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**Norbert Elias's Innovative Network Language in Sociology and  
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## **CAMBIO**

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## [Norbert Elias's Innovative Network Language] in Sociology and Psychotherapy

The following prophetic text was written by Norbert Elias in 1938, exactly 73 years ago. It is an excerpt from Elias's little book *Society of Individuals* which intended to be the theoretical part of his magnum opus *On The Process of Civilization*. Let us listen carefully to the depth, width and innovativeness, of Elias's interdisciplinary train of thoughts, a year before the outburst of the Second World War.

Our tools of thinking are not yet flexible enough adequately to grasp interweaving phenomena, our words not yet supple enough to express this simple state of affairs simply. To get a closer view of this kind of interrelationship one might think of the object from which the concept of interweaving is derived, a woven net. In such a net there are many individual threads link together. Yet neither the totality of the net, nor the form taken by each thread in it, can be understood in terms of a single thread alone nor even all the threads consider singly; it is understood solely in terms of the way they are linked, their relationship to each other. This linking gives rise to a system of tensions to which each single thread contributes, each in a somewhat different manner according to its place and function in the totality of the net. The form of the individual thread changes if the tension and structure of the whole net changes. Yet this net is nothing other than a linking of individual threads; and within the whole each thread still forms a unity in itself; it has a unique position and form within it.

This is no more than an image, rigid and inadequate like all images of this kind. But as a model for thinking about human interweaving, it is sufficient to give a somewhat clearer idea of the manner in which a net of many units gives rise to an order that cannot be studied in the individual units. However, the relationship between people can never be expressed in simple spatial forms. And it is a static model. It [the model] serves its purpose somewhat better if one imagines the net as an incessant weaving and unweaving of connections.

The individual actually grows out of a network of people existing before him into a network that he helps to form. The individual person is not a beginning and his relations to other people have no beginnings. Just as in continuous conversation [between two people], the question of one evoke the answer of the other, and vice versa, and just as a particular part of the conversation does not arise from one or the other alone but from the relation between the two from which it is to be understood, so each gesture and act of the infant is neither the product of his "inside" nor of his "environment", nor of an interaction between an "inside" and an "outside" which were originally separate. It is rather a function and precipitate of relations, and can only be understood - like the pattern of a thread in a net - in terms of the web as a whole. Likewise the speech of others develops in the growing child something which is entirely his own, entirely his language, and at the same time a product of his relation to others, an expression of the human mesh within which he lives.

In the same way, ideas, convictions, affects, needs and character traits are produced in the individual through intercourse with others, things which make up his most personal "self" and in which is expressed, from this very reason, the network of relations from which he has emerged and into which he passes. And in this way this self, this personal "essence", is formed in a continuous interweaving of needs, a constant desire and fulfillment, an alternating taking and giving. It is the order of this incessant interweaving without a beginning; it is the history of his relationships that determines the nature and form of the individual human being. Even the nature and form of his solitude, even what he feels to be his 'inner life', is stamped by the history of his relationships - by the structure of the human mesh in which, as one of its nodal points, he develops and lives as an individual (Elias 1938: 34-35-36).

Now, let's jump 40 years ahead to 1977. In this year, a conference was held at Amsterdam University in honor of Norbert Elias's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, titled *Human Figurations*. One of the first discoursers at the conference was Eric

Wolf (born in Vienna in 1923), a Professor of Anthropology at the Lehman College of the City University of New York. Eric Wolf and his Jewish family fled from Germany to England, and in the summer of 1940, at the age of 17, he was interned along with thousands of other immigrants, in the internment camp in Huyton, near Liverpool. Intellectuals who were held in this camp spontaneously organized courses and study groups, as part of the activities during the internment.

In his lecture in Amsterdam, which was published in 1977 in a book of essays for Norbert Elias by the name *Human Figuration*, Eric R. Wolf told about his experiences in the internment camp in Huyton:

«But among the lectures at 41 Shepton Road, there were also two, by Professor Elias, one on *The Network of Social Relationships*, the other on *Monopolies of Power*. For me, these lectures, especially the first one, were something of a revelation... One day, a Prof. Elias, drawing lines and crosses on a dirty piece of paper which served as a blackboard, spoke of how a person is born into the world not as a pristine and isolated individual, but as a nexus in a social network. It was a simple idea, but it changed my ways of thinking about social phenomena» (1977: 29-30).

These lectures that Norbert Elias delivered to the interns at the internment camp in 1940 were a direct continuation of his revolutionary book *The Society of Individuals* (the text above) which was written about two years earlier, and which Elias tried but failed to publish before the war, through the University of Stockholm.

From these facts arise the following questions: what brought a German-Jewish Professor, held at a British Internment camp, at the height of the Second World War - to deliver lectures to fellow interns about *The Network of Social Relationships*? How is it possible that in the year 1940, Norbert Elias delivers an enthusiastic speech about *Social Networks*, in quite similar, though slightly different, terms as in the discourse about *Network Society*, in the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century? How come, a discourse about interweaving of Individuals in the social Web takes place 80 years ago; a discourse that is essentially different from the contemporary talk about technological determinism of the Network Society?

In order to answer these questions, Elias challenges the opposition, or the contraposition, of *the Individual* versus *Society*, which, in his words, has become a self-evident given in the modern man's mind. Generally speaking, Elias attacks simultaneously on two fronts:

He attacks the standpoint that sees the individual as the "purpose" while society is "the means"; He attacks also the standpoint that adheres to the notion that society is something more basic, an "ultimate goal", while the individual remains secondary, or the "means". Elias says that only by exposing the layers of disguise concealing the core of the antithesis, can we begin to resolve it. For Elias, "Individual" and "Society" are two sides of the same coin; and the coin is, therefore, the web or the social network! The individuals are intertwined in this web; and by weaving their repeated actions into the web, they knit it into being their own society!

After criticizing, deconstructing, and exposing the dichotomies, after unmasking their impotence and the hidden ideological goals behind the antithesis; Elias offers us a new language, in order to understand and to describe individuals and the society which they form together. He calls this new language: the Network Language.

How did Elias, came to formulate the *Network Language* so elaborately in 1939? In other words – how did he come to describe the modern world as a *Network Society*? Let me remind us, that the book *Society of Individuals*, was supposed to be the theoretical part of Elias's Magnum Opus, *On the Process of Civilization*, extending over 800 pages. So, I would now like to retrace the path which Elias took, in order to arrive at the *Network Language*, and to maintain, that in view of his monumental research work on civilization, the questions he raised in this research, and his innovative methodology; he could only have arrived at such enriching insights about the Network Society.

I will now present, in various and complimentary ways, the research questions which Elias raised in his life work. Let us note that Elias asked basic questions, which were different from the questions, the master sociologists of his era posed. He didn't ask questions regarding the structures of modern societies, but questions regarding the psychic structures of the people emerging, developing, living and functioning in these modern societies.

That is also the reason why Elias started to think with Freud's terminology regarding the mental structures of modern people, albeit historicizing and socializing them!

Here are Norbert Elias's questions: How did we become who we are? From where came those people, which fitted into the processes that Karl Marx and Max Weber wrote about? How these processes created individuals whose mental structures are capable of acting reasonably within modern lifestyle? Can I, Norbert Elias, offer a plausible model for the mental evolution of human beings? (Not as a philosophical or literal allegory; but, I am committed to a scientific model!). And as a devoted reader of Freud; Elias insisted to ask: who produced those people which came to Freud's couch?

Talking about Sigmund Freud; let us read from an original letter which I discovered in Norbert Elias's archives in Marbach Am Naker, Germany. This is a long letter to his close friend, the German Jewish Psychoanalyst Sigmund Heinrich Foulkes, who founded Group Analysis with the significant aid of Norbert Elias. Let us not forget that in his formative years in the 1920<sup>th</sup>, Elias studied Medicine and Philosophy together simultaneously, before moving into Sociology; hence is his strong affinity to psychotherapy. Actually, Elias worked as a group therapist in the late 1940<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 1950<sup>th</sup>, under the professional supervision of Sigmund H. Foulkes.

If we read the fascinating letter quoted in the footnote<sup>1</sup>, we can see how Eric Wolf's recollections from the in-

<sup>1</sup> This is a faithful transcript of the letter sent on 2<sup>nd</sup> of September 1941 by Norbert Elias from his address in Cambridge (Alpha Road n.67) to Dr Foulkes, in Exter:

Dear Dr Foulkes,

My answer to your letter is coming rather late and I am terribly sorry for it. I was very glad to have news from you and so good news at that. But your letter came shortly after I had been appointed Senior Research assistant to the Social Research Department of the London school of Economics and I had a terrible lot of work to do during these first months. It is a step on the right direction and I have to see to it that I get a firm footing in our department; so I hope you will forgive me.

For many years now I have been living in a state of great insecurity not knowing very often whether, next month, I would still be able to pay my rent and my food. Now when uncertainty become our common lot I can for the first time sit back in the evening when the work is done feeling comparatively comfortable and secure, unless, of course, a bomb drops somewhere nearby. It seems a little strange if you come to think of it.

Speaking of strange experiences, there was this internment business. I know you won't agree with me but very often during these months of internment I felt great regret that you were not able to share this experience with me, not only because *I had to give a long course of lectures on Sociology and Psychoanalysis* (and it would have been so much better had we been able to do it together), but mainly because it was, in a way, quite an extraordinary experience: Several thousand people uprooted, many for the second for the third time in a short period, from their family, their friends, their ordinary walk of life, hurled together, rich and poor, young and old, under conditions which were, at the beginning, sometimes appalling though latter on, generally, quite bearable especially if compared with what we know from French internment camps, at any rate under conditions which were completely new for most of the people concerned. For a long time we felt completely lost and abandoned by our friends especially our English friends outside. There was hardly any hope of going back to our former life in this country. There was this terrible feeling of being treated unjustly and of our complete impotence; we could not even console ourselves with the idea which may sometimes help the ordinary prisoner that we had been imprisoned in order to redeem our sins and faults; for we knew, of course, that we had been condemned to internment by no fault of ours, and while the normal prisoner of war can feel he is suffering for his country and hope for his country's victory we could only hope for the victory of our jailers who treated us as enemies and fear nothing more than the invasion of this country by our co-nationals and the victory of the country where we were born. As most of us had been brought up to the belief that everything we have to do has not only a cause but a purpose this naked uselessness of our predicament was one of its worst aspects.

Yet, life did not come to a standstill. You should have seen how we began to build up, antlike, a new community life behind barbed wire, choosing leaders, integrating and again disintegrating into various parties and groups discussing furiously problems which were in part important and real that is to say to be followed up by actions but mostly futile, wishdreams of people who continued to talk and to think as if they were still able to decide to act to influence others in the same way as before while in fact the management of their life had been taken out of their hands. Most of us realized, in fact, only slowly and by bitter experience the psychological implications of the barbed wire. Underground sexual abstinence had its effects. What they were you would have been better equipped to judge than I. you would have seen how old habits old complexes and emotions attuned to the former way of life (or conflicting with it) were tried out and

ternment camp in Huyton, fits with Norbert Elias's descriptions from the same place, as far as the new language of the network society is concerned. Furthermore, this letter shows again the constructive and fruitful relationship between Norbert Elias and S. H. Foulkes in the 1930<sup>th</sup> in London; between these two Jewish refugees from the Nazi regime, who ran away from Germany in 1933 and settled down in London to build new lives; between these two scholars who in the same place at the same time (the 1930<sup>th</sup>), made revolutionary breakthroughs, each in his own discipline, Sociology and Psychotherapy.

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grew into a new shape under these new conditions hysterics becoming sometimes more sometimes less hysteric than outside, compulsions (if I may say so) finding new tracks and fixations. On occasions I could do something to put things right but it would have needed a more experienced practice to understand and to help really and effectively. There you are. You did miss something, don't you agree?

On the whole I stood it quite well. You know that I am not easily thrown off my balance. Most people in the camp would I think agree that I was generally good tempered sociable and optimistic. How great the strain was I realized fully only when I came out. Sitting down to my work again, I found that my memory had deteriorated, my power of concentration slackened and that I had to overcome an enormous resistance before I could write a letter. As I had to write many of them when I came out partly for myself but mostly for those who were still interned this was pretty bad. Even now after almost a year I have not quite recovered my forces. Many of my friends have had similar experiences on the aftereffect of internment. I consider seriously going into an analysis if this goes on much longer be it only a symptom-analysis. Quite apart from the fact that it may widen my understanding for those matters I am most interested in I do not see why I should write my thoughts down with a great effort in about twice or three times the time I needed before my internment if it can possibly be helped. I may have to ask your advice in this matter (in the same time, I am sure you can't miss the implication; this is, of course, a nice round-about-way to explain the delay in my answering your letter). In fact, I am sorry I am not living in Exeter ; if I was I would certainly put a moustache and a periwig (this I would consider a very good disguise) tell you all my symptoms and see for myself how you do it. In fact, I am keenly interested in your new experience with the psycho-therapeutic method and technique [technic]. Regarding psychoanalytical theory I hold, as you know, rather heretical views; but I always tended and still tend towards orthodoxy. Regarding your letter I asked myself whether what you are doing now is not a great departure from the Established Church?

Being a heretic I hope you did not criticize my book too severely. In any case, I am very much obliged to you for writing this review and to Mrs. Foulkes for typing the script. Has it been published in the meantime? Could you let me have a spare copy? Or if not when it has been published? I am afraid I may not be able to get "Imago" here.

I have been giving, at the beginning of this year some lectures for the Board of Extramural Studies, Cambridge University, and I have been asked to give a lot more next term. Mr. G. F. Hickson whom Mrs. Foulkes mentions in her postscript to your letter is I believe the Secretary of this Board. So far I have not had the opportunity of meeting him.

About Neurath [Otto, *editor's note*] I can say very little. Our ways of doing Sociology are, I think, quite different. It may seem strange that one Sociologist knows little about the other. But our field is large and for the greater part still unexplored. There is no secure and firmly established method the basic condition for collaboration and interchange of scientists of the same branch. It is slightly different in the States; but in spite of all the work done over there I feel that everybody (who is strong enough to do so) must force his own way into the jungle within the limited term of a lifetime until the right one has been found and cemented and firmly established; for I firmly believe that only one can be right in the end. I am saying all that merely in order to excuse my ignorance with regard to Neurath. A part from a few exceptions I have generally found it more useful to study facts than to study other sociologists.

It is a pity we cannot exchange views on our new experiences. Couldn't you take a holiday in Cambridge at Christmas time? Life is incredibly peaceful here in spite of a few bombs every now and then. The town is, of course, full of evacuees, but not so crowded as for instance Oxford. During this summer I have learnt punting on the river and have been starting again – after more than ten years to play tennis. I cannot help wondering all the time that this is still possible while there is a war on and that I am able to give lectures and to do the work I like best (besides some other more useful work) which, all together, keeps me pretty busy. In spite of internment and all that I am naturally very grateful towards this country and, on the whole, quite hopeful, so far as the war is concerned.

I hope you won't be vindictive and will write to me soon.

With kindest regards for Mrs. Foulkes and yourself,

Yours,  
Norbert

You may have heard that Borkenau is back in London from his internment in Australia.

*The direct and profound influence of Elias's Network Language on the foundation of Group Analysis and its clinical practice*

Norbert Elias had a direct influence on the founder of Analytical Group Therapy, S. H. Foulkes. Already in 1940, at the time which Elias was interned in Huyton, Foulkes started to move his patients from the psychoanalytical couch, to sit in circle and to talk freely and to free associate with each other, a process which he called "free floating discussion".

Foulkes and Elias were close friends already in Frankfurt, during the Weimar Republic years. As I said before, they settled in London in the 1930th, where they continued to exchange ideas in Sociology, psychiatry and Psychoanalysis. So when Foulkes founded the innovative Group Analytic Psychotherapy, he immediately adopted Elias's network language entirely!

Terms like «therapeutic matrix», the patient as a «nodal point in a group's network», «the mind as a multipersonal or transpersonal phenomenon», «resonance in the matrix» - are only just a few basic ideas which Foulkes adopted from Elias. And it was not just intellectual influence. At the 1940<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 1950th, Elias took an active part in the foundation and in the establishment of the Group Analytic Society. He also was supervised by Foulkes as an apprentice, and even treated groups of difficult teenagers himself, before he started lecturing on sociology at the University of Leicester at 1954.

On the contribution of Norbert Elias to the "roots" of the theory of Group Analysis, I wrote in an extensive review article (Lavie 2005); and on the «profound influence on the thinking of Elias's friend S. H. Foulkes, with whom Elias collaborated in formulating the principles and practice of Group Analysis», see in the *Note on the Text*, by Robert Van Krieken (2010), the editor of the new edition of *The Society of Individuals*.

The most outstanding feature of Group Analysis which differentiate it from other group therapies, is the emphasis is on what is going on *between* the group members, on the space where members are being intertwined, thoughts and feelings interweave, in the ever developing group's therapeutic network or matrix.

Moreover, the conception of the individual's mind in Group Analysis is also essentially different. In Foulkes's terms the mind is basically "multipersonal" or "transpersonal" and therefore emerges within a network, a matrix. The dramatic transformation of the psychotherapeutic paradigm, made by Elias and Foulkes, their common "blasphemy" against the traditional psychoanalytical principles, can be traced back to the above letter from 1941. The revolutionary conception in Group Analysis and in Elias Process Sociology about the human mind, the human psyche, is a subject which deserves a further discussion in another article.

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