

Everyday Life in Figurational Approach: A Meso Level for Sociological Analysis

Perulli, Angela

Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

Zur Verfügung gestellt in Kooperation mit / provided in cooperation with:

GESIS - Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Perulli, A. (2016). Everyday Life in Figurational Approach: A Meso Level for Sociological Analysis. *Historical Social Research*, 41(3), 120-133. <https://doi.org/10.12759/hsr.41.2016.3.120-133>

Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer CC BY Lizenz (Namensnennung) zur Verfügung gestellt. Nähere Auskünfte zu den CC-Lizenzen finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/deed.de>

Terms of use:

This document is made available under a CC BY Licence (Attribution). For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0>

Everyday Life in Figurational Approach: A Meso Level for Sociological Analysis

Angela Perulli*

Abstract: »Alltagsleben im figurationalen Ansatz: Eine Meso-Ebene für die soziologische Analyse«. Moving from Elias and Scotson's "Established and outsiders" the article proposes a discussion about everyday life analytical category. This book clearly highlights what can be considered a constant in Elias' sociological methodology: the necessity for sociology to depart as little as possible from actual observable reality. Through a typically meso approach to social phenomena, the small things of everyday life, the ways that interactions and relations take place in specific places and times, become the observation plan to analyse the structural dimensions making society. Gossip, neighbours, free time, lifestyle, stigma and solidarity are just some of the topics dealt with in this text. With them, everyday life appears as the terrain on which social figurations reveal themselves, reproduce and are visible, in the ongoing game of the changing interdependencies of human living. I started by referring to the critical position that Elias assumed when invited to express himself on everyday life. The second part of the paper deals with the *pars construens* of Elias' thought: through the category of figuration everyday life as a meso tool to approach sociological analysis. He sees real individuals at work in it – with their I- and we-identities, their habitus – acting and reacting in networks of interdependencies. With the figurational approach, everyday life appears as life that is there, as the unique and inevitable dimension of sociological analysis. With the peculiar established-outsidere figurational one, everyday life appears as the ground to see and study production and reproduction mechanisms of social inequalities.

Keywords: Everyday life, figurations, social inequalities.

1. Introduction

They are many reasons, 50 years on, why it is worth placing renewed attention on the research carried out by Elias and Scotson. Not just because it is one of the few, or perhaps the only case of field research conducted by N. Elias, or because it resulted in the use of conceptual categories and original keys to interpretation whose heuristic utility has gained more and more ground (suffice

* Angela Perulli, Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Florence, Via delle Pandette 21, 50132 Firenze, Italy; angela.perulli@unifi.it.

it to think of the many uses of the established and outsider figuration, and the concepts of stigma and of group charisma and group disgrace), but also because it clearly highlights what in my opinion is a constant in Elias' sociological methodology: the necessity for sociology to depart as little as possible from actual observable reality. Through a typically meso approach to social phenomena, the small things of everyday life, the ways that interactions and relations take place in specific places and times, become the observation plan to analyse the structural dimensions making society. Gossip, neighbours, free time, lifestyle, stigma and solidarity are just some of the topics dealt with in this text. With them, everyday life appears as the terrain on which social figurations reveal themselves, reproduce and are visible, in the ongoing game of the changing interdependencies of human living. Hence, the author is able to give this conceptual category, on which I intend to concentrate my paper, an original and in some ways provocative guise.

In 1978, upon request from the editors of a special issue of a German journal on *everyday life*, Elias deals with the topic of the epistemological status of this conceptual category and devotes some pages to reflection on this expression. He does so in his usual style – polemical and irreverent towards the sociological traditions en vogue at the time – while nevertheless offering the reader no few interesting cues and allocating aspects linked to the everyday an absolutely central role for the analysis of social phenomena. Elias criticizes a technicist use of the term 'everyday' as misleading. But despite his initial criticism of the sociology of everyday life as a specific discipline, he highlights the cognitive and heuristic potentials linked to an approach to social (or human as our author would say) phenomena that centres the analysis around real people with their relationships, as they are played out in everyday life, ordinary day-to-day life, a life that has always had its historical and territorial connotations. Indeed, his is an 'extremist' position that, if one may say so, overrides the same supporters of everyday life sociology, by ultimately upholding that sociology can be no other than a science of everyday life, and that the problem does not so much lie in separating everyday from non-everyday life, by identifying spheres with distinct confines and contents, as calling the attention to what sociology should be as a science questioning itself about human formations. Reflection on everyday life therefore becomes the opportunity to reflect on sociology, its contents and its epistemological status, while once again presenting the most characteristic traits of Elias' approach: societies and social formations as figurations, the pivotal nature of the relational elements of human life, the dynamic nature of social phenomena and the need for processual keys to understanding them, and the call not to reify the concepts and analytical tools. And by so doing Elias offers us some suggestions, still usable today, to overcome some of the obstacles that have been encountered by the sociology of everyday life over the years. Indeed, they offer possible answers to questions that recurrently arise on the heuristic possibilities of approaching sociological topics through the lens of everyday life.

2. Against the 'Sociology of Everyday Life'

It can be useful to start from the *pars destruens* of Elias' essay. The first problem that Elias brings up concerns definition: What is everyday life? The 1978 essay indeed begins with the consideration that

Not so long ago, the concept of everyday life could be used in an ordinary, everyday way. One could talk in all innocence of 'the way things happen in everyday life' without pausing to wonder what 'everyday life' might actually mean. But now the concept of the everyday has become anything but everyday: it is loaded with the freight of the theoretical reflection, and in this form it has become a key concept for a number of schools of contemporary sociology (Elias 2009a, 127).

Elias starts by ruling out that there is a field of sociological reflection that can be identified as 'not everyday.' 'Everyday life' is an expression normally used in contrast to something that is not everyday life. However, what this something consists of usually needs to be guessed (Elias 2009a, 128).

And then:

As it is used in sociology today, this concept is anything but homogeneous. [...] Very rarely is it stated what is really meant by the 'not-everyday.' Any opponent with whom one is in dispute, and against whom an everyday term is used as weapon, remains partly out of reach. Is it possible that even in the minds of the various theoreticians of the negative, the common ground denoted by this multifarious concept lies rather in the negative, in what they are turning away from, than in the positive meanings they associate with the term? (Elias 2009a, 127).

What unites them would seem to be their common reaction to the theories that had long dominated in sociology (structural-functionalist and marxist-oriented scholars first of all) which placed attention on the more macro elements of social phenomena. So the everyday seemed to rediscover the micro subjective spheres of associated human life as a perspective that could place attention on the meaning assumed by subjective aspects for the people living them and on how individuals experience those traits not solidly institutionalized by society. However, by so doing, we have progressively set out along a path that has shifted sociological analysis further and further from the reality that can be observed in everyday life, while bridling the very term 'everyday' into increasingly narrow spheres under the aegis of more and more sophisticated and abstract theoretical constructions.¹

Elias also laments the use by sociologists of philosophical formulations (such as that of Husserl) which would lead to "peculiar hybrids – neither philosophy nor sociology" (Elias 2009a, 132) and debates more and more closed

¹ Distancing itself from what, according to Elias, were the most fruitful characteristics of the formulation by Goffman, whom many of these schools considered a progenitor.

within the sociologists' 'sect,' completely incomprehensible to outsiders, progressively resulting in clear, common-sense (and everyday) expressions taking on obscure, 'difficult' meanings, unintelligible to the outside.² With the multiplication of the 'sects' in contemporary sociology, followed by the failed attempt of the functionalists to affirm a single great universal theory, a multiplication would then be seen of the meanings attributed to the term 'everyday.' As a result, the term would be used simultaneously with different and at times opposing meanings, as emerges from Figure 1 below.

Figure 1: Types of Contemporary Concepts of the Everyday with the Implied Antithesis: A Selection

Everyday	↔	Holiday (feast day)
Everyday = routine	↔	Extraordinary areas of society not subject to routine
Everyday = working day (especially for working class)	↔	Bourgeois sphere – that of people living on profits and in luxury, without really working
Everyday = life of the masses	↔	Life of the privileged and powerful (kings, princes and princesses, presidents, members of government, party leaders, members of parliament, business leaders)
Everyday = sphere of mundane events	↔	Everything regarded by traditional political historiography as the only relevant or 'great' events in history, i.e., the centre-stage of history
Everyday = private life (family, love, children)	↔	Public or professional life
Everyday = sphere of natural, spontaneous, unreflecting, genuine experiences and thinking	↔	Sphere of reflective, artificial, unspontaneous, especially scientific experience and thinking
Everyday (everyday consciousness) = ideological, naive, superficial and false experience and thinking	↔	Correct, genuine, true consciousness

Source: Elias (2009a, 131).

To look to the everyday as a social datum should be to ask questions such as: does the everyday refer to distinguishable spheres or sectors within human societies? Does such a sphere exist, with its own structure and a certain autonomy?

But one might consider whether one is not simply referring here, with the aid of an esoteric abstraction, to peculiarities of the present working and professional societies, which could be denoted just as well by terms such as leisure, the private sphere and related concepts (Elias 2009a, 133).

² Here we encounter a topic that was dear to our author, who often brought attention to the dangers connected to the reified, far from common-sensical use of the concepts used by sociology.

Thus far Elias has distanced himself from everyday life sociology as a separate sphere of sociological reflection, from that sociology which had seen studying everyday life as giving the possibility of erecting disciplinary barriers and, ‘artificially’ as Elias would say, separating some aspects of social life. However, if we go back to a closer meaning of everyday life to the one used in common language, in which the everyday means the day-to-day, we see that this is not just present but central even in Eliasian theory. What is more, it also presents itself as a possible key to reading the social transformations that have guided and affected contemporary society, as well as giving access to those very slow transformations that enable Elias to trace the civilizing of modern Western societies in a processual light. And he does so by clearing up what he defines as a ‘misunderstanding’ (Elias 2009a, 129), that is, what distinguishes his use of ‘everyday’ from its ‘technical’ meaning.

The concept of the everyday as generally used today as a technical sociological term, tacitly includes the idea that there are peculiarities of everyday life which are different from those of other areas of social life and may even be opposed to them. I myself had used my concern with what is classified by others as everyday life in precisely the opposite sense, to make clear a change in the civilising canon which is indissolubly bound up with other structural changes in society, such as the increasing division of functions or processes of state formation (Elias 2009a, 129).

In referring to the ‘everyday,’ as we will see, Elias is speaking of change in the personality structure or in the affect-economy. He correlates changes in social structure with transformations in the personality structure and claims a central role for the aspects that are linked to day-to-day, that is everyday, experience, owing to the significance that they have of social transformation in general³. Through this correlation, the analysis of everyday life is transferred from a truly micro to a meso level:

There is no good reason to suppose that the investigation of structures of social life (which, if done one-sidedly, can certainly be called ‘objectivistic’), and the investigation of the meanings of the various aspects of social life as experienced by the people concerned (which, if done one-sidedly, can very well be called ‘subjectivistic’), are incompatible. The investigation of the experiential dimension, the way in which, in the context of their experience of social structures, people contribute both to their reproduction and to their change, is no less indispensable than the investigation of the long-term, unplanned, blind interdependence-mechanisms which are at work in the transformation of these structures. This is especially true if one is concerned with the process of the transformation of social structures (Elias 2009a, 128).

³ See the original pages on shoelaces (2009c).

3. Social Figurations. Or Sociology as the Study of Everyday Practices and Acting

What enables the different dimensions of social living to be kept together, as we have seen, is the reading of human societies in terms of a ‘figurational flow.’⁴

With this comes the analysis of everyday life, meant as analysis of ordinary day-to-day life. It presents itself as the only possible plan for observing the networks that link the actors to each other as well as the interdependent actions of these same actors. As Elias would remember, figuration is presented as the interconnected actions performed by a group comprising individuals who are dynamically interdependent on each other, again in a particular historical and social situation.

Villages and towns, universities and factories, status groups and classes, families and occupational groups, feudal and industrial societies, communist and capitalist states – all these are networks of individuals. Each one of us belongs among these individuals – that is what we express in saying ‘*my* village, *my* university, *my* class, *my* country.’ And this is all the more visible, the more we remain anchored to the experience of everyday life, day-to-day life, and to the use we commonly make of these expressions in it (Elias 2012b, 10).

The actions are observed as they are actually carried out, as they are actually realized. Indeed, real people – and not the Individual in the abstract sense – come into play in the figurations (with their biological, cultural, social and psychological characteristics, with their life courses and their aspirations) who act within more or less formalized rules, which they interpret and help to strengthen or change. All individuals pursue their own ends, and as a result inevitably act within the boundaries given by the historical, geographical and social conditions in which they are born – from the past (individual and group) which inevitably accompanies them and the future before them. These confines are also represented in the social habitus that links the various individuals in the figuration. And it is the set of individual purposes that give rise, in an unplanned way, to society. Central to determining individual ends is the idea of seeking survival, a biological, cultural, social survival of practices and habits. And in response to the different needs for survival, historically individuals have given rise to distinct figurational forms (families, tribes, states, etc.) which Elias calls ‘survival units’ (Kaspersen and Gabriel 2008). With the characteristic of being an ‘attack-and-defence’ unit, they are directly linked to a feeling of

⁴ Elias speaks first of networks, then of configurations, and subsequently of figurations. At the end of his writings, he prefers the expression figurational flow, as clearly emerges from the texts selected following a biographical criterion in the work edited by Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom (1998).

fear that one's own world, horizon of experience, and survival in the most crude and general sense, will disappear (Giovannini and Perulli 2012, 140-3).

Furthermore, the idea of figuration also centres around the dimension of power, in its specific relational definition. The observation of everyday life inevitably has to consider who influences what, as well as what margins and what limits people and groups have for acting. Let us take Elias' example of the football match: the figuration is given the moment the actual match is played, by the players taking part, by their moods and feelings, by the relationships that arise on the pitch, by how the actors interpret their role that day, but also by the field (by its conditions), the regulations and how they are interpreted.

So, like in the match, in every phenomenon of real life, that is, day-to-day life, real actors (people) come into play, as do rules, institutions and the environment, in more or less visible ways. An example is the description that Elias makes of the tumult in a city street:

Most of the people do not know each other. They have hardly anything to do with each other. They push past each other, each pursuing his or her own goals and plans. They come and go as it suits them. [...] In this tumult of scurrying people, for all their individual freedom of movement, there is also a hidden order, not directly perceptible to the senses. Each individual person in this turmoil belongs in a particular place. He has a table at which he eats, a bed in which he sleeps; even the hungry and homeless are both products and parts of the hidden order underlying the *mêlée*. Each of the people who pass has somewhere, at some time, a specific function, property or work, a task of some kind for others, or a lost function, lost possessions and lost work. There are shop assistants and bank clerks, cleaners and society ladies without a profession of their own; there are men who live on interest, policemen, road-sweepers, ruined property speculators, pickpockets and girls with no other function than the pleasure of men; there are paper wholesalers and fitters, directors of a large chemicals concern and the unemployed. As a result of his function each of these people has or had an income, high or low, from which he lives or lived; and as he passes along the street, this function and this income, more openly or more hidden, goes with him. He cannot jump out of it as the humour takes him. He cannot simply switch to another function, even if he wishes to. [...] He is obliged to wear a certain form of dress; he is tied to a certain ritual in dealing with others and specific forms of behaviour very different from those of people in a Chinese village or an urban artisans' community in the early Middle Ages. [...] Even his freedom to choose among the pre-existing functions is fairly limited. It depends largely on the point at which he is born and grows up within this human web, the functions and the situation of his parents and the schooling he receives accordingly. This too, this past, is also directly present in each of the people scurrying in the city bustle. [...] Each of the people who pass each other as apparently unconnected strangers in the street is tied by invisible chains to other people, whether they are chains of work and property or instincts and affects (Elias 2010, 18-9).

The 'mobile chains' that link individuals, whether they be visible or not, always have a sociological situation and specific physiognomies in time and space:

in each association of human beings this functional context has a very specific structure. It is different in a tribe of a cattle-rearing nomads from in a tribe of farmers; it is different in a feudal warrior society from in the industrial society of our day, and over and above that it is different among the different national communities of industrial society itself (Ivi, 19).

And these diversities can be seen and analysed starting from people's everyday lives, their living habits, their observance of the basic rules upon which social relations take shape and develop.

4. Some Examples of Processual Sociology

Figuration therefore appears as an analytical tool that can account for a reality inevitably in continual change, overcome the obstacles linked to the habit of artificially stopping social phenomena in order to analyse them, then forgetting the contrivance committed. The necessarily dynamic nature of the sociological approach suggested by Elias is not restricted to the level of the actions and interdependencies that take place in a given moment (and can be observed at the same time). It underlines the need to always keep the dimension of change very much present, the processual nature of actions, relationships and social phenomena in general. A processual logic applied to the observation of real life, how real people act and interact, among other things enables a close connection to be seen between historical time, biographical time and everyday time, between individual biographical horizons and long-term transformations in which the same biographies move and in turn produce more general transformations. In long-term analyses too, the plan is still to observe how practices and behaviours that can be observed in day-to-day life have changed. These are the habits connected to food, physical needs, behaviours in the bedroom, how we blow our nose, emotional instincts, the capacity to control ourselves in public, together with changes in clothes, housing and political institutions that mark the path of this slowest of processes which Elias calls 'civilizing.'

Investigations of changes in the canon of behaviour and sensibility in a civilising direction make possible something that has not been properly attempted up to now and has, perhaps, been regarded as not feasible. They allow us to make reliable comparisons between the behaviour and feelings of people in different phases of a social development. The importance of such investigations into changes in what, it seems to me, is currently classified as the 'everyday' and which I myself attempted to grasp conceptually as a change in the personality structure or in the affect-economy, lay precisely in the fact that changes in the personality structure could be correlated in this way with changes in the social structures as one of its aspects (Elias 2009a, 129-30).

These are all elements that are visible at the level of everyday life, as appears from the numerous examples that can be found in Elias' work, some of which he explicitly quotes in the 1978 essay: *The Civilizing Process* (2012a) shows how social life is made up of many processes, of figurations positioned in the history of the modern West within a wider process or long-term figuration in which the chains of human interdependence increasingly differentiate and integrate.

As is known, for Elias civilizing is that set of social and psychological changes that have appeared more and more clearly in the attitudes and behaviours of Western men and women from the Middle Ages to date, which are particularly visible if we observe the practices and rules underlying them in day-to-day life. During this long-term process, all the main social functions, the economic, political, legal and demographic structures, in the same way as the personality and psyche structure, change in close interdependence on each other. In other words, it shows how the sociogenesis and psychogenesis processes are carried out together (Mennell 1992). To this end, certain forms of individual psychology (personality structure of the medieval knight and that of the courtier) and certain forms of political organization (autonomous feuds and centralized state) are compared in different phases of modern European history. For this purpose, Elias uses guides to good manners as a source, reading them as indicators of the sensibility and rules of behaviour prescribed to high-ranking youths, and hence as indicators of changes in psychology, sensibility and the threshold of distaste. From these 'guides to etiquette' it clearly emerges how the spontaneity, impetuosity and self-indulgence which man wallowed in for centuries had been abandoned. We were increasingly orienting ourselves towards exercising continual self-control and regulating both our physiological and emotional impulses. The provisions on sensibility and disgust are significant models of behaviour precisely because they contrasted a spontaneity that continued to reign in human relations carried out far from the courts and had to be abandoned in the new social situation that was being created, at court above all, but also in the wider world.

The scenes of everyday life depicted in medieval miniatures and codices show a model in which violence over the weak lives alongside idyllic moments where sexuality is also satisfied openly, where everything, life and death, sex and exercising cruelty can also take place in public. Use of a method of self-repression does not seem at all necessary; men exhibit their instinctual lives, with no concerns about hiding it in any way. Everything changes, albeit slowly, when the aristocracy moves into the courts.

The birth of a court society is seen as the affirmation of a new model of human interdependence, which is the specific theme of the work *The Court Society* (2006). At the court of Louis XIV that type of interdependence, of mutual conditioning between the ministers living there, the king and the noblemen, is established in paradigmatic form. And in different, less visible forms this would spread in the following centuries to a large part of the population follow-

ing the great increase in social differentiation. With the court of Versailles, ministers and nobility are concentrated in the same physical place, giving rise to a small separate world, which is read in terms of figuration. The exercise of self-control, foresight, the capacity to interpret the meaning of other people's gestures, and therefore also to exercise personal introspection, to reflect on the sense of one's actions (consciousness) requested by court life, were set to become the habitus for most of the individuals living in the West, in the 'advanced' industrial societies, albeit with a notable difference between the social strata. The elements characterizing the court are: the vicinity among its members; the monopoly of violence by the sovereign; uniform and moderate self-control; instinctual self-repression as the trait set to spread with the civilizing process. The court marked the passage from an aristocracy of warriors to an aristocracy of courtiers. The people at court adopted languages and manners that distinguished them from all the other strata, even the privileged. In this text we find a wide-ranging study of behaviours and words, with extreme attention to their possible multiple meanings. The courtiers developed a highly acute sensitivity towards the use of gestures. They could not give in to their likes or dislikes because it could be dangerous. All this developed a particular form of rationality that presented calculation and foresight as elements common to bourgeois rationality but with different contents: the competition for prestige among the courtiers; for economic prestige among the bourgeoisie.

Elias speaks of rationalization because this is a process too. The two types of rationality advance the civilizing process since both imply renunciation of the 'pleasure principle' in favour of the 'reality principle.' They require men to act increasingly on the basis of self-restriction, in which they personally take it upon themselves to tame or silence passions and emotions. In both cases, the actor is forced to take a situation of close interdependence into consideration, resulting in the renunciation of the immediate satisfaction of needs and desires.

The French aristocracy, divided between those who remained in the country, resigned to becoming poor powerless bumpkins, and those who competed for power on the great stage of urban and court life, experienced the harshness of the new restrictions, the effort spent every day in the self-control required by the new networks of interdependence. They dreamt of a pastoral life which had never existed, of simple and uncontaminated nature: these mythical images projected the nostalgia for a lost spontaneity, for simple human relations that were no longer practised.⁵

⁵ I am also referring to the arts, from architecture to painting, and literature ('aristocratic romanticism').

5. Everyday Life in Established and Outsiders

The text *The Established and the Outsiders* (2008) contains another meaningful example of Elias' approach which sees sociology as a science whose main source is the observation of real life, i.e. everyday life. In this example one can find in a very clear way the eliasian meso approach at work. Through the critical presentation of Winston Parva everyday life the social stratification system and the mechanisms of production and reproduction of social inequalities emerge in all their strength.

In the final part of *The Civilizing Process*, Elias had already sketched out a series of ideas on relations between social inequalities, power-chances, personality structure and lifestyles. In his reading of the elements that mark the emergence and decadence of the social groups in the position of most power, Elias refuses to adopt either the Marxist or the Weberian position, while explicitly denying that everything can be traced back to questions of control over the economic sources of power. Implicitly, he also refuses to consider class, status and party as three factors or dimensions in the distribution of power-chances. What is central are the mutual influences of the processes creating meaning and power differentials. For Elias, as I said, power is a property figuratively generated by all social interdependencies. His study on the small community of Winston Parva poses precisely the problem of understanding which mechanisms explain the differences in power at community level and, more in general, which sociological mechanisms can explain the forms of social differentiation and segregation. What allows our author to formulate a bona fide theory of social segregation is his gathering of information and testimonies on the everyday life of the inhabitants of Winston Parva. The starting point is represented by the fact that

As soon as one talked to people there, one came up against the fact that the residents of one area where the 'old families' lived regarded themselves as 'better,' as superior in human terms to those who lived in the neighbouring newer part of the community. They refused to have any social contact with them apart from that demanded by their occupations; they lumped them all together as people less well bred. In short, they treated all newcomers as people who did not belong, as 'outsiders.' These newcomers themselves, after a while, seemed to accept with a kind of puzzled resignation that they belonged to a group of lesser virtue and respectability, which in terms of their actual conduct was found to be justified only in the case of a small minority (Elias and Scotson 2008, 2).

The research was carried out by rebuilding the networks of neighbourhood relations, by observing who spoke to whom, what activities were performed and with whom, whom people went to the cinema with and what they saw, who the groups of youngsters were, the love stories that were permitted and the ones that were hindered, the local associations and their activities, and the family networks.

A significant role was given to studying gossip. It helped define the roles of the different actors and gave meaning to their values and behaviour (whether real or presumed), even to the point of actual group stigmatization.

The Village gossip about the Estate [...] was based on a set belief about the Estate people which acted as a selecting agency: incidents on the Estate which did not fit the predetermined belief were of little interest to the Villagers: it was hardly thought worth one's while to feed them into gossip mills. Incidents which corresponded to the set image of the Estate were taken up with gusto and kept the gossip mills going for a while until they got stale and were replaced by fresh gossip items (Elias and Scotson 2008, 122).

Gossip represents one of the main tools of power unbalance reproduction.

The analysis of the structure of gossip [...] may help towards a clearer idea of the dynamics of ranking it shows the extent to which powerful minorities, as a kind of gossip leaders, can control the beliefs of a wider network of neighbours, and influence the allotment of gossip rewards and punishments and the yardsticks for the ranking of families (Elias and Scotson 2008, 79-80).

It is in the theoretical chapter included in the second edition of the text (1976) that Elias dedicates some interesting pages to reflection on *group charisma* and *group disgrace*, that is, on those characteristics of approval or disapproval resulting from the sole fact of belonging to a particular social group, no matter what the individual and real behaviours be. This is also one of the ways used by those who are in a position of relative power in relation to others in the group to establish and maintain boundaries, to retain and strengthen existing power differentials. The study on Winston Parva can be seen as a step towards considering group charisma group and group disgrace as two poles of a single *continuum* that reflect the degree of approval/disapproval in the figurational game (see Perulli 2014) and we have to note that the analysis has been played at the everyday life level.

Elias stresses:

Both the ranking order itself and its criteria were known, as a matter of course, to everyone who belonged to the group, especially to the ladies. But they were known only at the level of social practice or, in other words, at a low level of abstraction, not explicitly at the relatively high level of abstraction represented by terms such as 'the social standing of families' or 'the internal status order of a group' (Elias and Scotson 2008, 23).

What made it possible for some individuals, belonging to particular families, to have the power to socially segregate other individuals is the length of time they had resided in the place, with everything that this involves in terms of social relations, habitus, group cohesion and so on. Elias stresses that in the sociological sense 'being old' refers to social relations with distinct properties that give a particular essence to hostility and friendship. They tend to produce a pronounced exclusivity in the way of feeling, and perhaps also in attitude, and a preference for people with the same sensibilities, as is underlined by the common front against outsiders.

In everyday life

the members of the established group were able to communicate their estimate of each other's standing within the internal ranking order of their group in a face-to-face encounter directly by their attitudes and, in conversation about others not actually present, by little symbolic phrases and the inflection of their voice rather than by explicit statements about higher or lower rankings of families and persons on their group's internal ranking and pecking order (Elias and Scotson 2008, 23).

And so doing, they define and defend clear social boundaries.

6. The Inevitability of the Everyday

I started by referring to the critical position that Elias assumed when invited to express himself on *everyday life*. He distances himself from the sociological currents that were experiencing a certain amount of success in the 1970s, which put the spotlight on the interactions of small groups, private life behaviours, studying routines, the subjectivity of social life, etc.. What Elias reprimands these sociologists for is not their dealing with not very important, marginal, ordinary topics, but that they presented everyday life as a part of life, as if there were another type of life, different from the everyday. Also through the topics of his research – from good manners to ageing and death; from time to genius, to violence; from work to psychosomatic medicine, to art, family relations and sport – Elias underlines that social life can only be everyday life and that therefore the attention of sociology should be addressed towards this dimension, not because it is distinct from or as important as the 'great' topics of sociology, but because it is the only dimension of real life and real people.

In Elias' view, everyday life is the main source for the sociologist. He sees real individuals at work in it – with their I- and we-identities, their habitus – acting and reacting in networks of interdependencies, helping create those social institutions, those norms and values on the basis of which the same actions are carried out and which slowly contribute to forming the different societies that men have historically (and territorially) formed, with their power differences, system of stratification, beliefs, practices, habits, bureaucratic structures, environments, horizons of meaning and survival units. Social figuration, as we have seen, is the approach that enables all of this to be kept together. With the figural approach, everyday life appears as reality, as life that is there, as the unique and inevitable dimension of sociological analysis. With the peculiar established-outsiders figural one, everyday life appears as the ground to see and study production and reproduction mechanisms of social inequalities.

References

- Elias, Norbert. 2006. *The Court Society*. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 2).
- Elias, Norbert. 2009a. The Concept of Everyday Life. In *Essay III*, 127-34. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 16).
- Elias, Norbert. 2009b. Group Charisma and Group Disgrace. In *Essay III*, 73-81. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 16).
- Elias, Norbert. 2009c. The Story of the Shoelaces: A Sociologist on his Travels. In *Essay III*, 135-7. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 16).
- Elias, Norbert. 2010. *The Society of Individuals*. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 10).
- Elias, Norbert. 2012a. *The Civilizing Process*. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 3).
- Elias, Norbert. 2012b. *What is Sociology?* Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 5).
- Elias, Norbert, and John Scotson. 2008. *The Established and the Outsiders*. Dublin: UCD Press (Collected Works 4).
- Giovannini, Paolo, and Angela Perulli. 2012. Living and Surviving. For an Eliasian Theory of Human Beings Acting in the Nuclear Age. *CAMBIO. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali* 3: 137-49. doi: 10.1400/202885.
- Kaspersen, Larsen, and Gabriel Norman. 2008. The importance of survival units for Norbert Elias's figurational perspective. *The Sociological Review* 56 (3): 370-87.
- Mennell, Stephen. 1992. *N. Elias. An Introduction*. London: Blackwell.
- Mennell, Stephen, and Johan Goudsblom, eds. 1998. *The Norbert Elias Reader. A Biographical Selection*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers.
- Perulli, Angela. 2014. Production and Reproduction of Social Inequalities. The Role of Group Charisma and Group Disgrace. *CAMBIO. Rivista sulle trasformazioni sociali* 8: 105-18. doi: 10.1400/228745.