

Beyond the 'Parsonian Problem of Order': Elias, Habit and Contemporary Sociology *or* Hobbes was right

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Abstract

The way in which Simmel answered the question 'How is society possible?' provided a variety of important and fruitful foundations for subsequent sociological theory and research. However, the reformulation of the sociological *Grundfrage* as revolving around the so-called "Hobbesian problem of order" by Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action* took sociology in a completely different direction. After briefly outlining the critiques of Parsons' construction of Hobbes, which suggest that it is more accurate to speak of the "Parsonian problem of order", the paper then examines the ways in which Elias's theory of human society deals with social order in a more useful way, one which takes us back to Simmel's original formulation as well as suggesting ways of developing it. The central argument is that Elias's theoretical orientation provides a way to rescue those elements of classical and early twentieth-century sociology which were written out of the sociological canon as a result of widespread adoption of the "action-theoretical" orientation of *Structure* - particularly the concept of "habit" - and to re-incorporate them into contemporary social theory and research.

Introduction

When Simmel (1910) posed the question 'How is society possible?' as sociology's *Grundfrage*, he framed it as an extension of Kant's query, 'How is *nature* possible?', to society. He begins his discussion with an explanation of the differences between the cognition of 'nature' as distinct from human observers, and society as constituted precisely by observing human subjects. His opening argument is that human individuals are inherently social in a way that the various elements of nature are not inherently 'natural'. He agrees with Kant that the 'unity' or 'connectedness' of nature only emerges in the observing human subject, whereas the connectedness and unity of society is *inherently* a characteristic of the individual elements composing it, namely 'individual souls' (1910: 374, 376). The implication of Simmel's argument is that the question should be posed in the form 'How is society possible?', along the lines of 'how does society work?' with the core analytical task being to explore the paradox of human being's dual individual and social nature. How is it that particular, concrete process of individuation are *at the same time* universal processes of socialization? (p. 377).

The rest of Simmel's piece is an outline of the various elements of this paradoxical constitution of human subjectivity which sociologists need to work with in order properly to understand it. For example, human beings *both* share more with each other (in love, common work) than natural objects, *and* are more distinct from each other, as psychic centres of perception. (p. 375). Others (you/thou) are both independent of our representations of them, possessing their own unique individuality, and captive to those representations. We both perceive people not as individuals, but as types, through the 'veil' of social presuppositions (pp. 379-80), but everyone is also 'something more' than their social position:

Each element of a group is not a societal part, but beyond that something else.....the sort of his socialized-being (*Vergesellschaftet-Seins*) is determined or partially determined by the sort of his not-socialized being....individuals, like callings and social situations, are distinguished by the degree of that *In-addition* which they possess or admit along with their social content. (pp. 381-2)

Individuals only exist within social groups to the extent that they also exist outside them, the individual soul 'cannot be inserted into an order without finding itself at the same time in opposition to that order' (p. 384). Simmel thus stimulated a profoundly *relational* understanding of human intersubjectivity and sociality which underlay much of the sociological theory and research which followed, but by no means all of it. Indeed, his answer to the question 'How is society possible?' came to be overshadowed by a very different approach, in which the sociological *Grundfrage* came to be posed, framed and answered in a way which continues to have effects on sociological reasoning today.

The turning point was Talcott Parsons's (1937) *The Structure of Social Action*, a book which, despite the delay in its impact, every commentary (Cosser, 1977: 562; Alexander 1988; Camic 1989; Gould 1991; Levine 1989; Shils 1961: 1406) has identified as having effected a powerful transformation of sociological thought, one which established a clear break with pre-*Structure* theory in the very process of claiming to draw out the essential features of (some) classical social theorists. Edward Shils once remarked that *Structure* "precipitated the sociological outlook" and "began the slow process of bringing into the open the latent dispositions which had underlain the growth of sociological curiosity" (1961: 1406), and no later commentator has formulated a convincing argument against this assessment.

Rather than being able to assume an essential continuity in sociological thinking, with a clearly identifiable and uncontested sociological "birthright", then, *Structure* came to function as sociology's 'year zero', drawing together all previous sociological wisdom into the correct and definitive formulation of sociology's *Grundfrage*. It did this partly through a particular interpretation of Hobbes's political theory and his construction of the relationship between the state and individual liberty. In *Structure*'s interpretation, social life is organised around a primary tension between the pursuit of individual and collective interests, with the pre-sociological understanding of how this tension is best resolved being identified as the view that it could only be dealt with by the authority of the State, a position attributed to Hobbes. The specifically *sociological* contribution to liberal society and politics was to provide another, better explanation of social order, one which saw it as emerging not from the authority of the State, but from a system of shared norms and values.

This paper will begin with a brief outline of the ways in which the post-*Structure* formulation of sociology's *Grundfrage* was essentially a blind alley, and it will then go on to explain how the kind of approach to the question of social order to be found in

Norbert Elias's work can deal with social order in a very particular and more useful way. Elias's sociology can both recover those important elements of the sociological imagination of Simmel and the other classical theorists which had been effectively written out of sociology by the 'Parsonian turn', and also develop them in important ways. I would like to focus on the work of Elias to a large extent because he is rarely regarded as a significant sociological theorist, and because the linkages between Simmel and his historical sociology are potentially of enormous analytical utility and significance. My aim in the paper is thus a dual one: to rescue Simmel's approach to sociology's *Grundfrage*, 'How is society possible?', from the effects of Parsons' misperception of Hobbes, but also to correct the misunderstanding of Elias as a theorist, to establish that Elias's contribution to contemporary sociological thought has a number of other elements beyond his "relationism" (Emirbayer 1997; also van Krieken 1998: 61-5, 74-5) which more effectively realize the possibilities of classical European social thought, and particularly those of the concept of 'habit'.

Parsons, Hobbes and the "Problem of Order"

The "Hobbesian problem of order" is arguably sociology's post-*Structure* re-formulation of Simmel's 'How is society possible?' (Dawe 1970: 207; Burger 1977: 320). I have outlined Parsons' approach to Hobbes and the critiques of it elsewhere (van Krieken 2002), so I will confine myself to a recapitulation here. The Parsonian construction of Hobbes turns him into a kind of rational-choice theorist, in which it was the pursuit of individual self-interest which, unconstrained, would provoke 'a war of all against all - Hobbes's state of nature' (Parsons 1935: 295). As Parsons wrote in 1934, 'in the absence of a pre-established harmony in terms of a metaphysical "Nature" there must be, for a society to exist, a significant degree of integration of ultimate ends in terms of a *system common* to the bulk of the individuals composing it' (1990: 323). Social order thus derives from outside 'individuals', the integration of a system of ultimate ends, without which there would be what he understood as 'Hobbes' state of nature - that is, chaos' (1990: 323). As Parsons understood it, Hobbes felt that only the coercive force of sovereign authority could effectively hold society/social order together, when in fact it was the internalisation of values which achieved this effect - the normative solution to the problem of order which retained a voluntaristic element to social action.

However, as Stephen Holmes (1995: 69-99) and many others have emphasised, all of this is nonsense, based on a wild misreading of Hobbes. His approach to how one explained and prevented civil war was not in fact organised around an opposition of 'nature' to 'society'. His 'state of nature' is one where the state and law are absent, but nonetheless populated by thoroughly socialized and civilized human beings (Macpherson 1962: 22, 29) - to be precise, individuals motivated not by self-interest, but by religious belief. As Bernard Gert puts it, "all the premises about human nature...which he uses in arguing for the necessity of an unlimited sovereign, are in fact statements about the rationally required desires, and not, as most commentators have taken them, statements about the passions" (1996: 164; c.f. also Ryan 1996: 217-8 and Kraynak 1983: 93-4). We are in a state of nature, argued Hobbes, so long as "private appetite is the measure of good and evil" (1962: 167) - in other words, as long as society is not normatively integrated, something which he felt can only be achieved via a *socially-founded* (not externally imposed: Lloyd 1992: 317; Shapin and Schafer 1985: 152-3) sovereign state. His 'Kingdome of Darknesse', his *Behemoth*, the threat of civil war, was not individuals pursuing their self-interest, but precisely the contrary: individuals driven by *too little* rather than too much self-interest, by passionately held - and deeply socialized

- beliefs and opinions (see also Hirschmann 1977) *with no central authority to decide between them.*

One of the effects of *Structure's* reformulation of sociology's *Grundfrage* as the so-called 'Hobbesian problem of order', and its particular answer, was to entrench an individual/society opposition within sociological thought. Instead of having moved beyond the individual/society opposition around the turn of the century, Margaret Archer, for example, can still see it in 1995 as *ontologically* founded, announcing that "the problem of the relationship between individual and society was *the* central sociological problem from the beginning. The vexatious task of understanding the linkage between "structure and agency" will always retain this centrality because it derives from what society intrinsically is" (Archer 1995: 1). Dualisms like individual/society, or agency/structure and the "Parsonian problem of order" are integrally linked, bound to each other like Siamese twins. Accept the latter, and we are condemned to forever recycling individual/society dualisms in their various guises, and their supposed transcendence.

From Action and Structure to *Habitus* and Social Processes

Elias can help us out of our difficulties here for two reasons: his rejection of the centrality of a theory of "action", and his insistence on a temporal dimension to sociological theory. After he met Parsons in 1970 at the ISA conference in Varna, Elias praised his integrity, sincerity and his power of theoretical synthesis, but also felt unconvinced "that this gift has been used in the right cause" (1972: 277). Elias argued that it was networks of people acting, rather than abstract disembodied 'action', which should be placed at the centre of a theory of society (1972: 277). The division of sociological thought into "the two sociologies" emerges from an interaction between a continued attachment to individualist, liberal ideals of autonomy and freedom and the organization of sociology around theories of "action". Attempts to oppose the determinism of structuralist approaches with action theories merely approach the dualism from a different angle, proposing that social order can emerge from autonomous individuals emancipated from external constraint. As Elias put it, "one of the strongest motive forces of people who insist on starting their theoretical reflections about societies from 'individuals *per se*' or from 'individual acts' seems to be the wish to assert that 'basically' an individual is 'free'" (Elias & Scotson 1965: 172).¹

To the extent that Parsons's understanding of human action as organised around the linking of means and ends has been followed within sociology, leaving only arguments about how the ends are determined, we overlook a central element of the understanding of human behaviour in classical sociology which Elias retained, namely, their emphasis on the importance of particular *psychological* formations of individuals in explaining social life. For the early sociologists the concept which engaged with this question was "habit", "habitus" or 'habitude" (Camic 1986: 1074). These concepts disappeared from sociological vocabulary after *Structure*, with a few exceptions, including especially Wilhelm Reich and the Frankfurt School theorists - Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, and the early Fromm. It has been generally true of post-*Structure* sociological thought, as R.W. Connell suggested, that "[th]ere have been no effective

¹ Collins argues similarly in this regard, that the "longing for agency" is a retreat to "a subjective world constructed so as to offer the fantasy of subjective power" (1992: 77).

successors to this generation of theorists. Historical depth psychology remains a gleam in the theoretical eye rather than an established branch of knowledge" (Connell 1983: 158). It has only been more recently, with the work in the sociology of emotions (Barbalet 1997; Shilling 1997) and more broadly the impact of Pierre Bourdieu's interest in *habitus* as well as the growing influence of Elias, that this has begun to be rectified.

The dynamics of societies are also dependent on the formation of a shared social *habitus* or personality make-up which constitutes the collective basis of individual human conduct. Elias gave the example of the concept of "national character", which he called "a habitus problem *par excellence*" (1991: 182). The organisation of psychological make-up into a *habitus* is a continuous *process* which begins at birth and continues throughout a person's childhood and youth (1994: 454-5). Moreover, the development of habitus continued through a person's life, "for although the self-steering of a person, malleable during childhood, solidifies and hardens as he grows up, it never ceases entirely to be affected by his changing relations with others throughout his life" (1994: 455).

The ways in which the formation of habitus changed over time, what Elias called *psychogenesis*, could also only be properly understood in connection with changes in the surrounding social relations, or *sociogenesis*. He argued against the disciplinary separation of psychology, sociology and history, suggesting the a single human science would address the ways in which "[t]he structures of the human psyche, the structures of human society and the structures of human history are indissolubly complementary, and can only be studied in conjunction with each other" (1991: 36). The formation of habitus is a function of social interdependencies, which vary as the structure of a society varies (1994: 249). While he used the notion of "correspondence" between *habitus* and social structure in *The Civilizing Process* (1994: 156), later he modified his position to accommodate the possibility that social habitus might change more slowly than the surrounding social relations (1991: 211). Our "whole outlook on life" said Elias, "continues to be psychologically tied to yesterday's social reality, although today's and tomorrow's reality already differs greatly from yesterday's" (1995: 35; see also 1991: 211, 214, 217). It is only over time that one can trace the workings of *habitus*, and its re-formation over a number of generations. Since *habitus* and culture are slow to change, it is impossible to understand social life except over longer spans of time. A temporal dimension, in other words, is crucial to understanding the workings of human social life.²

While sociologists generally agree that individuals do not exist outside society, and that subjectivity is socially constructed, the continued adherence to a theory of action, uninformed by psychology, smuggles the concept of an "autonomous individual" opposing an "autonomous society" back in via another route, re-embedding it within sociological thought at the very same time that a contrary theoretical position is taken up when the question is addressed overtly. Parsons did eventually read and utilize Freud, but by then the damage had been done. Sociology had come to distance itself from theories of personality, reflecting the Parsonian misunderstanding of Hobbes' psychology, and producing a schism in its understanding of human social life which Parsons's appropriation of psychoanalysis could only approach from the other side. In other words, although sociologists may have *explicitly* agreed with Simmel's observation that individuals are social beings, the *latent* structure of sociological theory has come to embody a continuing opposition between "the

² Edward Shils has put this well: "A society is a "trans-temporal" phenomenon. It is not constituted by its existence at a single moment in time. It exists only through time.....It has a temporal integration as well as spatial integration" (1981: 327).

individual" and "society". Putting it as crudely as possible, the huge and vital difference between Elias and Parsons was that Elias wrote Freud into his theory from the outset, whereas for Parsons psychoanalysis was a late addition to an already-formulated sociological theory.

Unplanned "Order"

Elias did not see the very existence of "social order" itself as problematic, saying that he understood the concept "in the same sense that one talks of a natural order, in which decay and destruction as structured processes have their place alongside growth and synthesis, death and disintegration alongside birth and integration" (1978: 76). He directed his attention to another question, namely, the apparent *independence* of social order from intentional human action. For Elias, the question was: "How does it happen at all that formations arise in the human world that no single human being has intended, and which yet are anything but cloud formations without stability or structure?" (1994: 443-4). It was the slowly dawning awareness from about the French Revolution onwards that, just as social life was not determined by God or supernatural forces, it was also not determined by the intentions of human beings, which Elias felt contributed to the emergence of sociology as a discipline:

If one does not ask merely for a definition of society, but rather for the experiences which cradled a science of society, this was one of them: the experience that although people form societies and keep society moving by their actions and plans, at the same time society seems often to go its own way and, while being driven by those who form them, at the same time, seems to drive them. (1984: 43)

The thinkers who first contributed to this developing awareness included, for Elias, Adam Smith, Hegel, the Physiocrats, Malthus, Marx and Comte. Hegel's concept of the "cunning of reason" was one of the first attempts to capture this "ordered autonomy" of social life from the individuals who make it up:

Again and again...people stand before the outcome of their own actions like the apprentice magician before the spirits he has conjured up and which, once at large, are no longer in his power. They look with astonishment at the convolutions and formations of the historical flow which they themselves constitute but do not control. (1991: 62)

For Elias there is no question about the *possibility* of social order or society, the mere existence of which actually needs no explanation. What requires analytic attention is instead the *relationship* between social order and the actions of the human beings making it up. More precisely, the most acute problem for Elias was the apparent *lack* of relationship, the seemingly *alien* character of the social world to the individuals making it up.

Elias saw "society", then, as consisting of the structured interweaving of the activity of interdependent human agents, all pursuing their own interests and goals, producing distinct social forms such as what we call "Christianity", "feudalism", "patriarchy", "capitalism", or whatever culture and nation we happen to be part of, which cannot be said to have been planned or intended by any individual or group. Weber's analysis of the roots of the spirit of rational capitalist accumulation in ascetic Protestantism provides a good example of the kind of "blind" process Elias was talking about. Although human beings possess and conduct themselves with "agency", then, this does not mean that they are the "agents" or "creators" of social life, which has a

“hidden order, not directly perceptible to the senses” (1991: 13).

It is only in a limited sense, then, that people “make their own history”. Elias formulated it as follows:

It is simple enough: plans and actions, the emotional and rational impulses of individual people, constantly interweave in a friendly or hostile way. *This basic tissue resulting from many single plans and actions of men can give rise to changes and patterns that no individual person has planned or created. From this interdependence of people arises an order sui generis, an order more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of the individual people composing it.* It is this order of interweaving human impulses and strivings, this social order, which determines the course of historical change; it underlies the civilizing process. (1994: 444)

This conception has much in common with the notion of “spontaneous order” usually attributed to Adam Ferguson and the Scottish Enlightenment theorists. There has been some discussion of the notion of the “unintended consequences of human action”, indeed Robert Merton published a short paper on the topic at the same time that *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* was being completed (Merton 1936; see also Boudon 1986 and Mennell 1977; on Ferguson, see Hill 1996). We all know that Friedrich von Hayek explored the concept of “spontaneous order” and also argued against the utility of planned intervention into economic and social processes (von Hayek 1967; 1989), but Elias went in a different direction, towards a focus on the *relationship* between intentional attempts to control and transform the social world and the long-term unplanned processes of development within which they take place.

In analysing this relationship between intentional human action and unplanned surrounding social preconditions and outcomes, Elias emphasized, on the one hand, the dependence of any given individual, no matter how central a position they held, on the surrounding network of social, economic and political relations. “No individual person, no matter how great his stature, how powerful his will, how penetrating his intelligence, can breach the autonomous laws of the human network from which his actions arise and into which they are directed” (1991: 50). He indicated a very clear preference for understanding social transformations in terms of changes in social conditions, or in the structuring of social relationships, rather than attributing very much causal significance to the decisions and actions of particular, supposedly powerful individuals or groups (1994: 266).

On the other hand, although within the broad sweep of history it is apparent how much individuals are buffeted by forces beyond their control, “the person acting within the flow may have a better chance to see how much can depend on individual people in individual situations, despite the general direction” (1991: 48). It is equally unrealistic to believe “that people are interchangeable, the individual being no more than the passive vehicle of a social machine” (1991: 54). Elias saw social life as both “firm” and “elastic”: “Crossroads appear at which people must choose, and on their choices, depending on their social position, may depend either their immediate personal fate or that of a whole family, or, in certain circumstances, of entire nations or groups within them” (1991: 49). Agency thus consisted of the strategic seizure of opportunities which arise for individuals and groups, but not in the actual creation of those opportunities, which “are prescribed and limited by the specific structure of his society and the nature of the functions the people exercise within it” (1991: 49). Moreover, once an opportunity is taken, human action “becomes interwoven with those of others; it unleashes further chains of actions”, the effects of which are based not on individual or group actors, but “on the distribution of power and the structure of

tensions within this whole mobile human network" (1991: 49-50).

For Elias a primary sociological concern is, then, the *relationships* between intentional, goal-directed human activities and the unplanned or unconscious process of interweaving with other such activities, past and present, and their consequences. For example, in relation to technological change, he commented: "From the viewpoint of a process theory what is interesting is the *interweaving of an unplanned process and human planning*" (1995: 26). Often Elias emphasized the unplanned character of social life, largely because he was concerned to counter the notion that there can ever be a direct and straightforward relationship between human action and its outcomes. However, all his observations taken together indicate a more complex understanding, for he always believed that improved human control of social life was the ultimate objective of sociological analysis. In his words, "people can only hope to master and make sense out of these purposeless, meaningless functional interconnections if they can recognize them as relatively autonomous, distinctive functional interconnections, and investigate them systematically" (1978: 58). Elias saw an understanding of long-term unplanned changes as serving both "an improved orientation" towards social processes which lie beyond human planning, and an improved understanding of those areas of social life which can be said to correspond to the goals and intentions of human action (1997a: [14]).

Conclusion

Future sociological inquiry, taking preliminary cues from such areas as the sociology of emotion and feeling, the philosophical theory of action, and the psychoanalytic theory of action and affect, must move beyond the present means-ends framework and the problem of order, if it seriously seeks to illuminate the nature of social action, rather than fragments of it. (Camic 1979: 545)

I have argued that Hobbes and Simmel were right, on social order at least, and Parsons was wrong, and that Elias's historical sociology is one useful way of recovering the more important features of classical social theory lying beneath the concrete of the 'Hobbesian problem of order' and the action/structure dichotomy, to begin with because of his mobilisation of the concept of 'habit' or *habitus*. But Elias can also do more for contemporary social theory, by revisiting the whole question of the individual and society in a way which both resonates with Simmel's understanding, and also takes us in new directions, engaging with different problems, particularly those surrounding the disjunction between human actions and their outcomes, and the alienation of social institutions from their architects.

We usually tell ourselves that the question of whether sociologists continue to see "the individual" and "society" as separate entities was settled long ago, that the transcendence of the dichotomy is simply part of sociology's inheritance. If we can read it in Marx, Weber, Durkheim and Simmel, why repeat the argument? However, in reality dualistic forms of perception, apparently vanquished in explicit arguments and in the relevant sections of the textbooks, simply reappear in another form, built into the structure of sociological thought with different labels attached. The problem, as Camic (1986) has shown, is that the early sociologists can be read in a variety of ways, and the effect of both Parsons's construction of the sociological "tradition" and the criticisms of it has been, until only quite recently, to perceive human conduct in a way which reproduces the individual/society dichotomy. Concepts and modes of perception have

a habit of rising, phoenix-like, from the ashes. Elias's arguments about problems in sociological thought need to be addressed at the level of its deep, underlying structure rather than merely its surface arguments, and from that perspective they retain much of their force. If they did not, we would not still be puzzling over the supposed distinctions between agency and structure, social and system integration, or micro and macro approaches to sociology (Knorr-Cetina and Cicourel 1981; Alexander et al 1987; Mouzelis 1993; Ritzer and Gindoff 1994).

We can see this in the critiques of Elias. Bauman, for example, commented that "Elias encourages his followers to close their eyes to the active, creative role of the individual or collective *subject* of knowledge" (Bauman 1979: 120), and Dennis Smith suggested that "his approach leaves unresolved an important contradiction concerning the human capacity for choice and evaluation" (1984: 370). What distinguishes Elias from writers such as Marcuse, Habermas and Moore, said Smith, was "his "bleaching out" of the evaluating, choosing side of humanity" (1984: 373). Hans Haferkamp also felt uneasy about the emphasis which Elias placed on the unplanned and "blind" character of social development: "Elias does not give much weight to the success of intentions and plans in this framework. Nor does he check to see when the planning of associations of actions has been successful....there have been many situations where micro- or macro-social actors have succeeded in their intentions and plans" (1987: 556).

To the extent that "agency" is conceived as somehow "oppositional" to, or "autonomous" from, social determination, such criticism merely reinforces Elias's assertion that the individual/society dichotomy is still a problem in sociological thought. He would have regarded claims like: "The residuum of human autonomy and creativity must be reclaimed for social theory otherwise the full implications of human agency will be totally eclipsed" (Layder 1994: 118) as reflecting a continuing romanticism about individual "freedom". Elias never questioned the idea that human beings act creatively, with conscious intent, and that their actions cannot be simply read off in a deterministic fashion from their surrounding social context. This is different, however, from attributed *effectivity* to their action, and it is the *effects* of human action which have to be regarded as determined by the way a combination of actions interweave with each other, frequently in conflict and competition with each other. The process by which the actions of various human agents, individual and collective, combine and interpenetrate with each other, by definition lies beyond the control of any of the participating "actors". Rather than "bleaching" out human choice and evaluation, Elias's position concerning agency is simply one about the "logic of collective action", about the real effects those choices and evaluations actually have once they enter social life, especially while human groups continue to compete with each other. It is the dynamics of competition, conflict and interweaving which constitutes the "blindness" of social development and restricts the effectivity of human agency.

The potential of both Elias's overall theoretical approach and his empirical studies is that their basic elements can be mobilized in relation to a wide range of topics in empirical social research, with great promise of generating powerful lines of inquiry, explanation and debate. Equally significant, however, is the possible contribution that Elias can make to a reorientation of sociological theory. The features of Elias's approach discussed here - the interweaving of planned action and unplanned development, the importance of an analytical focus on human interdependence, and the significance of "habitus" - have considerable potential for taking sociological theory beyond the apparently endless obsession with dualisms and their transcendence. There is no "Hobbesian problem of order", only a "Parsonian problem of order", there need be no

“two sociologies” and no problem of “structure and action” requiring solution with a “theory of structuration” (Giddens 1984). Hobbes *was* right (Shapin & Shafer 1985).

There are only, as the pre-Parsonian sociologists understood well enough, changing formations of *habitus* within ongoing processes of historical development, of continual adjustment of human conduct to particular social conditions. Although there is no reason to stop being critical of many of its features, an engagement with Elias’s sociology can help us develop a theoretical space within which we can recover those non-dualised elements of sociological thought rendered invisible by the Parsonian appropriation of sociology’s *Grundfrage*, as originally posed by Simmel.

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