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Symbolism and Symbols in Norbert Elías.

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Abstract

Norbert Elías was a German sociologist known primarily for his theory of the civilizing process and his focus on historical sociology. Although he is not as recognized for his specific work in symbol theory as are other sociologists such as Pierre Bourdieu or Erving Goffman, his work has important implications for understanding how symbols and rituals shape social interactions and interactions. power structures. Norbert Elías' contribution to symbol theory is significant in his work "The Symbol Theory", which was published posthumously in English in 1989 and later translated into several languages, including Spanish in 1994. Elías addresses the meaning of symbols in the process of production and creation of human social life. He highlights "symbolic emancipation", which he describes as the human ability to form symbols and communicate through them. This ability distinguishes humans from other species and allows survival and adaptation to diverse environments without the need for genetic transformation. The book is also dedicated to unraveling the conceptual terrain that allows us to think about symbols, criticizing the dichotomies between sociology and biology, nature and culture, materialism and idealism. He emphasizes the importance of understanding symbols as constitutive elements of social reality. Elías's work is part of his trajectory of historical sociology and sociology of knowledge. He explores symbolism in the context of the civilizational process and analyzes how objective social processes intertwine with the conditions of subjectivity. He also develops theories about language, symbols, communication, reason and knowledge, thus contributing to a sociology of knowledge. Keywords: Symbolism, Symbolic, Elias

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Introduction to the sociology of Norbert Elías

Norbert Elías was a German sociologist, known for his distinctive approach to the study of society and its development. His most notable contributions include the theory of the civilizing process and his focus on power relations and social interdependencies. Elias's most famous work, "The Process of Civilization" (1939), examines the evolution of human norms and behavior in Europe from the Middle Ages to modern times. Elías argues that the



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civilizational process involves an increasing regulation of individual behavior through the internalization of social norms and impulse control. The sociologist developed the concept of "configuration" to describe the networks of interdependence between individuals and groups. These configurations are dynamic and change over time, reflecting power relations and mutual dependencies. The idea is that individuals do not exist in isolation, but rather their actions and behaviors are deeply influenced by the relationships and social structures in which they are embedded.

Elias saw power as a fundamental characteristic of human relationships. His focus is on how power structures emerge and transform over time, influencing individual and collective behavior. In "The Process of Civilization" he shows how the state's monopoly on violence and the development of a centralized bureaucracy contributed to the process of civilization. The sociologist argued that an essential part of the civilizing process is the control of impulses and emotions. As societies develop, social norms and expectations become more complex, and individuals learn to control their desires and behaviors more tightly. There he also analyzes how recreational activities reflect and contribute to the process of civilization, regulating aggression and providing a means for the controlled expression of human impulses.

Furthermore, Elías has examined how states and societies develop and are structured through long historical processes. The focus is on how individuals and states emerge and evolve together, influencing each other. The English academic also explored the sociology of sport and leisure. In "Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process" (1986), he analyzed how recreational activities reflect and contribute to the civilizational process, regulating aggression and providing a means for the controlled expression of human impulses.

The concept of "figuration" is central to Elías's sociology. He describes the dynamic networks of social relations that make up societies. The figurations are not static structures, but are constantly changing and evolving, reflecting the power relations and interdependencies between individuals. Elías was influenced by several sociological and philosophical currents, including Max Weber's ideas on rationalization and power. His work has had a significant impact on contemporary sociology, especially in the studies of power, civilization, and social development. His focus on long-term processes and social interdependencies has been especially influential.

Norbert Elias' sociology focuses on the study of the historical and social processes that shape norms, power relations, and human interdependencies. His focus on civilization and impulse control has provided a unique and valuable perspective for understanding the development of modern societies.

Elías raises the problem of the relationship between the individual and society, pointing out the need for a review of concepts and terminologies in sociology (Elias, 1994b). In his text *Knowledge and Power* (1994) he proposes a "Copernican revolution" to break with the egocentric vision, replacing it with a perspective of interdependent individuals and criticizes the reification of concepts that prevents a clear understanding of social life, proposing a vision where individuals are linked in networks of interdependence. Elías advocates an interdisciplinary view and criticizes traditional divisions in social sciences, suggesting that it is impossible to establish precise boundaries between areas of knowledge. He highlights the



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need to overcome naturalized perspectives and recognize social pressure, challenging the "metaphysics of social figures" that leads to dehumanization.

The sociologist points out the influence of reification on social pressure, highlighting how social figures are perceived as external and objective entities and explains that this reification comes from the historical experience of premodern societies, where natural phenomena were interpreted in an animistic anthropomorphic way. . Elías (1994b) proposes the task of sociology as "emancipate", recognizing that social coercions are self-imposed and defending the need to free oneself from static models that naturalize the social. Ultimately, the author advocates emancipation through terminology that more accurately reflects social figurations, allowing thinking more adjusted to reality and freeing oneself from conceptual ties that prevent a deep understanding of society.

The renewing perspective of Norbert Elías

Norbert Elías offers an innovative perspective on the relationship between thought, knowledge and language, integrating these activities as inseparable social processes (Elías, 1994a)

1. Social nature of knowledge:

- Speaking, thinking and knowing are intrinsically social activities.
- These activities are carried out in groups and cannot be adequately understood if they are considered purely individual.

2. Knowledge through language:

- Language acts as a link between nature and culture, composed of physical sound patterns and symbols that allow communication.
- Language, thought and knowledge are interrelated through the use of mnemonic images.

3. Collective and long-term process:

- Knowledge does not arise from an isolated individual, but from a collective and cumulative process over time.
- There is a "social fund" of knowledge that includes pre-scientific phases.

4. Generational transmission of knowledge:

- Language allows the transmission of knowledge from generation to generation.
- By learning a language, a person accesses the knowledge accumulated by their society.

5. Meaning of fantasies:

- Fantasy is an elementary form of knowledge and should not be relegated to the unreal or irrational.
- The human ability to imagine things that do not exist or events that do not happen is fundamental to symbolic activity.

6. Survival and language:

- The ability to transmit knowledge through language has been crucial for the survival of human collectivities.



The overcoming of philosophy

Elias, with an initial training in philosophy, seeks to overcome traditional philosophical orientation to address problems from a sociological perspective. He criticizes the individualistic and rationalist ideologies and assumptions of classical philosophy, proposing instead a sociological theory of knowledge that integrates language as a central element in the production and transmission of knowledge. This approach redefines the process of civilization, highlighting the world of symbols and their importance in understanding human nature.

Elias Theory: Power, behavior, emotion and knowledge

Norbert Elías focused on the relationship between power, behavior, emotion and knowledge over time, significantly giving shape to what is known as processual or figurative sociology. Although initially marginalized, his work was rediscovered in the 1970s, becoming one of the most influential sociologists. His concept of large social figurations or networks of interdependencies between people explained the emergence and function of large social structures, without neglecting individual agency (Wikipedia). This approach criticized the excessive emphasis on structure over agency, predominant in structural functionalism.

Elías's most famous work - *The Civilization Process* -, published in 1939 and rediscovered in 1969, analyzes the historical developments of the European habitus. Elias describes how post-medieval European standards of violence, sexual behavior, bodily functions, table manners, and ways of speaking were gradually transformed through increasing thresholds of shame and disgust. This internalization of self-control, enforced by increasingly complex social networks, developed the "psychological" self-perceptions that Freud identified as the "superego." The second volume examines the causes of these processes, finding them in the increasingly centralized early modern state and in the more differentiated and interconnected society. Initially misinterpreted as an extension of discredited "social Darwinism", Elias's analysis of the civilizational process was eventually appreciated for its sociological depth. He wrote in English and German, and his work includes important contributions to the sociology of knowledge and sport.

Elias and the symbols

Symbols are social constructions that people provide with historical and contextualized meanings, open the door to the senses and communicate ideas, concepts and feelings (Quiroga, 2021).

Elías (1994a) highlights the abstract nature of the exhibition and the absence of empirical examples, unlike other works by the author. The main criticism is directed towards conventional sociology, which according to Elías is in a primitive stage of development and lacks a clear basic model to understand human beings and recognizes the lack of consensus in the social sciences on the basic assumptions about the man and society. The *Theory of the Symbol* is presented as an attempt to rethink man from the most primary aspects of him, especially in relation to symbols and language. Elías advocates a sociology of knowledge that



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addresses the problems of thought and knowledge from a sociological perspective, surpassing the rationalist approach of classical philosophy.

The essay addresses the criticism of the lack of clarity in conventional sociology and highlights the need for a sociology of knowledge focused on the study of symbols and language as a basis for understanding human beings. Elías (1994a) faces two challenges in constructing a theory of the symbol: determining the role of biological and social dimensions in the formation of symbols, and demonstrating the inherently social nature of language. Traditionally, the relationship between biology and sociology has been presented in an exclusive manner, with biologists disdaining social scientists and vice versa. Elías addresses this problem and highlights the mutual ignorance between both disciplines and in his sociology, the study of language, the false opposition between biology and sociology is reproduced. He distinguishes between biologists who focus on language in its broadest sense, and sociologists, who at best are concerned with linguistic diversity without paying sufficient attention to the underlying biological substrate. Elías, however, advocates a complementary vision in which the social and the biological participate fundamentally in the construction of the symbol. His unfinished experience in medicine influenced his continued interest in the connection between the biological and the social throughout his life.

Methodology

After reading the book *Theory of the symbol: an essay in cultural anthropology*, we formulate a description of its main concepts and the incipient development of a theory of the sign.

Findings

For Elías, the key to building a basic model of human beings is the development of a theory of the symbol. This theory must consider the most elementary and primary strata of symbolic conformation of man and the creation of language. Elías criticizes the division of labor in the social and human sciences, which reproduces traditional oppositions such as body and soul (physiology and psychology), or the separation between politician and businessman (political science and economics). This internal structure will hardly change as long as the current institutions do not change. The theory of the symbol does not fit completely in the field of biology, even though symbols have biological aspects, nor in psychology, since it focuses too much on the individual and not on language as a social phenomenon (Valencia Gutiérrez, 2004). Elías considers that conventional sociology neglects the problems of knowledge, language, memory and thought, and has not developed an adequate sociology of knowledge.

Historical and Contemporary Contributions

Elías recognizes that there have been significant advances in the knowledge of man and society in the last 150 years, mentioning Marx as an example. However, Elías does not explicitly recognize the contributions of disciplines such as anthropology, linguistics, psychoanalysis, philosophy and history in the construction of a model of the human being. Part of Elías's criticism is directed towards philosophers for the way in which they have treated the problems of language, thought and knowledge, since he considers that the



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sociology of knowledge must address these problems from a sociological perspective, not from the framework rationalist and individualist of classical philosophy (Valencia Gutiérrez, 2004).

Elías's theory of the symbol seeks to lay the foundations for a sociology of knowledge that resolves the problems of knowledge and thought, using language as a starting point and understanding it as the symbolic universe of social and individual human life. Elías criticizes the lack of a coherent model of the human being in the social sciences and proposes the development of a theory of the symbol as a solution. This theory must serve as the foundation for a renewal of the social sciences, overcoming the division of labor and addressing the problems of knowledge and thought from a broader and more contextualized sociological perspective.

Conclusions

Norbert Elías, in his attempt to build a theory of the symbol, poses a severe criticism of contemporary social sciences, arguing that these disciplines are still in a primitive stage of development. The sociologist considers that one of the main defects of these sciences is their confusing basic model of human beings, which leads to confusion and is inadequate and misleading. Elias points out that, unlike the natural sciences that reached an agreement on their object of study, the social sciences lack a basic consensus on man and society, focusing on internal struggles for the supremacy of criteria between disciplines such as economics and biology.

Elias proposes that the key to overcoming these problems lies in the development of a theory of the symbol, which can provide the necessary foundations to renew the social sciences. However, he criticizes the current division of labor in these sciences, where biology and psychology, for example, do not adequately contribute to the construction of a theory of the symbol due to their restricted focuses. Likewise, he points out that “conventional sociology” has neglected crucial aspects such as knowledge, language, memory and thought.

Two fundamental aspects interest Elías in the elaboration of this theory of the symbol: the role of the biological and social dimension in the construction of symbols and the irreducibly social character of human language. The relationship between biology and sociology has traditionally been exclusive, with biologists and social scientists maintaining an attitude of mutual disdain and advocating for a complementary perspective, where both factors are recognized in the construction of the symbol.

Elias distinguishes between the biological predisposition to learn a language, common to the human species, and the social learning process that determines the specific language spoken. This innate ability to communicate is only activated through individual learning, based on social guidelines that vary from one society to another.

In his analysis, Elias emphasizes that the development of human language has occurred in extremely long intervals, making our understanding difficult. The false dichotomy between the biological and the social has led to a lack of productive dialogue between disciplines. Elías proposes that biological and social processes are mutually dependent in language



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learning and that the ability to communicate is a biological inheritance that is only fully realized through social learning (Valencia Gutiérrez, 2004).

Furthermore, Elías criticizes traditional dualisms such as the opposition between body and mind, arguing that nature and society are intertwined and influence each other. Biological evolution and social development are interdependent processes. The capacity for human language, with its biological substrate, allows the creation of symbols and sophisticated communication that transcends the mere expression of innate sounds.

- Biological and social dimension in the construction of symbols: Elías establishes that both biology and sociology play a crucial role in the creation of symbols. The biological predisposition for language is an innate characteristic of the human species, while social learning determines the specific language that is spoken.
- Social character of human language: Elías criticizes individualistic models that consider human beings as independent agents. He maintains that human language is intrinsically social and cannot be reduced to purely biological or individual terms.

Norbert Elías does not finish his project of integrating thought, knowledge and language, but he establishes clear guidelines for it. His proposal redefines the “ontological status of knowledge”, placing it in a symbolic dimension within the coordinates of space and time, criticizing the vision of knowledge as a timeless and ahistorical activity. Elías aims to overcome the exclusive dichotomies in the study of symbols, as he has done when criticizing the separation between biology and sociology, nature and culture, materialism and idealism (Elías, 1994a). The traditional separation of knowledge and thought from the study of language has established an opposition between materialism and idealism, considering knowledge as a spiritual and individual activity. Elías seeks to criticize these dichotomies in the conception of thought and knowledge, transforming the theory of knowledge into a sociology of knowledge.

Six aspects of Elías's proposal

1. Social nature of knowledge: Elías highlights that speaking, thinking and knowing are social activities, typical of human beings who live in society and share a collective reference. These activities should not be seen as individual, but as expressions of the social nature of man. This breaks with the philosophical tradition started by Descartes, which isolates reason, knowledge and language.

2. Knowledge through language: Elías shows that knowledge is given through language, a link between nature and culture, composed of physical sound patterns and mnemonic brain images, and symbols that regularize these sound patterns. Language is a “means of communication”, thought is a “means of investigation” and knowledge is a “means of orientation”, all of them related to the management of “learned and stored mnemonic images”.



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3. Collective and long-term nature of knowledge: Knowledge is a collective and prolonged process, whose starting point is a "we" and not an individual. This learning process has been sedimented over the centuries, recognizing a "social fund" of knowledge that includes pre-scientific phases.
4. Transmission of knowledge through language: Language is a collection of knowledge transmitted generationally through symbols. The socialization process, through which a child becomes a fully developed human being, is carried out through language, which guarantees the transmission of knowledge. By learning a language, a person accesses the "social fund of knowledge" of his or her society.
5. Meaning of fantasies: Elias revalues fantasies in the development of human life, extending the scope of the sociology of knowledge beyond scientific activity. Fantasy is a form of elementary knowledge, which should not be reduced to the unreal or irrational. This ability to distance ourselves from the immediate is fundamental to human symbolic activity, including art and magic.
6. Survival and language: The accumulated knowledge transmitted generationally through language is crucial for the survival of human collectivities. Elias highlights that the survival of humanity depends largely on the ability to build symbolic universes different from the immediate world.

The overcoming of philosophy

Norbert Elías, with initial training in philosophy, seeks to overcome philosophical orientation to address the same problems from a sociological perspective (Elías, 1994a). His criticism is directed towards the ideologies and towards the individualistic and rationalist assumptions of classical philosophy, proposing a sociological theory of knowledge that integrates language in the production and transmission of knowledge. This approach redefines the process of civilization, highlighting the world of symbols and their implications for the understanding of human nature. Although his work remained unfinished, Elías's legacy offers a new direction for contemporary social sciences through a theory of the symbol.

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