

Interdependence in Covid-19 times: reflections in the early days of social distancing in Brazil

28/05/2020¹

Tatiana Savoia Landini, Universidade Federal de São Paulo.

(translated by Ana Flávia Braun Vieira)

Savoia Landini T. (2020), *Interdependence in Covid-19 times: reflections in the early days of social distancing in Brazil*, in «Cambio. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali», OpenLab on Covid-19. DOI: 10.13128/cambio-8941

A couple weeks ago, the day was March 17th, I received an email from my friend Cas Wouters, from Amsterdam. Cas was giving the news about Johan Goudsblom death (Joop for the closest ones), professor emeritus at the University of Amsterdam and recognized for his work in the field of Norbert Elias's process sociology. Feeling the loss, I sat on my glassed-in porch. I watched the cars that passed that late afternoon. There were still a reasonable number of them, although they were already dwindling. Not because it was the end of day, but as a consequence of the beginning of the social distancing measures proposed as a viable solution to the coronavirus pandemic that was now spreading throughout Brazil.

Joop didn't die a victim of Covid-19, but of old age and a well-lived life, at the age of 87. I rehearsed a *The Loneliness of the Dying* (Elias, 2001) reread, but it didn't work. My need at that time was not to read or reread any text that spoke of old age or death, but to reread Joop himself, this was my solitary and quiet tribute to this man who contributed so much to the understanding and dissemination of Norbert Elias' work. This is the advantage of the writers, or rather, the advantage for us who stay, their ideas remain and insist on discussing with us. The text I chose was *Public Health and the Civilizing Process* (Goudsblom, [1986] 2003) – a nothing original choice given the moment, but necessary precisely because it deals with previous epidemics, as leprosy, plague, syphilis and cholera.

In the wake of Elias' discussion of changes in hygiene habits, Goudsblom (2003:154) argues that the pandemic impact should be considered in the context of the civilizing process.

¹ Originally posted, in Portuguese, on the *Virtual Library of Social Thought Blog* (link: <https://blogbvps.wordpress.com/2020/04/20/interdependencia-em-tempos-de-covid-19-reflexoes-nos-primeiros-dias-de-distanciamento-social-por-tatiana-landini/>)

Let's resume quickly Elias and *The Civilizing Process* (2000). Of this work, the examples taken from manners books regarding behavior at the table, in the bedroom, about bodily functions, etc. are always remembered. Behaviors such as taking food with one's hands, spitting on the floor, sleeping with strangers in the same bed, etc., over time became no longer considered acceptable. In tracing *changes* in behavior from the Middle Age to the 20th Century, Elias seeks to understand how these changes took place, what they consist of and what are their driving forces. In doing so, he discusses the relationships between the psychological dynamics involved – in this case, the feeling of shame and disgust – and the social dynamics, spelled out in the notions of refinement and civilizations.

Analyzing changes of behavior means to, in elisian terminology, practice a sociology that can handle processes of change, understanding their dynamics and their directions – they consist of the civilization processes or social development processes, as Elias came to refer later in his life. Process is, therefore, one of the basic notions of elisian sociology. But what is exactly in process? There is an individual level (each of us goes through an individual development process) and there is the social level (where what is in process are the figurations).

Figuration – another basic notion of elisian sociology – expresses the image of human being as an open personality, the one who has some degree of autonomy, but who, in reality, is fundamentally oriented and dependent on others. What qualifies a relationship is precisely interdependence. Figurations are formed not only by interdependent people, but also by interdependent groups – groups of friends, interest groups, political groups, social classes, identity groups, countries.

Analyzing changes concerning behaviors in *The Civilizing Process*, Elias opposes himself to perhaps more “rational” explanations, like the ones which understand suppression of behaviors such as spitting on the floor and grabbing food by hand as being motivated by medical issues, arguing that these changes elapse from relations and dynamics between social classes. Aiming to distance itself from other social classes, the upper class created new patterns of behavior, patterns that, over time, were also adopted by other classes. Although it resembles Bourdieu's concept of distinction, Elias brings an additional point: over time, the new patterns of behavior have ceased to be conscious to become habitus, to be incorporated as second nature.

Another point that characterizes the direction taken by the civilization process is a shift in the balance between external control and self-control favoring the latter, with the Modern State formation process playing a central role here. The State, in Elias, is defined as that which has a monopoly on legitimate violence and tax collection: in a society with weak central power, there was nothing that forced people to contain themselves; when the central power grew, people were forced to live in peace with each other, also gradually transforming the economy of affections.

Relationship between psychological and social dynamics; *habitus* formation or second nature; relationship between State and self-control; interdependent relationships. These are the points I bring from Elias. Following this theoretical framework, Goudsblom (2003) then makes some considerations regarding the epidemics of leprosy, plague, syphilis and cholera, from which I retain some observations about the plague.

The plague arrived in Europe in 1347, by the Black Sea, following other epidemic waves that were repeated at irregular intervals until the beginning of the 18th century. Highly contagious disease, its precise form of transitions was unknown. Panic and terror took over, and the behaviors of fleeing, avoiding the other and even aggression against groups

believed to be more dangerous for the contagion were spread, despite the ongoing trend of further manners refinement and the development of a broader self-control.

But more rational responses have also emerged, from which precursor cluster of the Health Councils can be identified. By becoming regular institutions in the main cities of Northern Italy since the end of the 15th century, the model has spread throughout Europe. This is one of the examples of the organized reactions in the sense of not only banishing the sick, but, in fact, fighting the disease. “Expectedly, the measures of the health boards were none too popular, and they met with a great deal of evasion and obstruction. As Carlo Cipolla (1976: 39) remarks, ‘in addition to waging their impossible fight against the invisible enemy, the Health Officers also had to fight selfishness, carelessness, ignorance, and stupidity – which were no less formidable than the microbes’” (Goudsblom, 2003: 147).

Despite the challenges, these Councils have come to occupy an increasingly important space in European governments. In the 16th and 17th centuries, a chain of communication was built so that one Council or government could inform another about the incidence of contagious diseases. Reporting an epidemic in its own territory was delicate due to the consequences for trade and employment. “The temptation and the political pressure to conceal a pestilence at home were always strong; yet, as Cipolla (1976: 53) notes, these short-term interests were outweighed by the long-term interest that all health boards had in maintaining the network of communications in a trustworthy state – a clear example of what Elias calls ‘the social constraint toward self-constraint’” (Goudsblom, 2003: 148).

I apologize for the quotes made in the two paragraphs above, but the words seem absolutely appropriate. If it wasn’t an exercise of anachronism, I would say that they could refer to the heated discussions we see today in Brazilian society, strengthened by the current party and political split.

But my objective isn’t to follow this path, but to think about the behavior of the population in general. Despite the rational organization of the Health Councils, Goudsblom recalls that the population, as a whole, was not driven by more “civilized” behaviors, neither by plague epidemics nor by the actions of the Health Councils. Although the emerging regulations had the support of the military forces and with the help of the taxes collected, they faced a lot of obstruction. In other words: if Elias identifies the monopoly of legitimate violence and taxes in the civilizing process as a crucial factor for the development of individual self-constraint, why did it not happen that way? The answer, once again, could be brought anachronously to the present day: the upper-class felt safe concerning the plague, it was always possible to seek refuge in their large properties; and the poor didn’t have much to do with health regulations, and were unwilling to collaborate with measures that had little to offer them besides forced retreat to one of the houses for the pestilent.

In those early days of validity of distance measures in Brazil, many texts have been written, more or less elaborated, predicting major changes in individual behavior and social organization, as well as in the political-ideological alignment of the population. The solidarity that was visible on social media led many to optimism. Offers to help to elderly neighbors, so they could avoid going to the supermarket; donation campaigns for residents of poor and peripheral communities; payment for house cleaners who would no longer come for weekly cleaning; offers of packed lunches to car park attendants who lost their livelihood. Society, some ventured, would learn a lot from this “trauma” that would be experienced, would emerge stronger, better, more prone to realize and accept the need to reduce inequality and the importance of the State in mitigating sufferings and injustices.

The possibility is always open, but if I had to give an opinion on what is to come, I would bet on the opposite, unfortunately. The solidarity that is seen, and even though it persists throughout this troubled period, will most likely disappear soon afterwards. The duration of the most critical period of the pandemic should not be enough to lead to changes in habitus, that is, to incorporation of values and attitudes. It should also not be enough to build the individual perception of interdependence – between individuals, between groups, between classes. Solidarity, understood here as rational and reactional behavior in a moment of exceptionally, should not lead to proposals for greater security in the labor area, for example, or the acceptance of measures aimed at reducing the enormous social inequality.

The State, according to Elias, by monopolizing legitimate violence and tax control, leads people *to live in peace with each other*. Before tempers flare up, a monopoly on legitimate violence does not mean ostentatious policing, let alone armed forces. Police forces, as well as the justice system, are (or should be) part of it. But the State also acts, for example, from incentives and sanctions, defining the legal, the acceptable and the desirable. The issue of tax control, rarely discussed in terms of its meaning and extent, is quite clear at this point. It is through taxes – the money collected – that the government distributes resources and opportunities, which means offerings (or not) a response to the pandemic that minimize suffering and risks, both in the present moment and in the possible resumption of “normality”.

Just as he talks about *forcing people to live in peace with each other*, at other times Elias talks about *social constrain toward self-constrain*. In our so unequal country, there are countless spaces (slums, communities, prisons, etc.) in which the State actions are not very present. In a study on the formation of organized crime group called *First Capital's Command* (Primeiro Comando da Capital - PCC), for example, Camila Nunes Dias (2011) relates the miserable conditions in which prisoners in state of São Paulo were in (and still are) to the formation of this organized group that took to itself the task (among others) of constituting a disciplinary power in these spaces. The peripheries of large Brazilian metropolises are seen as a space in which Covid-19 can be spread rapidly, due to lack of structure and sanitation of the communities, as well as its population density, in addition to the stark poverty.

A few weeks after the start of the social distancing recommendations, important initiatives have appeared in these spaces: sound cars that pass on streets instructing the population, ambulance rental, temporary hiring of doctors and nurses, donation collections and its distribution, etc. [III]. Much of this organization must come from neighborhood collectives, community organizations, but perhaps – and probably – also come from groups linked to organized crime and militias.

If the Brazilian State or its government fails to take responsibility to increase social constraint towards self-constrain – in other words, to be present throughout the national territory –, other groups have taken, still take and will continue taking the space, requiring that task. Although momentarily beneficial and necessary, their actions point in the direction of greater fragmentation and weakening of the Brazilian State, and of undesirable consequences for the future. The incorporation of the interdependence perception, an inherent characteristic of the relationships between individuals, groups and classes in society, is of utmost importance so that our courses could be different.

Several literature books have been remembered at this time. I reread “Blindnes”, from José Saramago (Ensaio sobre a cegueira, in Portuguese). I still keep the first edition published around here. When I first read it, I was completely overwhelmed by the story. I saw myself completely blind and, amid the whiteness that surrounded me, I wondered how I could see

the letters and read the book. I also wondered about the meaning of the metaphor of blindness in Saramago's work. Rereading it now, even in the first week of social distancing here in Brazil, I found it difficult, almost repulsive. My attention turned to the most tangible aspects, the confinement, the resulting filth, the hunger. Fear took over. Fear that "each one for themselves", at best "each group for themselves", would create generalized chaos. One of the main causes of death due do Covid-19 is acute respiratory failure, presenting widespread inflammation in the lungs. Society can die from the same evil, from widespread chaos resulting from the individualistic and self-centered view, from the lack of perception of the interdependence between each and every one of us. Let's go back to Saramago.

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