

Second Chapter

On the Plan of this Academic Work

Books always have a context of origin; they do not simply emerge all of a sudden, they do not fall from heaven, mimicking creation. The same holds true for non-scientific as well as scientific literature. In fiction there are styles and fashions, sudden breakthroughs of new patterns and structures of language. The latter are rare exceptions and are particularly interesting for the literary studies. For instance, a whole journal was devoted to the writer Arno Schmidt and the decoding of his oeuvre: the *Bargfelder Bote*, discussed and analysed his body of work in all its particulars. But even in such case, biographical aspects are being screened. In doing so, one is not interested in crude objectives, like finding out when the author commenced writing, but rather whether there were circumstances in their lives which stood in direct or indirect correlation with their literary work, exerted influence or determined directions. I do not wish to keep it a secret that during the preparations one edition of the Arno Schmidt foundation has very much impressed and

influenced me: the study “Wu Hi?”¹ edited by Jan Philipp Reemtsma and Bernd Rauschenbach, is a particularly convincing blend of critical literary study and biography, providing an excellent density.

The same applies to scientific books; only here it is often easier to consider the membership in a certain school as context of origin. The recognizable affiliation to a paradigm is, as a rule, enough to recognize these contexts. More seldom are those books that make other superfluous. This also holds true for the so-called life works that systematically yield a one-time thought, by and by discussing it for all areas of life. Only in those cases where a break though has been accomplished, the questions concerning the context of origin can become meaningful which go beyond the categorisation into academic schools of thought, paradigm communities. This is true even in the natural sciences. An example worth reading is the description by Watson of the way to the discovery of the DNA molecular structure,² while, in this instance, it is of particular interest that the set objective of research had been achieved despite adverse circumstances. The final result is a discovery on which modern genetic research is based and which made it possible in the first place.

This is especially true in the case of the social sciences—where in particular persons who are associated with events in the history of sociology were and are at the centre of the

1 Jan Philipp Reemtsma, Bernd Rauschenberg (eds.): *Wu Hi?* Arno Schmidt in Görlitz, Lauban, Greiffenberg. Zürich/Bargfeld 1986.

2 James D. Watson: *Die Doppel-Helix. Ein persönlicher Bericht über die Entdeckung der DNS-Struktur.* Introduction by Heinz Haber. Reinbek near Hamburg 1973.

investigations. Therefore, the circumstances of Auguste Comte's life—he was the first person to use the term sociology for the newly emerging science at the end of the 19th century—have been extensively analysed and documented. Though Karl Marx's life course is known down to the last detail, its further valuation in view of his path-breaking work continues to be the subject of scientific discussions and disputes. With regard to the sociologists of the 20th century, this applies in particular to Max Weber. Although it is difficult for the concerned researchers to lift the cloak of secrecy, Marianne Weber and other relatives have purposefully laid over his biography. The interpretation of his biographical data and circumstances has been steered into a certain direction. This can be proven in a small example, which coincidentally demonstrates the importance of biographies for the interpretation of contexts of origins.

Biographies and Biographers

If one follows the information and interpretations of Marianne Weber in her biography of her husband who died in 1920³—and until 1990 all of the biographies did so for a lack of other sources—, the mother had a decisive influence on the socialization of the young Max Weber. The educated-middle-class and religious-pietistic atmosphere of the parental home, predominantly shaped by the mother, ostensibly determined his life, its ups and downs. It seems reasonable to identify in this context Weber's access to his

3 Marianne Weber: *Ein Lebensbild*. Tübingen 1926.

well-known and important volume “Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus” (‘The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism’), and one may then arrive at the interpretation that the meaning which Weber attributes to religion may have something to do with the maternal parental home.

So far the biographies have followed this interpretation and have adopted the characterization of the father as a comfortable “bourgeois”, inclined to “pleasure and enjoyment”, and as having few interests and being resigned to his insignificance. Marianne Weber’s assessment virtually eclipsed all other known facts. Dirk Käsler has shown that another, very different characterization of the father is not only possible but obvious.⁴ Max Weber sen. came from a wealthy East-Westphalian linen weaver family. He managed a grand house in Berlin and was politically as active as influential. From 1867–1897, with a short interruption, he was a member of the Prussian House of Representatives and from 1873–1884 a member of the German Reichstag. Käsler writes: “The ‘Lebensbild’, and with that all who write after him—reports ... that the leaders of the neo-liberal party, Benningssen and Miquel, associated with the Weberian house, that the representatives Rickert and Kapp, the finance minister Hobrecht, but also the ‘stars in the academic sky’, Dilthey, Goldschmidt, Sybel, Treitschke and Mommsen, came to visit the Charlottenburg house”.⁵ For Käsler, it is difficult

4 Dirk Käsler: *Der retuschierte Klassiker. Zum gegenwärtigen Forschungsstand der Biographie Max Webers*. Typescript of a lecture at the “Max-Weber-Conference”, German Sociological Association, Section: Sociological Theories, 19–21 June 1986, pp. 25 f.

5 Loc. cit., pp. 24 f.

to imagine “that all these men came on a regular basis only for the good cigars which the guest were provided with by the sons Max and Alfred after the dinner ... if he were nothing else than what his daughter-in-law wrote about him: ‘he remains what he is: a liberal bourgeois.’”⁶

As it can be seen, completely different constellations of the background and the according interpretation of the original context of Weber’s important works are possible. Maybe it was not at all the mother’s religious orientation but the energetic-capitalist attitude of the father that had a strong influence on the son. This then causes slight doubts whether it was not totally different motifs that led to “Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus”, which might change the assessment of said study.

I do not want to decide on this at this point. This little analogy is but an example of the significance of biographical data for scientific work. It also entails the urgent appeal to treat such evaluation sensitively. Even when a strong compositional interest, like that of Marianne Weber, is absent, precocious determination and the non-consideration of material can bias both the readers’ attention and later authors.

Nevertheless, an academic publication’s context of origin remains of interest, namely in particular where a study cannot readily be associated with a specific paradigm community. This holds true especially for “Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation” and its author. The book cannot be allocated within one of the paradigm communities of its time. The author did not belong to a particular sociological school, as we will see later on; a teacher-pupil relationship did not exist

6 Loc. cit., p. 25.

either. It is therefore not sufficient to present this book with regard to its new approach, but one has to ask for its prehistory, i.e. in which context and how at all it could come into being.

In doing so, the sensitive treatment of biographical data is one part of a difficult task. This has nothing to do with an obligation to discretely conceal data and processes. Rather, the task does in principle not differ from the 'normal' sociological research. Personal requirements and preference, as it was certainly the case with Marianne Weber, have to give in to a most accurate assessment of the facts at hand that is adequate for the examined object. Also, one has to take account of the circumstances of the time. The examiner's present life conditions must not be imposed on past circumstances. After all, it is both a past and, in contrast to present-day life conditions, a definable time period, which, by the way, has been insufficiently examined. The focus on the major book often obscures the biographical-scientific prehistory. The aim, therefore, is not a comprehensive biography, but the attempt to understand the life circumstances and working environments which date back 50 years and more.

Environment as Milieu

In the following, I focus on a certain period in Elias's work life. In its centre are "Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation", its context of origin, its contents and the possibilities which have since become available for the academic work by sociologists. By pointing out studies done by younger sociologists, I want to show the opportunities, regarding theory as

well as empiricism, that are provided by a sociology relating to both the people and the processual development of the figurations these people form—a sociology as it had been represented by Elias since the 1930s.

In doing so, admittedly, only a section of the Eliasian works is being discussed. This reflects the idea that the intensive discussion of said topic and the related literature is extensive enough to serve as an initial introduction to the work and biography. As a matter of principle, introductions cannot replace self-study or the own perusal of the address literature addressed. They can call attention to the cornerstones of a position; and they can, as shall be attempted here, illustrate the new and the particular of said position. Such introductions could inspire, support and maybe save the reception for readers' own work and their individual analysis of the work from fallacies, but they cannot replace these individual approaches.

In connection with the context of origin, I have deliberately used the term 'milieu'. In doing so, I follow—with reservations—the suggestion developed and substantiated by Dirk Käsler in his book "Die frühe Soziologie 1909–1934 und ihre Entstehungs-Milieus".⁷ His central assumption is that there exists a series of determinants which can help to, not exhaustively but insightfully, distinguish several milieus of emergence of early German sociology. Käsler differentiates three of these milieus: firstly, the milieu of origination which pertains to the socialization in the family of origin,

7 Dirk Käsler: *Die frühe deutsche Soziologie 1909–1934 und ihre Entstehungs-Milieus. Eine wissenschaftssoziologische Untersuchung*. Opladen 1984.

secondly, the milieu of education and vocational training, and, finally, the milieu of academic career.

Käsler's fundamental assumption can be illustrated using an example. The most important sociologist of the first twenty years of the 20th century was, without doubt, Max Weber. He was born in 1864; his parents were part of the bourgeoisie, were protestant-liberal and lived in Berlin. Weber attended a humanistic high school and studied law in Berlin. He was a protestant of liberal orientation.

Around the mid-20th century, one of the most important German social scientists was Max Horkheimer, one of the key figures of the Frankfurt School. Born as a son of bourgeois-Jewish parents even before the turn of the century, he attended a humanistic high school, initially studied psychology, and then lived in Frankfurt without a religious but with a decidedly socialist orientation.

There is not yet a focus on a particular scientist in Käsler's work. He attempts to present differences in the generational groups and use these for the explanation of the development of sociology in the first third of the 20th century. In doing so, he reaches the conclusion that the milieus of origination and education and vocational training were too similar to explain significant differences in the sociological positions. It was the milieus of academic career that had a critical influence. He manifoldly verified this on the basis of teacher-pupil and, better still, master-disciple relationships.

Without anticipating later explanations regarding Elias, one can observe that the particular in his biography is his ability to evade the formative influences of certain milieus of career. No teacher-pupil relationships can be identified, even less a master-disciple relationship. Käsler's point was

the depiction of groups, individual fate only interested him as a part of his entire survey and the question “What kind of people were those who—individually and jointly—established this new science called ‘sociology’”⁸ could only be answered in general terms. In contrast, the text at hand is meant to comprehend the life journey of an individual. It is to be shown that, even at a young age, the contours of an academic programme began to show in the milieu of origination, but in particular in the milieus of education and vocational training, which Elias then worked on for his whole life.

Norbert Elias: Oeuvre and Biography

The existing sources enable me to show that Elias early on developed a certain attitude which can be called scientific. However, it is difficult to extract individual events and encounters that were of particular, maybe even fundamental, importance. Especially because it is at least doubtful whether it is at all appropriate to define as responsible individual experiences and encounters for the chosen direction and different stages in the long-term development of a young person; or whether it would be better to examine it as the sum of interwoven factors.

Elias has spoken publicly about his biography. Besides in his “Notizen zum Lebenslauf”⁹ (‘Notes on a lifetime’),

8 Dirk Käsler: Die frühe deutsche Soziologie, loc. cit., p. 22.

9 Norbert Elias: Notizen zum Lebenslauf. In: Peter Gleichmann, Johan Goudsblom, Hermann Korte (eds.): Macht und Zivilisation. Materialien zu Norbert Elias’ Zivilisationstheorie 2. Frankfurt/Main 1984, pp. 9–82. The English translation ‘Notes on a lifetime’ is part of Vol-

this happened most sustainably in the WDR (West German Broadcasting) television film “Man lässt sich fallen und man fängt sich auf. Norbert Elias – Menschenwissenschaftler”¹⁰ by Ulrich Gembar dt and Christian Feyerabend, which had been the sum of numerous personal conversations between Elias and Gembar dt. Maybe Gembar dt, who was only separated from Elias by one generation, had a particularly good access. Furthermore, there was a four-hour radio interview by Carmen Thomas for a ‘Hallo Ü-Wagen’ programme on 30 May 1984¹¹ and autobiographical conversations with Dutch sociologists, who turned them into a cover story for the so-called colour supplement of the weekly magazine *Vrij Nederland* on 1 December 1984. Moreover, there are a couple of reports and recollections by third parties; however, with few exceptions, these only relate to the times in Heidelberg, Frankfurt and in exile. From his schooldays, I have only two reports. Most of his classmates did not survive the First World War. The majority of his Jewish relatives and acquaintances are victims of the Holocaust. Occasionally, Elias, too, appears in reports and recollections of third parties about Heidelberg and Frankfurt.

Elias had just left the Heidelberg student circle for Frankfurt when was joined by Golo Mann who described it in his youthful memories.¹²

ume 17 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias, Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections, UCD 2013.

10 First broadcast on 31 October 1985.

11 Added to Vol. 17 of the ‘Gesammelte Schriften’ is a CD with a segment of the interview.

12 Golo Mann: *Erinnerungen und Gedanken. Eine Jugend in Deutschland*. Frankfurt/Main 1986. Concerning this, see in particular pp. 279–291 and pp. 377–413.

I have attempted to verify autobiographical statements and recollections of third parties as far as this was possible. On the one hand, by inspecting files in the university archives of Breslau, Heidelberg, Freiburg and Frankfurt, on the other hand by surveying persons who knew Elias and/or his life circumstances in the individual periods.

I will therefore try to include biographical circumstances in the explanation of important components of the civilization theory and process sociology. I do so because in the case of Elias I am convinced that neither a biography irrespective of his work nor a history of his oeuvre that is irrespective of his biography would be possible. There are cases, with this I am following Stefan Blankertz, when “the individual of the author” appears as “an integral part of the intellectual performance” and Immanuel Kant’s self-assessment “Of ourselves we are silent; it is about the cause”¹³ cannot be accepted. Books do not always have a monopoly position as the source of explanation. Without knowledge about the previous periods of development, the significance of “Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation” cannot be adequately understood; without knowledge about the biographical circumstances, the intellectual performance cannot be adequately evaluated. Even when person and oeuvre are not a unity, they are nevertheless related to each other.

Based on these considerations, the structure of the book was developed. Initially, information is given on the basic problems of sociology, problems which, in a certain manifestation, influenced the sociology of the 1920s and 1930s. It

13 “Von uns selbst schweigen wir, es geht um die Sache”, Stefan Blankertz: Kritischer Pragmatismus. Zur Soziologie Paul Goodmans. Wetzlar 1983, p. 111.

is followed by a chapter on the parental home, school and studies, which concludes with the successful completion of the doctorate. A chapter each is dedicated to the time in Heidelberg and Frankfurt as well as to the Zurich 'Soziologentag' 1928, the sociologists' annual conference. Subsequently, a long chapter presents the main arguments in "Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation". The following chapter then deals with the years in exile. It concludes with the time of the Heidelberg 'Soziologentag' of 1964 until the awarding of the Adorno Prize in 1977, bringing Elias the public appreciation for which he had waited so long.

<http://www.springer.com/978-3-658-17351-7>

On Norbert Elias - Becoming a Human Scientist

Edited by Stefanie Ernst

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2017, XVI, 237 p. 8 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-3-658-17351-7