

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Norbert Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying* and *Humana Conditio*. Edited by Alan Scott and Brigitte Scott. Chester Springs PA: University College Dublin Press/Dufour Editions, 2010, 192 pp. \$US 99.95 hardcover (978-1-906359-06-5)

This book is volume 6 in the Collected Works of Norbert Elias that is being published by University College Dublin Press. Eighteen volumes are planned. The production is exemplary, from binding and paper quality through the editorial care. Earlier translations have been corrected and changes noted; editors' notes explain circumstances within which Elias wrote and clarify references he makes to lesser known authors and contemporary events. The price necessarily matches the quality, and these books seem intended mostly as library editions.

The present volume includes one of Elias's most frequently cited books, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, published in German in 1979 and in English in 1985. The other text, *Humana Conditio*, was published in German in 1985 as an expansion of lectures that Elias gave at the University of Bielefeld on the fortieth anniversary of the end of World War II. The present publication is the first English translation. Both works are translated by Edmund Jephcott.

The Loneliness of the Dying is frequently cited but rarely discussed in the clinical and scholarly literature on death and dying. I myself read this book in the Blackwell edition before I had read anything else by Elias. Rereading it now, decades later, I realize how much I missed. While *Loneliness* is readable by itself, the argument can seem thin unless it is understood against the background of Elias's other writing, especially his magisterial work, *The Civilizing Process*, or as the UCD Press edition more accurately translates it, *On the Process of Civilization* (volume 3 in the complete edition). Here Elias presents his theory of society as a complementarity between the processes of psychogenesis and sociogenesis. Most simply, psychogenesis refers to the sensibilities and sensitivities of individual habitus: what kind of person is produced by a particular society. Elias's particular concern is how a society's threshold of shame and repugnance shapes its members. Sociogenesis is the reciprocal process by which such individuals reproduce the kind of society in which they wish to live — the institutionalization of their habitus. Society — more

accurately, social process — comprises both psycho- and sociogenesis, each reshaping the other.

The Loneliness of the Dying analyzes how peculiarities of contemporary social structure have produced characteristic problems for dying. The book's interest is not the observation that dying persons are lonely, but rather understanding why this loneliness is predictable, if not at all inevitable. Elias summarizes what the psychogenesis of the modern period produces: "the high degree of individualisation, the comprehensive and constant restraint of all strong drive and emotional impulses, and a tendency towards isolation" (p. 46). Such individuals create institutions that exacerbate the lack of shared meaning which then becomes endemic: "It is only the institutionalized routines of hospitals that give a social framework to the situation of dying. These, however, are mostly devoid of feeling and contribute much to the isolation of the dying ... The secular rituals have been largely emptied of feeling and meaning; traditional secular forms of expression lack the power to convince" (p. 24). People want institutionalized routine — it appeals to their desire for individualisation and restraint — but then they suffer from these routines crowding out rituals in which shared meaning might be generated.

Elias's conclusion is no less significant for being unsurprising: "The special accent taken on in the modern period by the idea that one dies alone matches the accentuation in this period that one lives alone" (p. 48). Elias, who studied medicine before moving to philosophy and eventually sociology, compares himself to a physician, supplementing "the traditional medical diagnosis by a sociological diagnosis, concentrating on the danger of isolation" (p. 56).

At which point, many readers might ask what particular value this book has. My response is that to value *The Loneliness of the Dying*, a reader needs to know either remarkably little about dying or a reasonable amount about Elias. If *Loneliness* is read as an appendix to *The Civilizing Process*, then themes of individualisation and self-restraint take on a resonance that elevates what otherwise might seem self-evident observations. The depth of dilemma in contemporary care for the dying deepens. Reading *Loneliness* as a work of sociological theory, Elias offers a profound demonstration of his capacity to hold personality and social structure in mutual dependence, without reducing one to the other. *Loneliness* can be productively taught to theory students as a succinct example of Elias applying his concept of process to a substantive problem.

Unfortunately, *Humana Conditio* has not, on my reading, aged nearly so well as *Loneliness*. Elias wrote at the end of the Cold War, but he does not foresee that end. He develops an analysis based on his idea that power is consolidated in a series of elimination contests among states.

In *The Civilizing Process*, elimination contests provide a rich description of the emergence of France as a nation state; Elias is even better in later writing on the Nazi consolidation of power in the Weimar Period. But today we read *Humana Conditio* knowing that the elimination contest between the US and the USSR, while it resolved without the violence that Elias feared — the threat of nuclear war hangs heavily over this book — prepared for a perhaps more dangerous situation, in which state powers have far more limited control over the means of violence. Occasionally, Elias glimpses what will happen; for example: “But the network of humanity is stretched too widely ... to give a single state or a single group of states any real chance of establishing a lasting military-economic hegemony over the whole of humanity” (p. 134). Yet violence perpetrated by non-state, diffuse, cellular organizations is not on Elias’s horizon. Today elimination contests fail to consolidate control of violence, and these contests are perpetrated by personalities that, in Elias’s terms, lack modern restraints on violence. *Humana Conditio* remains a text of its time, less useful for understanding contemporary political violence than for seeing why Elias is at his best when he keeps psycho- and sociogenesis in tension; this essay involves only the latter.

Again, sociologists can be immensely grateful to UCD Press for insuring that future scholars will have the writings of this essential theorist in a definitive edition. Paperback editions of selected volumes would be most welcome.

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