

Norbert Elias, a theory beyond the individual and society

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Abstract

Norbert Elias strongly opposes the thoughts that establish insurmountable barriers between antithetical terms, elements whose existence would be separated from each other as if they were autonomous and independent entities. His project for a social theory is to overcome the exclusionary opposition that upholds that things depend either on the individual or society. From Elias' perspective, what happens is an overlap in which the two elements influence each other, each one producing transformations in the other. According to his figurational sociology, the process of forming the individual's self-coercion while directing his actions and desires also determines how society is organized. The individual, in turn, does not transform passively but molds himself according to the structures of society.

Keywords: homo clausus, power, dependence

Resumo

Norbert Elias opõe-se fortemente aos pensamentos que estabelecem barreiras intransponíveis entre os termos antitéticos, elementos cujas existências seriam separadas umas das outras, como se fossem entidades autônomas e independentes. Seu projeto de uma teoria social é superar a oposição excludente que sustenta que as coisas dependem ou do indivíduo ou da sociedade. Na perspectiva de Elias, o que acontece é uma imbricação na qual os dois elementos se influenciam mutuamente, cada um produzindo transformações no outro. De acordo com sua sociologia figuracional, o processo de formação da auto coerção do indivíduo, ao mesmo tempo que direciona suas ações e seus desejos, também determina o modo como a sociedade se organiza. O indivíduo, por sua vez, não se transforma passivamente, mas se molda conforme as estruturas da sociedade.

Palavras-chave: homo clausus, poder, dependência

Resumen

Norbert Elias se opone fuertemente a los pensamientos que establecen barreras insuperables entre los términos antitéticos, elementos cuyas existencias serían separadas unas de las otras, como si fuesen entidades autónomas e independientes. Su proyecto de una teoría social es superar la oposición excluyente que sujeta que las cosas dependen o del individuo o de la sociedad. En la perspectiva de Elias, lo que pasa es una imbricación en la cual los dos elementos se influyen mutuamente, cada uno produciendo transformaciones en el otro. De acuerdo con su sociología figuracional, el proceso de formación de la auto represión del individuo, a la vez que direcciona sus acciones y sus deseos, también determina el modo como la sociedad se organiza. El individuo, por su vez, no se transforma pasivamente, pero se moldea según las estructuras de la sociedad.

Palabras clave: homo clausus, poder, dependencia

Résumé

Norbert Elias s'oppose fortement aux pensées qui établissent des barrières insurmontables entre les termes antithétiques, des éléments dont les existences seraient séparées les unes des autres, comme s'il s'agissait d'entités autonomes et indépendantes. Son projet de théorie sociale vise à dépasser l'opposition d'exclusion qui affirme que les choses dépendent soit de l'individu soit de la société. Du point de vue d'Elias, ce qui se passe est une imbrication dans laquelle les deux éléments s'influencent mutuellement, chacun produisant des transformations dans l'autre. Selon sa sociologie figurative, le processus de formation de l'autocontrainte de l'individu, tout en dirigeant ses actions et ses désirs, détermine également la manière dont la société s'organise. L'individu, à son tour, n'est pas passivement transformé, mais s'adapte en fonction des structures de la société.

Mots-clés: *homo clausus, pouvoir, dépendance*

The intention to overcome specializations among sciences is at the foundation of Norbert Elias' project when, for example, in *The Society of Individuals* (Elias, 1994a), he presents his proposal to free thought from the compulsion to understand the terms individual and society as opposites to each other. This text, and Elias' work as a whole, seeks to think of individuals as inseparable from social relations, and also prevents society from being conceived as the result of a grouping of its members. Elias' proposal (Lahire, 2013; Pagès, 2018), then, criticizes the thoughts that are based on the division between the psychological individual and social structures, insofar as the choice of only one of these positions, whether an elementary conception, based only on the isolated unity of any relationship with others, or a totalizing structure, which treats social formations as supra-individual entities, external and separate from individuals, assuming ethical positions that can produce harmful effects.

What makes human beings connect with one another? What mechanisms organize the web of the social fabric? The answers to these questions led Elias to produce breakthroughs and advances not only in sociology, but also in disciplines such as history, philosophy and psychoanalysis.

Homo clausus: Social conflicts manifested in the sciences

In the book *Norbert Elias: A Sociology of Processes*, Sabine Delzescaux (2001) identifies three characteristics of Elias' sociology. First, as a *multidimensional sociology*, it states that its main object, the human being, besides being made of flesh and blood, is also a historical being, located in a time and space. The second characteristic of Elias' sociology refers to its *multidisciplinarity*. The background of his sociological project connects, in the same scientific model, history, sociology and psychoanalysis, among other disciplines. History presents itself as an essential science for the analysis of long-term social processes, covered by processes and changes. We can only speak of individuals or societies considering that they develop permeated by stories that precede their own existences. Despite being criticized by Elias for not considering the effects of social transformations on the psychic structures of individuals, psychoanalytic theory contributed to Eliasian sociology, raising questions related to what, in the scope of the formation of social configurations, was repressed in the unconscious. Finally, according to Delzescaux (2001), Elias' sociology is marked by *processuality*. *The concept of process is perhaps one of the most important in Elias' work*, inscribing in his research the transformations and changes in social structures and psychic structures without having to resort to a point of origin.

Norbert Elias's main question insists on being answered. Why do sciences, in their concepts and foundations, and even in the language of common sense, still refer to individuals as if they were autonomous beings, isolated from other individuals? Some disciplines treat societies as superior and more real than individuals, determining them as entities subject to the forces of macrostructures. Others focus on individuals as structures isolated from social relations and historical processes, capable, therefore, of being apprehended and understood by universalizing criteria.

For Elias, the uses that different sciences make of the terms individual and society are manifestations of power games. Thus, his criticisms fall on the absolutist claim to knowledge, which seeks to occupy a superior position in relation to other disciplines (Heinich, 2001). According to Elias, epistemic pedantry is the result of a historical and social process that led to the formation of individuals who, little by little, were forced to adopt a very high degree of restraint and affective control, turning their gaze away from the "external world" and towards themselves (Mennell, 2015). However, behind the civilizing process, there is a logic of exclusion that disregards everything that is rational, universal and indubitable, making reason sufficient to produce its own truth. Thus, the civilizing process, in a project of erasure, forgets and denies conflicts that substantiate social relations. Elias (1994a, p. 32) states:

It is this conflict within the individual, this “privatization” or exclusion of certain spheres of life from social interaction (...) that leads the individual to believe that “inside” himself, he is something that exists entirely alone, without relationships with others, and that only “later ” he relates to others “on the outside”.

Norbert Elias (1993, 1996) points out some factors that tipped the scales in favor of the individualization process. Among them, the formation of nation states, through the monopoly of physical violence and economic control, the increase in the division of labor, and the internalization of mechanisms of self-control over drives and affections were conditions that produced important transformations in the psychic economy of individuals. These individuals, in turn, began to have greater self-control over their behaviors and emotions, independent of the action of external agents, increased the stability and pacification of social relations, as well as increased the levels of interdependence and differentiation between them. A new rationality emerged as moral conscience, producing ethical foundations and moral imperatives that should guide human conduct and thought according to the laws of reason. At the same time, still following Elias, an idea of an individual “I” emerged, separated by an invisible wall from what is of nature, the body, and past times, whose transmission is made from generation to generation through the formation of language and specific habits. Epistemic conflicts end up reproducing social conflicts, distinguishing those who have greater power and greater privileges from those who are considered inferior and of lesser value.

The assumption of a stable and complete social system ends up disregarding the procedural aspects and finding expression in the way of thinking of certain scientific theories. The man who sees himself as a “closed personality”, separated from all others, reproduces this isolation in the way he knows the world and himself. We find this type of thinking reproduced in philosophy, where there is the *homo philosophicus*, who is the one who acquires knowledge of the external world, who is not seen as a being whose life has gone through development from childhood to adulthood or even through historical development. A character, above all, who is considered an ideal, static entity that must be considered in its universal replicability. The main question, then, becomes finding the best way, the most appropriate method, to gain access to the external world.

The image of the metaphysical individual is accompanied by the *homo oeconomicus*, *psycho-analyticus*, *historicus* and *sociologicus*, defined by the figure that Norbert Elias called *homo clausus* : “his core, his being, his true self appear equally as something in him that is separated by an invisible wall from everything that is external, including all other human beings” (Elias, 1994c, p. 238). The nature of this wall has never been a question for these disciplines. That which separates the internal from the external would already be given and established as a self-evident condition of the human condition itself. The idea of process is reduced to a state and civilization, instead of referring to social transformations, comes to be defined as an ideal state that is finished or, at best, ready to be achieved.

According to Stephen Menell (1992), the concept of *homo clausus* refers to the idea of a person, in the singular, a “subject” of knowledge, a single thinking mind inside a closed container, from where it looks out and struggles to know the “objects” from outside present in the “external world”. Among these objects are other minds, equally closed inside their own containers. One of the greatest difficulties for epistemologists is the question of how a thinking “subject” can know something from its own enclosure.

What implications for science arise from the establishment of these antitheses that are characteristic of a given way of thinking? For Elias (1994a), psychology is sometimes presented as a branch of science that is based on the division between an individual psychology, which treats psychological functions as if they were independent of relationships with others, and a mass psychology, which fails to include the individual’s psychic processes. In the task of determining the natural laws responsible for the way in which individuals control their behavior, it ends up being a discipline that brings the natural sciences closer to the social sciences. By this logic, we could say that there would be an “individual mind” and a “collective mind”. There would be a huge difference between the object of individual psychology and the object of mass psychology, such that they would be considered completely separate from each other.

In philosophy (Kilminster, 2007, 2011) the subject is characterized as an entity isolated from any otherness, even being considered, for example, a monad by Leibniz, an *automata* by Thomas Hobbes, or a *res cogitans* by Descartes. The theories of the social contract, supported by Hobbes, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, reproduce the need for an artificial connection in a relationship between individual and society that would originally be between distinct terms. Metaphysical presumption, in this way, denies its own historical and procedural dimension, reducing reason to an absolute isolation that dispenses with its experiences and learning. However, for Elias, it is the condition of power that transforms sciences into peremptory and arrogant discourses, attracting individuals to take advantage of privileges and to the narcissistic recognition of truths that they promise to achieve, denying their power structures.

It is, therefore, a language game that uses the logic of domination to reproduce its own interests. Following Burke (2012), Elias also criticizes history, when this discipline points to the understanding of the unique character of events as a reflection of the actions of individuals, in historical processes, determined by voluntary acts of those who stand out for their power. Elias was a critic of the dominant historiography (Kirschner, 2014), a discipline that is reduced to the description of

actions and facts, based on the freedom of individuals as the basis for decisions and voluntary acts of characters isolated from other social relations. Psychoanalysis, in turn, is also included in this set of reductionist scientific disciplines, to the extent that, according to Joly (2012), Freud separated the history of the individual from the history of society. In this regard, Elias (1994a, p. 53) states:

This specific form of superego, this especially vigorous and semi-automatic curtailment of all impulses and affects directed towards others, was what allowed the individual – in an increasingly perceptible way from the Renaissance onwards – to perceive himself as a “subject” and to perceive the world as something separated from him by an abyss, as the “object”.

Some of Elias’ criticisms of psychoanalysis appear in the text *Sociology and Psychiatry* (2010), in which the sociologist questions the status of “science” for the different branches of knowledge that have human beings as their object. Despite the interdisciplinary discourse, the sciences resist engaging in a deeper dialogue with each other, remaining trapped in the use of technical and specialized language, in a reduction of concepts, models and explanations that serve to determine the *status* professional *savoir-faire* of each group of specialists. Elias (2010, p. 49) states: “The power differentials between the different scientific professional groups are truly considerable”. What is at stake, for the sociologist, is the process of hierarchizing the disciplines according to the degree of recognition, prestige and opportunity.

Each scientific discipline considers its own type of explanation as a truth that must prevail over the others, reducing the value of all others that disagree with it and taking itself as a fundamental type (Elias, 1994b). Likewise, the disciplines that stand out consider the explanations of other areas as threats to their autonomy. As a result, in order to sustain their *status*, scientific specialties end up masking interdependence with other disciplines and, therefore, constructing a unitary and reductive model of the human being. With regard to psychiatry, for example, the patient occupies the central place in the diagnostic scene, while all other people are displaced to the background. Any references to historical and social processes, the social grammar that determines specific modes of relationships between individuals, are excluded from their foundations. On the other hand, Elias counters that, for sociology, social configurations are prioritized and well-structured, without being able to investigate the networks of particular relationships that an individual establishes with others.

As a theoretical model, *homo psychiatricus* is based on the hypothesis that there is a radical division between what occurs on the “inside” and what occurs on the “outside” of the individual human being. (...) Consequently, *Homo psychiatricus* is a human being deprived of most of the attributes that we could describe as “social”, such as those linked to family status, academic success, professional training and occupation, or even the characteristics and forms of national identification. (Elias, 2010, p. 56)

Represented in the figure of *homo clausus*, the individual is seen essentially as a closed system, which perceives itself as the center of the world and whose internal processes are considered more independent in relation to “external” or social factors, considered peripheral. As a result of the civilizing process that led to the formation of contemporary industrial societies, this individual ends up being the center of all things, isolated and solitary, contrasting with terms such as “group” or “society” when referring to all things located outside of it, which surround it as an environment.

From this perspective, terms such as “individual” and “society”, despite being mutually exclusive, are given very similar meanings. Thus, to the extent that they are contrasted with each other, they bear the mark of autonomy and exclusion, as if individuals existed outside of society and societies outside of individuals. For Elias (2008), neither sociology nor any other scientific discipline should sustain, reproduce or reinforce this dichotomy, with the risk of carrying and transmitting the harmful effects of a rupture that imposes a place of social isolation on the individual and disregards subjective processes when it returns to social dynamics.

According to Mennell (1977), Elias’ proposal to overcome the dichotomy between the terms “individual” and “society” is aimed at the field of human sciences in general, but especially at the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, psychology and history. There is a need to operate a new Copernican revolution to resize the places of subject and object. Antitheses such as “inside *or* outside”, “one’s own *or* another’s”, “self *or* other” and “natural *or* social” are suspended when the individual begins to consider himself as part of a network of human relations constituted, on the one hand, by the dependence he has on other people and, on the other hand, by the dependence that others have on him. According to the introduction that Elias wrote for the 1968 edition of “*The Civilizing Process*” (Elias, 1993), the human sciences can no longer refer to terms such as “individual,” “society,” “ego,” or “social system” as if they were separate, static, and autonomous entities. They are not two isolated terms, but “different, though inseparable, aspects of the same human beings” (Elias, 1994c, p. 220).

In this introduction, Elias (1994c) describes that, at the beginning of his research, he intended to “solve the stubborn problem of the connection between individual psychological structures (the so-called personality structures) and the forms created by large numbers of interdependent individuals (the social structures)” (Elias, 1994c, p. 217). Civilization is a process and this is made by changes in which the transformations of social structures and personality structure are interconnected. Changes in social grammar bring about changes in the psychic economy.

The forces that push one human being toward another are numerous and varied. However, we still lack theoretical perspectives that provide elements that consider the valences of each individual within a structure of sets of valences

that were configurations between interdependent individuals. The question that runs through Elias' work reappears in the text "*Sociology and Psychoanalysis*" (2010): how are the two types of structure – the structures of the groups that form the individuals and the structures of the individuals taken in isolation – linked to each other? Elias takes on the task of developing a theoretical model that goes beyond this dichotomy. To do so, it is necessary to redirect the hegemonic thoughts that organize and guide the different sciences. However, this model does not allow us to understand the continuity between the structure of personality and the social structure. In his text "*Sociology and Psychoanalysis*", Elias (2010, p. 59) states:

But the task of the sociologist, as I understand it, is to develop a concept of the human being that is not influenced either by current political slogans or by the kind of self-experience that suggests that the self is somehow alone, separated by an insurmountable wall from all those who are "outside." The ability to detach oneself from this kind of experience and from the ways of thinking it induces is the *sine qua non* of the human being. *Sine qua non* of any rupture with fossilized theoretical and practical traditions. But achieving such a profound rupture is not easy. It requires a radical reorganization of our representations and the concepts we use to express them.

In this way, Elias is concerned with investigating how the processes of exclusion have operated over the centuries, the changes in civilization, the development of habits and emotions, which have separated individuals from each other and established values of distinction between them. Elias' solution, according to Mennell (1992, p. 193), is to think of the image of the individual as an open being, a *homines aperti*, "tracing the changes in the structure of personality hand in hand with the changes in the structure of human relations in society as part of a global process". Norbert Elias then sets out on the task of founding a science capable of considering the transformations in the modes of psychic control according to the modifications of social relations over the centuries. The structures of the psyche, the structures of society and the structures of history should form the object of a single human science (Elias, 1994a, p. 38). To this end, his thinking must renounce static positions.

Invisible ties or "*What unites individuals is not cement*"

Norbert Elias intended to break with scientific concepts that treat the individual as a self-sufficient being or society as a separate, equally independent superstructure. He presented his research project in "*The Society of Individuals*" as follows (Elias, 1994a, p. 18): "But what if a better understanding of the relationship between the individual and society could only be achieved by breaking this either/or alternative, dismantling the crystallized antithesis?" It is not possible to think of human beings except in the midst of a historical and social network of relationships with other individuals. A child is born into a family, occupying the role of daughter/son, brother/sister, niece/son or granddaughter. He/she is part of different configurations, in which each member is dependent on the other, forming a context of interdependence.

The family, society or any other social group form sets that cannot be considered harmonious or complete in themselves. It is, above all, a sustained relationship between what Elias differentiates as *identity* and *ideal of self* and *identity* and *ideal of us*: "Between personal needs and inclinations and the demands of social life, there always seems to be, in the societies that are familiar to us, a considerable conflict, an almost insurmountable abyss for the majority of the people involved" (Elias, 1994a, p. 18). Elias then turns to the understanding of the elements that produce bonds of union between individuals capable of constituting a collectivity that is never a complete totality in itself but always open in a continuous flow of individuals over time. "What unites individuals is not cement" (Elias, 1994a, p. 20), says Elias, jokingly. But what elements, what hidden order, lead individuals to live together, establishing different types of relationships between them? The answer seems to be quite simple. Each person, within this network of social relationships, has a place, a *function*, assuming some type of task that occurs in the context of interdependencies between individuals.

By birth, he is inserted into a functional complex with a well-defined structure; he must conform to it, mold himself according to it and, perhaps, develop further on the basis of it. Even his freedom of choice between pre-existing functions is quite limited. It largely depends on the point at which he is born and grows up in this human web, on the functions and situation of his parents and, in line with this, on the schooling he receives. (Elias, 1994a, p. 21).

The network of interdependent functions is not formed by particular individuals. Nor is it because of a single individual, nor a sovereign desire, that people establish relationships with each other. Society is not constituted by the sum of individual wills, nor was there a collective decision that established – for example, via a social contract – the way in which people could relate to each other. Just as individuals do not exist outside the bonds that form social structures, these structures also do not exist outside individuals. Individuals and societies are sides of the same structure, they are in continuity with each other, so that they intersect and determine each other. Individuals internalize social mechanisms of control – instantiated in what Freud (1923/2011) called the *superego* – that organize the psychic economy, the drive and its affects through *habitus* and customs. From this, Norbert Elias (2008) proposes thinking about a structure whose whole should be understood not

as individuals existing independently of societies, nor societies existing independently of individuals, but as a structure formed by *interdependent functions* between its elements.

As an example of how social configurations work, Elias (2008) suggests that we imagine a group of dancers performing a ballroom dance. The steps, gestures, rhythm, and movements of each dancer are synchronized with those of the others. For those who wish, they could also be isolated and explained as autonomous movements, in which each individual is responsible for his or her own actions. However, all behaviors are interconnected, determined by relationships that span time and distance.

Since when do individuals connect with one another and form a collective? For Norbert Elias (2008), we should not think in accordance with religions or even some sciences – including psychoanalysis –, which had to create a myth to explain the origin of societies, as if, at a certain point in history, there was a single person, or a father of the primitive horde, from which all others were formed. It is not possible to understand the nature of social ties if thought is reduced to a mythical dimension of the origins of societies. Elias (1994a, pp. 26-27) states: “Every individual is born into a group of people who already existed before him. And that is not all: every individual is constituted in such a way, by nature, that he needs other people who existed before him in order to grow”. We should distance ourselves from thoughts that presuppose the situation of an individual isolated from others and always think in a procedural way.

Another factor in explaining why individuals bond with one another concerns their constitutive nature. The primordial condition of unpreparedness The physical and psychological helplessness of human beings appears in Norbert Elias’s thinking as a fundamental element for understanding how individuals address others and form networks of interdependent relationships. In “*The Society of Individuals*”, Elias (1994a, p. 27) states: “Only in relationships with other human beings does the impulsive and helpless creature that comes into the world become a psychologically developed person who has the character of an individual and deserves the name of adult human being”. The notion of helplessness is not foreign to Freudian psychoanalysis. Freud (1930/2010b) used it to describe the primordial condition of individuals, which makes them seek love and protection in the people who are responsible for their primary care.

Only in society does a child become capable of learning, entering a world of symbolic exchanges. Only in society does a child build his identification processes and develop self-control mechanisms. Each society has its own characteristics in relation to these processes, so that individuals are constituted according to the organization of the social structures in which they arise. In less complex societies, the level of individuation of each of its members is lower, the places they can occupy are more restricted and the functions they can perform are more similar to each other. In this sense, Elias (1994a, p. 28) points out: “From the study of the civilizing process, it became quite clear to what extent the general modeling, and ,therefore ,the individual formation of each person, depends on the historical evolution of the social pattern, of the structure of human relations”. For the sociologist, psychic structures are affected by the structure of society, so that the psychic economy is closely related to social grammar, that is, to the way in which society is configured. In this way, psychoanalysis is shown to be a fundamental theory in Elias when he considers that the psychic structure, organized in unconscious economic processes, in pulsional forces, in psychic instances and in defense mechanisms, also undergoes transformations according to the transformations of social relations (Zabludovsky, 2015).

Social control of drives, the process of differentiation and individualization, the increased division of labor and competition between people were elements that increased psychic tension, requiring individuals to resolve internal conflicts that were previously directed outward. Society puts pressure on individuals, who feel forced to curb the spontaneity of their behavior and feelings so as not to run the risk of losing their place within the social network. As a result, desires become psychically inscribed as impossible to fulfill, remaining hidden from others and from the person themselves, in the dark recesses of the unconscious.

The actions that each individual perform are effects and produce repercussions within the network of contacts. These actions “are not products of their ‘interior’ or their ‘environment’, nor of an interaction between an originally distinct ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’, but constitute a function and a precipitate of relations, and can only be understood (...) from the totality of the network” (Elias, 1994a, p. 35). This applies to affections, ideas, desires, drives and even psychic structures such as *the Id, Self and Superego*. All of them are expressions of the individual who performs a function within a network of relations with other individuals, bringing with them the history of human relations.

Even psychoanalysis, when proposing distinctions between “conscious” and “unconscious” (Freud, 1916-1917/2014), between psychic instances (Freud, 1923/2011) or between “material reality” and “psychic reality” (Freud, 1920/2010a), could not consider these elements as if they were natural, but as part of a social and historical process, results of the interaction between human beings in groups or societies. The terms that make up the psychic structure should not receive the status of substances, that is, immutable, static and autonomous entities, but of *functions*, that is, “*particular forms of self-regulation of the person in relation to other people and things*” (Elias, 1994a, p. 36). Psychic instances and the economy of drives are expressions of the way in which social relations are configured, of the most different types of relations that individuals establish among themselves. This implies that psychic structures, when in correspondence with social structures, have a capacity for transformation that not even Freud, according to Elias, was able to elaborate in depth.

For each social grammar we must think of a corresponding psychic economy, which manifests its conflicts and its histories in a particular form of suffering. Reading about the civilizing process provides the conditions to understand how individuals are able to repress into the unconscious elements that, in other times, were openly manifested in relationships between people. Psychic functions are characterized by what Elias (1994a) calls *social molding*, describing a psychic structure that is not constituted according to hereditary conditions, but according to the history of relationships with other beings.

Norbert Elias goes against the current that naturalizes behaviors, feelings and even self-control mechanisms that act automatically in the form of *habitus*. The process of formation of States, the increase in the division of labor, the complexity of dependency relationships and the growing degree of identification between individuals were some of the factors responsible for the construction of increasingly complex individual self-regulation mechanisms. Just as Freud identified, in the formation of psychic symptoms, manifestations of social conflicts, Elias recognized that *social habitus* individually express ways in which society is organized. A slave society, for example, reproduces in individual's particular psychic economies their social places, whether as slave owner or slave. Thus, the individual is shaped by the relationship with other individuals and mainly by the place he occupies within the history of the network of these relationships. A function within a historical context of dependency on other individuals. Dependency on those who preceded them and even on those who will succeed them.

The historical process of transformation of social relations is reproduced in the transformation of the psychic economy, so that individuals end up reproducing singularly, through the formation of symptoms and *social habitus*, the conflicts that manifest themselves between different groups or social classes, which seek for themselves and exclude from other conditions of prestige, privileges, recognition, power and *status*. Based on the psychic economy of Freudian Freud and the social economy of Karl Marx (1867/2013), Elias (1994a, p. 44) describes how social conflicts are reproduced in psychic conflicts:

Precisely the monopolization of goods and values that satisfy these multiple instinctive demands, these sublimated forms of desire – which satisfy, in short, the hunger of the ego and the superego –, precisely this monopoly, alongside the monopolization of that which satisfies elementary hunger, grows in importance for the genesis of social tensions to the same extent that the differentiation of social functions and, therefore, of psychic functions advances, to the same extent, equally, that the normal standard of living of a society rises above the satisfaction of the most elementary nutritional and sexual needs.

The way in which people are in a relationship of interdependence leads to a series of tensions in the search for power by one group over another, subjugating, controlling and exploiting their social and even physical existence. The transformations that have occurred over the centuries in the balance of forces between social groups have produced differences in the way in which the mechanisms of self-regulation of drives, affections and behaviors have been constructed. The power struggle, resulting from the interdependence between individuals, determines the power that each one exercises over the other, establishing more or less elastic ranges of mobility and action, according to the social position occupied (Elias, 2008). Groups or people who hold a certain power over weaker ones, appropriating the best opportunities and taking away from others the best possibilities for social fulfillment, end up reducing subordinate individuals to the place of marginalized, antisocial individuals.

In the section on the problems of human interdependencies in the book *Introduction to Sociology* (Elias, 2008), Elias highlights at least three forms of dependency between individuals. His criticism begins by pointing to theories that disregard the biological characteristics of human beings as essential elements for the formation of social bonds. Under the influence of the Freudian concept of drive, Elias argues that it is the body that, in its search for satisfaction, begins by establishing relationships with other individuals. “Not even satisfaction itself derives entirely from our body – it is also very dependent on others. This is, in fact, one of the universal interdependencies that connect people” (Elias, 2008, p. 148). A criticism that does not fail to refer to psychoanalysis, by highlighting that it is not a matter of a dependency that seeks only the satisfaction of sexual needs. The establishment of relationships with others seeks a greater variety of affective fulfillments, in addition to sexual ones. In this sense, affective connections are open valences that appear as a first way of distancing the individual from the idea of *homo clausus*.

With the increase in networks of relationships in social settings, we no longer consider only interpersonal relationships but seek emotional connections that reach symbols of the community. In this way, people can become emotionally connected to each other through identification with symbols or cultural ideals. “The individual who formed this connection will be as deeply affected as this social unit, to which he is emotionally connected, is conquered or destroyed, depreciated or humiliated, as when a loved one dies,” states Elias (2008, p. 151). The expansion of emotional relationships, in this case, implies the expansion of the dimension of the “I” and “we” spheres, to the point of including, in the network of emotional relationships, large social units such as States and nations.

Still about interdependencies, Elias highlights political and economic connections as elements that enable the establishment of configurations. The question he poses at the beginning of the section guides his entire work, aiming to understand what leads individuals to form social ties with one another: “What are the common characteristics of the different configurations that, at the various stages of development, linked individuals through this type of predominantly emotional bond?” (Elias, 2008, p. 152). Now, following Weber's (2004) line of understanding about the State as a social

unit appropriate for the use of physical violence, individuals unite in larger groups with the aim of defending their lives and surviving attacks from other groups.

Closely associated with the monopoly of physical violence is the economic monopoly. Karl Marx (1867/2013) was a thinker who was sensitive to this, understanding that, in industrialized societies, the dangers arising from social and economic differences were much greater than the dangers arising from other groups and individuals outside of them. The economy is described as an action by the State to protect the interests of a certain social class, the rising bourgeois class. From the point of view of the subjugation of the working class, the defense of the economic interests of the bourgeoisie by the State – such as the stability of merchants and their properties, the fulfillment of contracts and commercialization rates between industries – was something that should be suppressed, leading Marx to think of the economy as an autonomous sphere in relation to the state sphere, that is, the economy following its own laws. In turn, the development of political institutions was based on trade and industrial relations, especially regarding the complexification of social divisions and the increase in interdependencies.

The division of industrial societies into social classes and the conflicts of interest arising from it are determined by economic factors. Struggles for power arise based on the possibilities and economic access between different social groups. Power permeates relationships, determining who corresponds to the position of command and who must obey. In the case of industrial society, divided between the working class and the industrial bourgeoisie, power marks the relationship between the factory boss and the worker. Politics, in this sense, permeates relationships of interdependence as the distribution of power establishes a difference in the hierarchy of social groups that goes beyond economic relations. The possibilities of power are distributed unequally among individuals, since what is sought in the struggle for power is, above all, the need to be recognized by a prominent position, *status* and prestige.

In an interview with Peter Ludes, entitled “*Knowledge and Power*”, Elias describes power as the fruit of social relations and not as something inherent or a property, which can be put in one’s pocket. Power is political, but it is also economic and affective, of knowledge and of violence.

In reality, what we call “power” is an aspect of a relationship, of every human relationship. Power has to do with the fact that there are groups or individuals who can withhold or monopolize what others need, such as food, love, meaning, or protection from attack (i.e., security), as well as knowledge or other things. (Elias, 1984, p. 53).

What stands out in this late interview in Norbert Elias’ life is that he considers power not only as an economic monopoly or a monopoly of violence, but also as a monopoly of knowledge that antagonizes the lower classes of the dominant classes and that imposes, to establish a balance, a struggle for the right to education. For many centuries, individuals who have mastered knowledge had power over those who depended on them. The Church, for example, contributed significantly to this disjunction, easily excluding all human beings from the knowledge that it possessed. Over many centuries, it maintained knowledge revealed exclusively to itself, to gain spaces, privileges and *status* within society. Many modern States control educational institutions, which are primarily responsible for the process of civilizing children in our societies, as a way of monopolizing or even silencing knowledge of disciplines that transmit ways of thinking and questioning realities. The same occurs at the university level, where complex theories, with technical and specialized knowledge, alienate individuals due to their particular and difficult-to-access language.

Conclusion

Norbert Elias has always been concerned with resolving the historical antithesis between the individual and society. For the sociologist, distinctions between self and other, nature and culture, internal and external, are expressions of the civilizing process and the way in which societies have been organized historically. His solution involves recovering psychoanalytic theory as the basis of his theory on the civilizing process. For both Freud and Elias, civilization is built on the repression of drives. Thus, especially with the concept of *superego*, Elias thought that the formation of *social habitus* reproduces specific forms of social conflicts in individuals, or rather, individuals reproduce, in the formation of their own psychic economy, the social conflicts that have been transferred to the backstage of the unconscious.

Even after going through several wars and severe economic crises over time, States and nations have created images of ideal societies, eternal and immutable in their essential aspects, as if they were representatives of the highest values of humanity. Assimilated and conservative ideals are becoming increasingly stronger in some dominant countries (Elias, 2013). Consequently, individuals have created images of themselves that are equated with the highest values of human life, in accordance with the highest images created by their nations. Based on this, they believe that they belong to balanced and stable social systems, whose parts are harmoniously well integrated with each other, with secure values and traditions and with well-defined social roles. They assume that in this ideal system there is a high degree of equality among people, an integration that rests on the uniformity of its members.

The individual often appears to exist outside of society, and society also appears to exist outside of the individual, when, for example, the State places greater value on the individual by demanding that he or she give up his or her own life in a context of war. However, more than that, this insurmountable wall establishes different theoretical positions that imply divergent ethical positions. The choice of one side of this equation reproduces a logic of distinction that always seeks to consider who is inside and who is outside, who belongs and who is *an outsider*; who deserves privileges and who should be discarded, who is human and who is not.

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