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Mennell, Stephen

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Remembering Johan Goudsblom

Stephen Mennell*

Abstract: »Erinnerungen an Johan Goudsblom«. This paper is the slightly revised text of the opening address of the conference on “Long-Term Processes in Human History: A Tribute to Johan Goudsblom,” held in Amsterdam on 17-19 March 2022. It pays tribute to the Dutch sociologist Johan Goudsblom (1932–2020), leader of the Amsterdam School of Sociology and major champion of the work of Norbert Elias. The author sketches Goudsblom’s early life and reminisces about his own debt to Goudsblom as a friend and mentor. Tribute is paid to the extraordinarily wide range of Goudsblom’s interests, his prolific output as a sociologist and essayist, and the number of postgraduate theses he supervised. The connecting thread running through all his work was a concern with long-term social processes and the inseparability of sociological thinking and historical evidence. The breadth of his learning is especially obvious in his *magnum opus*, the book *Fire and Civilization*, and his late multidisciplinary collaborations in the study of ecological regimes.

Keywords: Johan Goudsblom, Amsterdam School of Sociology, long-term social processes, ecological regimes, fire, Big History, Norbert Elias.

1. Introduction

Johan Goudsblom, Professor Emeritus of Sociology at the University of Amsterdam – always Joop to his friends – died on 17 March 2020, right at the start of the “COVID-19 pandemic” (though not as a result of the virus). Thus it was not until two years later that many of his friends and admirers were able to commemorate him as they would always have wished. We gathered together to celebrate Joop both as one of the world’s most penetrating sociological minds and as a warm and greatly valued friend and mentor to very many of us.

I, for one, miss him – and sense his absence – every day. Let me first say a little about him as a friend.

My wife Barbara and I first met Joop and Maria Goudsblom at Norbert Elias’s house in Leicester, at New Year, 1975. We soon became great friends. At this time, Elias had already been sitting on my translation of *Was ist Soziologie?* (Elias 2012 [1978]) for about three years, without paying it any attention. During those days

* Stephen Mennell, School of Sociology, University College Dublin, Belfield, Dublin D04 F6X4, Ireland; stephen.mennell@ucd.ie. ORCID iD: 0000-0003-0207-5172.

together in Leicester, Joop miraculously managed to persuade Elias to delegate the approval of the translation to him. So a few months later, on a beautiful sunny day, I found myself sitting in the garden at J. J. Viottastraat 13, working with Joop on final corrections. It was the first of innumerable visits. I came to see Viottastraat as a sort of world headquarters of the kind of sociology that I wanted to do myself.

In return, I checked Joop's own translation of *Sociology in the Balance*, and over the years most of his other writings in English – though his English was so nearly perfect that it was never a very large task.

Later, when I was writing my book *All Manners of Food*, Joop offered to “promote” me at the University of Amsterdam for a belated doctorate. I said, “But I have no connection with the university,” to which he replied “You have now.” In short, I owe an immense personal debt to Joop, from whom – as I have often said – I learned more about the “figurational” way of thinking than I did directly from Elias.

2. Goudsblom's Early Life

Johan Goudsblom was born in North Holland, an only child. He lived through the wartime occupation of the Netherlands, including the “hunger winter” of 1944–1945, which he remembered vividly. Decades later, in the kitchen in Viottastraat, I was fuming at the American invasion of Iraq. I declaimed that “People don't like their countries being invaded.” He commented drily, “Well, I've lived through two invasions of the Netherlands; it is true that we didn't like being invaded by the Germans, but we were quite pleased to see the Canadians.” This relative detachment and ironic tone was characteristic – but it did not mean that he would not have shared the indignation we all feel now over Ukraine.

In school, he learned Latin, Greek, English, German, and French – one wonders how time was found for the rest of the curriculum – and won a national prize for an essay in English on “Youth friendship crosses borders,” a prize that took him on a visit to post-war Britain (where he saw mountains for the first time). After leaving school, he spent a year at Wesleyan University, Connecticut.

In 1951, after the year in America, he went to the University of Amsterdam to study social psychology, and, apart from short periods as visiting professor elsewhere, he was to remain there for the rest of his life. In his student days he was one of the editors of, and a regular contributor to, the locally famous student weekly *Propria Cures*, which gave him an early reputation in literary circles.

More important, just after he took his degree Joop met Maria Oestreicher, a student in the same faculty. They were married in November 1958, and were as close a couple as can be imagined. Joop and Maria came as a couple to academic conferences, and hospitably welcomed countless guests to their home, to which

some of us used to refer facetiously as the Hotel Viottastraat. After her death in 2009, Joop referred to Maria's "omni-absence."

Early in his time as a student in Amsterdam came another important encounter. He heard his professor, A. N. J. den Hollander, refer to a book by one Norbert Elias: *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. Then he found a reference to the same book by the greatly admired writer Menno ter Braak (who had reviewed it when it was first published in 1939, but who had committed suicide when the Germans invaded the Netherlands). Joop found a copy of the first edition in the university library, and it made a profound and lasting impression on him (Goudsblom 2016a). Later, he used to say that he had read the book at least a dozen times, and he had found new insights every time. He finally met Elias in person at the 1956 ISA World Congress of Sociology in Amsterdam, and they maintained close contact from then onwards.

Joop Goudsblom once said to me that he was only 80 per cent as intelligent speaking in English as he was in Dutch, and in German only 60 per cent. In French, it was only 40 per cent "and then it is not worth it." He could of course read all three. To me, coming from Britain, it still seems remarkable that an undergraduate student could read such a large book in German – the only British case I know of was Eric Dunning¹ – though in the Netherlands it was not particularly unusual. But, as Goudsblom said in a later essay (1986), Dutch sociologists in the 1950s enjoyed, as it were, "a view from behind a one-way mirror": they were able to read and appreciate the latest sociological research and the latest ideas in English, German, and French as well as Dutch. They selected, rejected and innovated, but then wrote about their insights *in Dutch*, which few people outside the Low Countries could read. That did not prevent Goudsblom from becoming the single most important champion of Elias internationally. When he became a very young *hoogleraar* (full Professor) in 1968, one of the first things he and his colleague in the history department Maarten Brands did was to invite Elias to Amsterdam as a visiting professor. (Only Münster, I think, got its invitation in earlier.) In Amsterdam these were turbulent times, the phase of student unrest and protest, which was more dramatic and precipitated more rapid change in the Netherlands than in many other countries. I have heard stories of Elias sitting on the floor, taking part in a seminar organised by the students on "Revolution: Personal and Political." Goudsblom came through the "student revolution" less bruised than some of his colleagues, notably better than his doctoral supervisor Professor Arie den Hollander.

Goudsblom was interested in many questions that would traditionally be regarded as "philosophical," which still tend to be discussed by "social theorists" in a "philosophoidal" way (to use Elias's word). But, like Elias, he tried always to transform them into empirically researchable *sociological* questions. His doctorate

¹ Eric Dunning (1936–2019), Professor of Sociology, University of Leicester, pioneer of the sociology of sport and co-author with Norbert Elias of *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process* (2008 [Elias Collected Works, vol. 7]).

was published in 1960 under the title *Nihilisme en cultuur* (English translation: *Nihilism and Culture*, 1980). It was a study of the problem of nihilism – a state of mind in which nothing appears to have value or meaning – in Western culture. He said it stemmed from his own early experience of nihilism as a personal problem; he acknowledged Maria's help in turning it into a sociological problem. In the book, Nietzsche is a central figure, and the influence of Elias is already evident, but so is that of Talcott Parsons, the then-dominant sociological theorist whose influence would later vanish from Goudsblom's work.

3. Goudsblom's Influence

Joop Goudsblom rapidly became the intellectual leader, in alliance notably with Abram de Swaan, of what came to be known as the Amsterdam School of sociology, which for many years had its own journal, the *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*. The list of candidates whose doctoral theses he supervised is extraordinary, not just for their number – 29 in total – but also the variety of topics he was able to supervise.² To give just a random selection, their topics included studies on sport, food, Freud and psychoanalysis, art history, nuclear deterrence and the Cold War, the Dutch honours system, informalisation, opiate addiction, behaviour in meetings, behaviour of concert audiences, human-animal relations, and jokes. The common thread was Goudsblom's developmental perspective, and his refusal to join in “the retreat of sociologists into the present” (Elias 2009) that was so general in the post-war years. Few of the topics were typical of mainstream sociology at the time, though some of them became so. Part of his success as supervisor was his openness, his serious interest in the various topics of his *promovendi* (which were seldom his own topics), his sharp eye for what was good and relevant, and the pleasure that he showed when he found something really good. Though generally so friendly and supportive, at the same time he could also be very critical, maintaining high standards of scholarship and style.

He was a prolific essayist, both as a polemicist for his own developmental and processual sociology against more mainstream sociological approaches, but also on a wide range of empirical topics. Like the theses he supervised, his own essays often explored unfamiliar sociological territory. Many of them were collected in three volumes of essays published in Dutch (1987, 1988b, 2001). They often contain aphorisms, flashes of brilliance, such as this gem, which is as pithy a summary of the theory of civilising process as you will ever find: “more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people” (Goudsblom 1988b).³ Not enough of his Dutch essays were translated, but he did also write and publish

² A full list was published in *Figurations: Newsletter of the Norbert Elias Foundation* 52a, the special issue published in March 2020, immediately after Goudsblom's death.

³ Goudsblom himself gave me this translation.

extensively in English.⁴ Occasionally, he was translated back from English into Dutch: I remember him telling me how embarrassed his Dutch translator was when he pointed out to her that when he referred to “a man o’ war,” he meant a ship – not a person.

4. Long-Term Processes

What all of Goudsblom’s work had in common was an underlying concern with long-term social processes, which brings us at last to the central subject of this journal issue.

A good place to start is a modest little book with a decidedly *immodest* title, *The Course of Human History*, written in collaboration with the economic historian Eric Jones and me (Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennell 1996). It had its origins in a seminar that we ran in collaboration when both Goudsblom and Jones were visiting professors in Exeter. Goudsblom wrote chapters on ecological regimes and the rise of organised religion, and on the formation of military–agrarian regimes, but his most broadly theoretically relevant contribution was on “Human history and long-term social processes,” in which he advocated “a synthesis of chronology and *phaseology*.” The distinction between chronology and phaseology can be said to arise from the old tension between historians and sociologists, which was neatly captured in an exchange in Bielefeld in 1984, during a discussion of a paper by the great world historian William H. McNeill. The sociologist Hans-Dieter Evers observed that “This is a problem with historians. They always withdraw into facts when they are asked questions about concepts.” But, moments later, when a sociologist had evaded factual detail, Artur Bogner responded, “That’s the problem with sociologists. If they are asked about facts, they go into conceptual sophistication” (Bogner and Mennell 2022, 124-5).

More about chronology and phaseology can be found in Nico Wilterdink’s article in this issue (Wilterdink 2023). But the gist of Goudsblom’s argument was that, in explaining long-term processes, chronological listing of facts is not enough: we also need some conception of the structure, the sequential order, of such processes – in other words, a “phaseology.” Any such ideas, though, have traditionally provoked knee-jerk cries of “evolutionism!” or (latterly) “eurocentrism!” Intellectual warriors such as Karl Popper (1957) in Britain or Robert Nisbet (1969) in the USA saw all efforts to discover any structure in earlier social development as inseparably linked to impulses to shape the future in authoritarian ways (see also Bucholc and Mennell 2022). Many of the objections they raised pertain to the entire tradition of constructing phase models, from Plato and Aristotle to Karl Marx and Herbert Spencer. They “continued to recognise the spirit of Plato in virtually every attempt at discovering *stages* of social develop-

⁴ Often his own translations were better than those of the professionals; see Goudsblom (1988a).

ment” (in Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennell 1996, 21). But, as Goudsblom saw, we do *need* some idea of stages within social processes, especially long-term processes. And indeed some major stages of social development – ecological revolutions – have always been accepted: the agrarian and industrial “revolutions,” and maybe the information revolution through which we are living now.⁵ Before those, however, Goudsblom argued, there was a prior ecological revolution: the gradual establishment of the human species monopoly of the use of fire, which considerably antedated the biological evolution of the modern form of human beings, *Homo sapiens*.

Goudsblom worked on his book, *Fire and Civilization* (1992), for a decade. I believe he considered it his most important book. It involved him venturing into territory where few sociologists dare to tread, far back into pre-history, into the evidence of archaeology, paleo-anthropology, ethology, and ecology. The human use of fire goes back at least to the era of *Homo erectus*, and there must have been a time when our evolutionary forebears could not use fire, let alone *make* it. Many cultures have myths, such as that of Prometheus, about how the use of fire was first acquired, but Goudsblom argues that it could not have been a single event; rather, it was a long process that saw reverses as well as advances: in the early phases fire was probably sometimes lost. Today, however, we know of no human society that has lacked the use of fire; moreover, it is a skill monopolised by the human species. The effects of this have been profound: it has affected biological evolution and the human diet, and it decisively tilted the balance of power between human beings and all other animals.

Although *Fire and Civilization* was well received, many non-sociological readers seemed to contrive to overlook the book’s central *sociological* argument: that the process of the acquisition of the active use of fire was necessarily *intertwined with a civilising process*, in the technical sense. Fire is dangerous: mastering its dangers involved learning to control fears. It involved a more habitual deferment of gratification, embodied in advances in social organisation. The fire had to be guarded. Fuel had to be gathered to keep it going. Both involve the elaboration of a system of rosters, rotas, or shifts – turn-taking, a division of labour. Using fire to cook involves the development of new skills. So does its use in hunting. So does its use in war against other human groups. The book continues the story of fire

⁵ In studying any of these major turning points in social development, Goudsblom argued, a simple four-stage model was useful:

1. A stage when there were no societies with control over fire, or agriculture, or mechanical industry, or x;
2. A stage when there were at least some societies with control over fire, but none with either agriculture or mechanical industry, or x;
3. A stage when there were at least some societies with both control over fire and agriculture, but none with mechanical industry or x;
4. A stage when there were at least some societies with control over fire, with agriculture and with mechanical industry, but none with x (Goudsblom, in Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennell 1996, 23).

through the agrarian and industrial revolutions, but this is perhaps enough to give a flavour of it.

Joop, and indeed the whole Goudsblom family, were ecologically conscious long before the environment became a mainstream political concern. In 1993, he published a timely essay, the title of which in English translation was “The temptation of excess: the environmental problem as a problem of civilisation.” As usual, he was unerringly on target in making a connection between the environmental crisis facing the world and the theory of civilising processes. For if the world’s ecological problems are to be solved, it is certainly necessary that “more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people.” And indeed the essay ends on a somewhat pessimistic note. The last paragraph reads,

As for the world outside the wealthy West, we can hardly come up with a mating call. Even if extensive growth comes to an end there, the need for intensive growth will remain. The best we have to offer are techniques and resources to industrialize as quickly and as cleanly as possible.

That is not so bluntly and pessimistically as I myself would put it: *I* would say that populism,⁶ rapacious rentier capitalism, and kleptocratic authoritarian governments make it inconceivable that enough of the world’s human population will develop habitual self-restraint to the extent necessary to avert climate catastrophe.

By the 1990s Goudsblom had become good friends with David Christian and, inspired by his lead, had begun to organise a course in “Big History” (Christian 2005) in Amsterdam. It involved collaboration with colleagues from many other faculties – cosmologists, physicists, geologists, chemists, biologists – as well as other social scientists. Through it emerged the crucial concept of “the Anthropocene,” which remains fundamentally a geological term, now used by scientists to denote the new geological epoch dating from the commencement of significant human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems. But his term anthroposphere is better in my view, more general, encompassing more obviously not only humans’ impact on ecology, but also the long-term impact of major ecological transitions *on human beings themselves*.

The idea was elaborated in the major book *Mappae Mundi* (Goudsblom and De Vries 2002), which was spectacularly launched in the presence of Queen Beatrix in 2002. Goudsblom co-edited it with Bert de Vries, an environmental scientist with a background in physics and chemistry, with chapters by eight other very multidisciplinary contributors. His own key contributions were chapters entitled “Introductory Overview: the Expanding Anthroposphere” and “The Past 250 years:

⁶ Populism is a term too loosely bandied about, but I am using it in the sense of a recent definition that I find satisfying: ‘reaping short-term electoral reward by pretending there are simple answers to complex national issues and scapegoating others for these problems’ (Editorial in *The Observer*, London, 24 July 2022).

Industrialization and Globalization” (ibid. 21-46, 353-78). One sign of how much things had changed since his schooldays, however, was that Joop told me how much he regretted having given the book its main title in Latin, which he believed had hampered its reception. Not only that, but the book also had not just a subtitle, but a sub-sub-title. In full, the whole title was *Mappae Mundi: Humans and their Habitats in a Long-Term Socio-Ecological Perspective: Myths, Maps and Models* – rather a mouthful.

5. Goudsblom’s Recognition and Reputation

Joop Goudsblom was for decades a major figure in Dutch intellectual life. Besides his distinction as a social scientist, from his student days he always had something of a literary reputation in the Netherlands. In 1957 he co-founded, and proposed the title, of the Dutch literary magazine *Tirade*, still published to this day. In 1958 he published a volume of aphorisms, *Pasmunt*. And when, right at the end of his life, he published the first of what should have been two volumes of autobiography (2016b), it was very well received by literary critics who knew little about him as a sociologist.

Goudsblom deserves to be recognised as one of the world’s greatest and most incisive sociological minds of the late 20th and early 21st century. He did gain a substantial international reputation, yet it was perhaps always a *succès d’estime*. He was disappointed that his work did not make a greater impact in the English-speaking world.⁷ It was partly because Anglophone sociologists, in the early days, seemed to have difficulty in understanding where he was coming from – not so much geographically, although the one-way mirror is still an obstacle to some extent, but intellectually. Where Goudsblom was coming from – the work of Norbert Elias – was virtually unknown in the English-speaking world until the 1980s and 1990s.

His relatively disappointing impact in Britain and America had nothing to do with his command of the English language. He wrote a spare and elegant English, vastly better than the English written by all but a tiny minority of anglophone sociologists. Or perhaps that was precisely the problem: most sociologists, especially “theorists,” write in such a clumsy, pompous, pretentious way that perhaps they assume that ideas that are clearly expressed and easily understood cannot possibly be important and significant.

In fact, it was a mistake ever not to listen what Joop Goudsblom was saying, and it still is. His work still speaks to important questions. As Randall Collins remarked to me, “Joop always dealt with important things.” This special issue of HSR, and

⁷ I wrote about this in more detail in my contribution to Goudsblom’s *Liber amicorum* (Mennell 1997).

the conference commemorating a much-loved friend from which it derives, recognises his continuing influence.

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Long-Term Processes in Human History

Introduction

Johan Heilbron & Nico Wilterdink

Studying Long-Term Processes in Human History.

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Contributions

Stephen Mennell

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Johan Goudsblom

Long-Term Processes in the History of Humanity.

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David Christian

The Trajectory of Human History.

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Nico Wilterdink

Goudsblom's Law of Three Stages: The Global Spread of Socio-Cultural Traits in Human History.

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Nina Baur

Long-Term Processes as Obstacles Against the Fourth Ecological Transformation. Ecological Sustainability and the Spatial Arrangements of Food Markets.

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Randall Collins

Sexual Revolutions and the Future of the Family.

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Johan Goudsblom

The Worm and the Clock: On the Genesis of a Global Time Regime.

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