

[Norbert Elias's Networks in the British Intellectual Field Before His Appointment in Leicester (1945–54)¹]

Abstract: An examination of Norbert Elias as “classical sociologist” or “one of the world’s leading social thinkers” means thinking about three elements of his academic path: 1) the time he needed to get his first academic post in Britain; 2) the constitution of a long-term and extended group of followers in Leicester; 3) the delay in translating his main works in English. This paper will concentrate on the first point, intending to identify the academic and para-academic webs Norbert Elias relied on to gain support for his many applications to posts as Staff Tutor and Lecturer before he was appointed in Leicester in 1954.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, Leicester; Biography, University career.

Norbert Elias is nowadays considered a “classical sociologist”, or “one of the world’s leading social thinkers”. *A posteriori*, three elements of Norbert Elias’s academic path may come as a surprise:

- First is the time he needed to get his first academic post in Britain: it took him nearly twenty years;
- Second is the fact that he did not really collect a following in Leicester – apart from the branch of sports sociology brilliantly developed by Eric Dunning;
- Third and last, only in 1978-82 was his book on the civilising process translated into English.

In this paper, I will concentrate on the first point. My aim is to identify the academic and para-academic webs Norbert Elias relied on to gain support for his many applications to posts as Staff Tutor and Lecturer before he was appointed in Leicester in 1954.

The results I present today are provisional ones. The sources I used are files from the archives of Norbert Elias, Barbara Wootton, W.J.H. Sprott, Morris Ginsberg, The University of London, The University of Leicester and the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE).

I will start by making a distinction between different kinds of networks in which Elias was integrated until 1954. In reality, these networks were themselves largely interconnected; but I will present them separately to clarify my purpose. I will then give some elements of an answer to the question of why Elias was only appointed as a simple lecturer at the age of 57.

1. Firstly, it is quite well known that Elias participated to the foundation of the Group Analytic Society in 1952, along with the psychoanalyst S. H. Foulkes (another German Jew who was a refugee from Frankfurt, but who was much more integrated than Elias into British society). I think it is important to say that Elias, at this time,

¹ BSA Conference, London 6-8 April 2011.

had profiles both as a sociologist and as a social psychologist. He cultivated a kind of dual academic membership. This fact is less well known. Between 1948 and 1954, Elias applied several times for posts of Staff Tutor or Lecturer in psychology and social psychology.² In his references, Morris Ginsberg could write, for example, that Elias «has a wide knowledge both of Sociology and of Social Psychology»³. And S.H. Foulkes was particularly in position to speak in praise of his competence as a «psychologist trained on academic lines, who is at the same time fully conversant with recent developments in social psychology and the social sciences»⁴. Incidentally, it is not a coincidence or a mere anecdote that Elias wrote to his parents, in the last letter he was able to send to them in January 1941: «On the whole, I can say, that it was a good thing that I have chosen sociology and psychology as my profession»⁵.

In 1950, Elias offered David Glass his services to write book reviews for the *British Journal of Sociology* and stated interestingly that his «main field [was] Social Psychology»: «I am particularly interested in changes in group relations, attitudes etc., in problems of class consciousness or national consciousness and, generally, in the social and psychological aspects of the civilising process»⁶. According to Halsey (2004: 77), Glass was «the dominating figure in British sociology in the 1950s». At the LSE, he was a strong partisan of quantitative research into the social structure of Britain, and a kind of pure empiricist demographer-sociologist who was very influential. We can easily imagine that Norbert Elias felt there was a gap between this conception of sociology and his own, and that he preferred to call himself a social psychologist. This also reveals a social structure that was not in his favour. But the fact he offered his services to a new journal of sociology created by the new British Sociological Association quite clearly shows his intention to discreetly make a name for himself – as a social psychologist or as a psycho-sociologist in a way – in the rather undefined British sociological field. Donald MacRae answered him in David Glass's name: «We should be glad to have your help and I would be interested if you would suggest suitable titles for our acquisition and your review as they appear»⁷. But no book review from Elias seems to have been published in the *British Journal of Sociology*.

2. Between 1944 and 1954, Elias gave extra-mural classes. Very little is known about his teaching activity in adult education. He mainly taught Social Psychology. He could not give a sociology course before 1952 within the framework of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) because there were not enough students. Moreover, it seems that it was much easier for him to talk about his work on the civilising process in his social psychology courses rather than in his sociology ones. It would also be possible to show that his teaching activity in adult education allowed him to “radicalise” his thought and simplify his writing (Joly 2012). But what is more important is that in the adult education system Elias found very important supports for gaining a post at University. The managers of the Department of Extra-Mural Studies at University of London generously agreed to give their names for references in his applications for academic posts. They were in a position that allowed them to comment on the work he had done as lecturer and tutor for the Department of Extra-Mural Studies and they spoke of him in the most laudatory terms: about his successes as a teacher, his very good contacts with students and colleagues, his striking ability to prepare students for examinations. One of them was for example Harold Shearman, who was an Academic Advisor for Tutorial Classes of the Extra-Mural Department of the University of London and a very much respected author of several books on adult education.

2 Deutsches Literaturarchiv, Marbach am Neckar (DLA), Elias, I, 139, letter from N. Elias to A. McPhee, 26 October 1949.

3 LSEL-AD, Ginsberg, E 1/29, letter from M. Ginsberg to V. Knowles, 5 April 1954.

4 Wellcome Library. NRA 38202. PP/SHF/B12, letter from S.H. Foulkes to F.G. Brooke, 15 May 1950.

5 DLA, Elias, I, 35, letter from N. Elias to S. and H. Elias, 6 January 1941.

6 DLA, Elias, I, 36, letter from N. Elias to D. Glass, 19 March 1950.

7 DLA, Elias, I, 42, letter from D. Mac Rae to N. Elias, 28 March 1950.

3. In the academic sub-field of sociology, Elias had connections to four powerful people, although none of them occupied as central a position as for example David Glass. These scholars were Morris Ginsberg, Barbara Wootton, W.J.H. Sprott and Francis D. Klingender. From many angles, and each in their own way, these four sociologists were “established outsiders” – or they were in a way established who were outsiders in spirit.

Ginsberg, of course, was the most famous of them, as a “founder” of British sociology and as “heir” of L.T. Hobhouse. He was the Head of the Department of Sociology at the LSE. But, according to Halsey, he gave no encouragement to the LSE students who, in the early 1950s, had the ambition of embarking upon a professional career in sociology (Joe Banks, Olive Banks, Percy Cohen, David Lockwood, Basil Bernstein, Ralf Dahrendorf, A.H. Halsey, among others). Their mentors were Glass and Edward Shils. Karl Popper was also very influential through his critics of historicism. It is certain that Elias had difficult relations with Ginsberg, who had helped him on his arrival in Britain and during the war. The problem lays in the fact that Elias was a former assistant of Karl Mannheim. In a way, he was the collateral victim of the so-called “Mannheim-Ginsberg problem”. In 1954, Elias wrote again to one of his friends: «Ginsberg I am sure has a great deal of good will for me. But as you perhaps know he can never really forget that I have been Mannheim’s assistant and I have had quite a number of setbacks on that account»⁸. Ginsberg contented himself with writing references for Elias. This was useful of course, but Elias, without doubt, must have hoped that Ginsberg would have helped him to integrate the LSE. It is no less certain that Elias perceived very well that Ginsberg’s Hobhousian conception of sociology was devalued in the 1950s.

The case of Barbara Wootton (1897-1988) is different. She was an important figure in British Sociology, not only in the inter-war period, but also after the war. More precisely, she was «an outstandingly vigorous public figure» close to the Labour Party and «an acknowledged expert in criminology, penology and social work» (Halsey 2004: 64). She had worked for the Labour Party and the Trades Union Conference before managing the Morley College for Workers in the 1920s (Wootton 1967). Between 1944 and 1952, as a Reader in Sociology, she had led the Department of Sociology, Social Studies and Economics at Bedford College for Women. In 1952, she obtained a Nuffield Foundation Research Fellowship⁹. She had failed to penetrate the doors of the LSE (T.H. Marshall had been preferred to her). But she possessed a very extensive social capital. She allowed Elias to use her name as a referee for applications for internal teaching posts, and she invited him to teach Theories and Methods of Sociology at Bedford College in 1952-3. There is no doubt that she was a strong and influential support.

As far as I know, W.J.H. Sprott (1897-1971) never wrote a reference for Elias. But he was an important contact for him in the British sociological sub-field. He was a member of the Society of the Apostles and a «really excellent»¹⁰ translator of Freud. Sprott held chairs in philosophy and in psychology in Nottingham. According to A.H. Halsey, «he was the first English sociologist to offer an informed, critical, and sympathetic view both of European writing in “the grand manner” and of the sophisticated functionalism of the American R.K. Merton» (Halsey 2004: 27). Therefore for Halsey he could be considered «a genial and articulate link» – purely virtual nevertheless – «between the older founders of sociology in Britain, such as Hobhouse and Ginsberg, and the new professionals in the aftermath of the Second World War» (*ibidem*: 203). Ginsberg would have liked to recruit him to the LSE after Mannheim’s death¹¹. Anyway, Sprott was very interested in publishing a translation of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Elias 1939) in his series International Library of Sociology and Social Reconstruction¹². This series had been created by Karl Mannheim, and it is curious that Mannheim never seems to have proposed to help Elias in this matter of the translation. We do not even know ever whether Elias asked Mannheim for support. But nothing could be done in 1952, despite a good report by Sprott¹³ who knew the “civilising book” well and the first volume of which he had quoted in one of his books (Sprott 1954). We also know that Sprott read *Problems of*

8 DLA, Elias, I, 49, letter from N. Elias to Kurt, 15 mars 1954.

9 GCPP Wootton 2/1, Bedford College, *Bedford News: The newspaper of Bedford College*, 3 February 1952.

10 According to Ernest Jones, who added: «A very unusual experience for me» (Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. WJHS-052-Jones, letter from E. Jones to W.J.H. Sprott, 9 July 1931).

11 Archive Centre, King’s College, Cambridge. WJHS-035-Ginsberg, letter from M. Ginsberg to W.J.H. Sprott, 4 December 1945.

12 DLA, Elias, I, 48, letter from W.J.S. Sprott to N. Elias, 23 April 1952.

13 DLA, Elias, I, 48, letter from W. J. S. Sprott to N. Elias, 16 June 1952.

involvement and detachment (Elias 1956), and sent him his comments on this paper.

Last, Francis D. Klingender (1907-55) was a «sociologist of industrial life as such as a historian of art» (Fabiani 1978: 21). He was Lecturer at University College of Hull. But his controversial Marxism and his premature death prevented his work being judged at its true worth. He invited Elias to teach sociology in Hull in 1952, and was one of his referees for a lectureship in sociology at Exeter.

But Elias could above all count on the support of his friend Ilya Neustadt (1915-93), a Jewish refugee like him, whom he had met at the LSE. Neustadt had written a thesis on the social structure of Belgian society, under the supervision of Morris Ginsberg. He had worked as an assistant in the LSE Library. In 1949, he gained a post as Lecturer in Sociology in the Economics Department of Leicester University College. Thanks to him, Elias had been invited to teach Social Psychology at Leicester in 1951-2. I think – but I am not sure – that Neustadt did all that was possible so that preference was given to applicants who were qualified in Social Psychology for the post of Lecturer in Sociology at which Elias was appointed in 1954¹⁴.

4. All in all, we can see that Norbert Elias had various supports in British sociology, but outside the dominant streams. I would also like to stress the fact that the support given to Elias from the academic world (Wootton, Ginsberg) as well as from the para-academic world (from managers of the Workers' Educational Association and from the Department of Extra-Mural Studies of the University of London) were all more or less connected to the Labour Party. Also if we look at the specific network of Jewish human scientists who took refuge in Britain, we realise that many of them were or had been members of socialist movements (Neu Beginnen, for example).

I would like to give just one example to show this relation. While the psychoanalyst S.H. Foulkes and the Labour MP Patrick Gordon-Walker, who was a fervent reader of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* and tried to have it published in English, have apparently very little in common, Elias's correspondence shows that he met Gordon-Walker at Foulkes's house.

5. In this paper, I have only given an outline of Elias's networks in the British intellectual field of the 1940s and 1950s. I have also given no more than a sketchy reconstruction of an extremely polarised field after World War II. The debates concerned the legitimacy of state control, of the Welfare State, of planning. For example, in her famous book *Freedom Under Planning*, Barbara Wootton (1945) had refuted the arguments developed in *The Road to Serfdom* by Hayek (1944).

All in all, it is not very difficult to understand why Elias obtained an academic post only in 1954. For financial reasons, Universities or University Colleges preferred to appoint Assistant Lecturers rather than an experienced candidate like him. What is more, LSE graduates were privileged (Elias was for example beaten in Leicester in 1952 by Joe Banks, who was aged 32). We should also note that he was appointed *after* other Jewish refugees who had been younger when arriving in Britain, and had therefore been able to go on with studying in Britain or to go back to university in Britain. In fact, we then realise how much Elias's age was a disadvantage to him in comparison to younger refugees who were able to gain a degree from the LSE (like Ilya Neustadt) and to older ones who already had a strong institutional position before exile (like Karl Mannheim).

Elias was therefore in a situation that was objectively unfavourable, and he did feel it beforehand. A few months before he was appointed in Leicester he asserted that he had «terribly mismanaged [his] chances for an academic career and had got [him]self, in that respect, so to say in a blind alley»: «That sounds like a tale of woe», he added. Nevertheless, he said he was perfectly happy – «apart from the fact that I still feel the right place for me is an internal teaching job»¹⁵. But he never really tried to analyse these objective obstacles from a sociological point of view, through a reflexive exercise as Pierre Bourdieu theorised it. My hypothesis is that, from childhood – and

14 DLA, Elias, I, 193. «University College of Leicester. Lectureship/Assistant Lectureship in Sociology». Ilya Neustadt had been promoted to Senior Lecturer in August 1954. See University of Leicester Archives ULA/P/AR32, University College Leicester Report 1953-4, p. 29.

15 DLA, Elias, I, 49, letter from N. Elias to K., 15 March 1954.

for reasons only psychoanalysis would be able to elucidate – he had a capacity of detachment and self-control that were strong enough to endure life's strong adversities.

I would like to quote a letter that Elias – who had just been awarded a Readership – wrote on 5 August 1959 to Tom Bottomore, who had also just been appointed as a Reader:

My dear Tom, I was delighted to hear that you got your Readership. Let me congratulate you. It is long overdue. [...] I also hope that the traces of bitterness which you quite rightly felt will gradually vanish. If they come from time to time, think of me. Where would I be, if I had the bitterness which I often felt, let gain power over me. If I may for once say it, it is not less sad for me to be at my age still a Reader – and a very young [that is, recently appointed] Reader at that, at a small University – because the Nazis drove me from the country where I was born. So you see – I have never ceased to be grateful for what I got.¹⁶

6. In conclusion, I should like to say a word on the way Elias saw the range of opportunities (in Bourdieu's words, the "space of possibles") in British sociology after his appointment in Leicester.

He was proud to have succeeded, with Ilya Neustadt, in very quickly building up the second largest Department of Sociology in Britain. It is interesting to note that in 1958 he wanted to invite to Leicester some sociologists to discuss in a small group the situation of teaching and research in sociology in the country. The main objective of this meeting was to decide a common plan of action in favour of sociology: «It is my firm conviction that a country which remains backward in the development of this field will be unable to hold its own in relation to others no less than a country which remains backward in the development of the natural sciences»¹⁷. This call was addressed to a younger generation of sociologists: Jean Floud, Tom Bottomore, Ernest Gellner, Asher Tropp, David Lockwood, Joe Banks, Bryan Wilson, Donald MacRae. Except for T.H. Marshall, whom he knew very little, Norbert Elias felt that he had nothing in common with his own generation in Britain (that is people like Wootton or Sprott). But it seems to me that he also felt that he was put at an unfair disadvantage compared with the new generation in gaining a chair. That is the reason why, as an older man, he thought that he could «make a good rallying point for the discussion and plans of a small cercle [sic]»¹⁸. The idea was obviously to introduce some kind of solidarity and the feeling of a common task in a competitive situation that produced a pernicious individualism. But the meeting that Elias (and Neustadt) had wished for never took place¹⁹.

16 DLA, Elias, I, 33, letter from N. Elias to T. Bottomore, 5 August 1959.

17 DLA, Elias, I, 33, letter from N. Elias to T. Bottomore, n.d. [1957-8].

18 DLA, Elias, I, 33, letter from N. Elias to T. Bottomore, n.d. [1957-8].

19 DLA, Elias, I, 42, letter from N. Elias to D. MacRae; 10 May 1958.

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