on 15 March – once again, everything was happening very quickly – an answer came from Morris Ginsberg, who wrote: «What he has written reveals a sensitive and cultivated mind. [...] On the personal side I have known him since his arrival here as a refugee and have always found him friendly and likable».

Nothing, therefore, stood in the way of the promotion, and from 1 October 1959 Elias was made a Reader with an annual salary of £1600.

5. By this time, Elias was sixty-two, and according to the university rules he had to retire at sixty-five. To prevent this, on 31 October 1961, Neustadt, now Professor, wrote a four-page letter to the Vice-Chancellor, with a request and an application to extend Elias's contract by five years. This four-page letter is of great interest, I think, for the history both of sociology in England and of the Department at Leicester. I can only recommend my English colleagues to look into the Department's files to find this letter, as it describes not only Elias's contribution to the building up of the Department of Sociology, but also the structures which Neustadt and Elias gave the new Department in terms of the curriculum.

Neustadt justifies his application for a five-year extension of the contract, firstly, by the quality of Elias's teaching: «relatively new lines in teaching and degree, a pioneering effort in this field». The second argument emphasises Elias's personal importance for the internal structure of the Department. To sum up, it was necessary

to secure five more years for Elias so that he did not accept other offers. The application was only partly successful.

On 2 January 1962, the Academic Registrar wrote that, according to Section 32 of the University statutes, Elias should really retire on 30 September 1962, but that the Senate had decided «to offer you a special post in the department for the session 1962-1963». Elias thanked the University for this offer in a letter of 15 January, and said he would let it have his decision within two weeks, as he had two other possibilities to consider. These two weeks turned into more than two months. Finally, on 22 March 1962, he wrote: «I have decided to accept the chair in Sociology at the University of Ghana».

What is interesting in this letter is not only the notification it contains, but the fact that Elias was writing for the first time on the large notepaper of the Department. Up to then he had always chosen the smallest format. I have the impression that his handwritten messages to the administration, or letters of thanks for any salary increases, were deliberately kept small. But here someone is writing who is almost ostentatiously aware of his standing in the university hierarchy. Having reached the status of professor, he now writes a very official letter with what is clearly a good typewriter on the Department's large notepaper, without any typing errors and in a very self-confident style. He thanks the University very graciously for the offer of a one-year extension and also – and this is a very fine passage in the letter – for the welcome he has received at the University of Leicester, «for someone like myself who has no other home». And at the end of the letter he writes: «I'm not a particularly demonstrative person but I have appreciated both very much».

The Registrar then thanks Elias no less courteously for the letter and writes that the Establishment Board and the Senate would undoubtedly be deeply impressed: «I'm sure that they, like myself, will appreciate very much the terms in which you have written».

Thus, Elias finally became a professor, which was the position he had longed for since school and which seemed unreachable after going into exile. Professor Elias has clearly been graciously received in the upper echelons of the English university hierarchy, and one might think that this brings to an end at least the bureaucratic part of the history of Elias at Leicester. But there was an epilogue which, in my opinion, is revealing.

6. Thirteen years after this polite exchange of letters, the Registrar wrote to enquire whether the entry: «Prof.» Norbert Elias in the «University Calendar» was in order. He adds the following, and one senses a certain doubt between the lines: «it may be that the University of Ghana conferred on you the title of Emeritus Professor. If so, the current entry in the calendar is accurate; if not, you understand that it is necessary to amend the entry to Dr. N. Elias». By return, a week later, Elias wrote back that he could fully understand the difficulty, but that «it is my old German University of Frankfurt which has conferred on me the title Emeritus Professor». From then on, the file contains only notifications of increases in the university pension and corresponding letters from Elias in which he confirms his residence abroad. The file closes with a note by the Department saying that he had died on 1 August 1990.

*Translated into English by Edmund Jephcott*

## References

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