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FIELDS, WORLDS AND FIGURATIONS: USING ELIAS TO REVISIT DEPTH CONCEPTUAL IMAGERY AND EMANCIPATORY CRITIQUE

All sociological concepts are metaphors of sorts. Such metaphors typically invoke certain kinds of imagery. When sociologists use the term "structure" and related terms such as "construction," particular images come to mind – perhaps the architectural configuration of buildings: their load-bearing form and functions; their fabrication, and so forth. Similarly, a term such as "power" has connotations of force; energy; physical control; and operation. This "imagery" is sometimes welcome and deliberate on the part of a theorist who intentionally employs a particular term. At other times, we must undertake careful delineation to distinguish technical and normative images connoted by a particular concept: the term "culture" is a case in point. Conceptual images typically carry a heavy theoretical "load." They are, to employ another oft-used piece of imagery, the "building blocks" or "frameworks" around which we develop ideas and "furnish" conceptual schemes.

Some enduring pieces of conceptual imagery have become so ingrained in the sociological canon that we have stopped "seeing" them. We typically discuss and debate the textual semantics and hermeneutics of particular concepts; rather more rarely do we consider and confront conceptual imagery itself. Yet this imagery has profound significance for the questions we ask of the social world, for the concepts we, as sociologists, use to make sense of it, and, ultimately, for the strategies we adopt in attempting to change it.

One particular piece of conceptual imagery, "depth," is of central significance to the discussion that follows. Here we are particularly concerned with depictions of the social world as having "layers," some of which are "deeper" than others. To over-simplify greatly: such imagery is regularly invoked conceptually to render a distrust of the "material," the "surface" of events, the "apparent," "be-

low," "behind," or "underpinning" which, as we might picture it, resides something deeper: "the real." The spatial dimensions to this metaphor elegantly convey a link to an allied notion and practice, "emancipatory critique" – an undertaking which itself warrants careful attention. For the moment, the link to critique is realised in the notion that only by questioning, interrogating, and, in doing so, penetrating "below" the surface that is amenable to the senses can we access the "deeper" "layer" or "realm" of the social world.

Immediately, this kind of imagery steers our thinking towards the fundamental entanglement of "ideas" and "things," of "comprehending" and "apprehending," and ultimately, of "acting" (analytically, politically, scientifically) and "seeing." Focussing on the question of "depth" is thus particularly apt to the central purpose of this paper: that of exploring the rather complex question of the interrelationship between conceptual imagery, political involvements in sociology, and the possible ways we might revisit the enterprise of emancipatory critique.

This exploration has three main steps. First, we address the role of the conceptual imagery of "depth" in critical realist approaches to the notion of "critique." We discuss how this imagery is applied in attempts to analyse social processes and capture their emancipatory transformative potential.

Second, we consider two other relevant and influential pieces of conceptual imagery: the concept of "field" in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, which shares some of the same basic premises as critical realist approaches regarding the character of "critique," and the image of "worlds" in the work of Howard Becker, which has, in a similar manner to Elias's conception of "figuration," been described as lacking "depth," and thus, "critical" potential. This allows an engagement with how issues of power, structure, and agency are conceptualised in the work of these respective theorists and, more centrally, with the extent to which the work of each can be reconciled with a commitment to a "critical" political agenda.

The comparison of the concepts of "world," "field," and "figuration" thus permits us to explore the utility of a well-established line of critique: namely that, "on the surface," a central problem with the work of theorists such as Becker – and by extension, Elias – is their inability to accommodate the operation of "deeper" "structures" that "undergird" the "surface" patterning of "worlds" and "figurations." The latter, so the argument goes, pertain solely to "events," "interaction orders," and "social systems" rather than the "causal mechanisms" which act upon them. This line of critique of Becker and Elias's work has major significance. Firstly, it means that theorists like Becker and Elias are unable conceptually to accommodate how structures of inequality and domination – principally those relating to social class, gender and ethnicity – have a profound bearing on what we "see" when we "look at" society. Secondly, it means that these theorists can only describe and discuss how the social world is "produced," not how and why it is "reproduced" in particular ways across time and space. Finally, related to these shortcomings, the concepts of world and figuration can be seen to be politically "anaemic". Unable to grasp the "deep" "causal" mechanics of the social world, they provide no secure

basis for changing the very social relations to which they are oriented. Ostensibly then, the conceptual imagery of "worlds" and "figurations" are politically conservative and stand in contrast to Bourdieu's imagery of "field" which attunes analyses always to adversarial struggles of opposing forces that are not directly visible but are nonetheless invariably at play.

We shall offer a counter-critique to this well-rehearsed line of argument and ultimately aim to turn this critique "on its head" with a "critical" review of the critically realist predicates it is founded upon, with particular reference to Bourdieu's notion of "fields." We show how in the case of Becker, and more so in the case of Elias, both "world" and "figuration" offer considerably more than initially "meets the eye" regarding their capacity to accommodate the workings of "power" and "deep structures." Here, we draw important distinctions between Becker and Elias, particularly regarding Elias's concept of interdependence in contrast to Becker's focus on interaction. Moreover, we propose that the conceptual metaphor of "depth" – particularly the notion of "deep causal mechanisms" common to several variants of critical realism – itself has serious shortcomings regarding its utility for apprehending the social world. Chief among such shortcomings are the hangovers from Kantian apriorism, including the axiomatic divide between the "noumenal," supposedly beyond the ken of observation, and the "phenomenal": the seemingly superficial empirical realm. Such imagery, which typically finds expression in variants of a "surface"–"deep structure" distinction, is, as we propose, mechanistic, substantialist, and static – at best deficient in its capacity to apprehend a fluid and dynamic social reality, and at worst a conceptual cul-de-sac that actively blinkers social analysts in their attempts to understand the world. We thus explore the alternatives to notions of "deep structure" offered in Elias's theoretical–empirical work and consider the significance of these for the scope of, and potential for, emancipatory politics in figurational sociology. Here, we revisit Elias's arguments about the "detour via detachment" and "secondary involvement," reflecting upon the implications of his call for a model of involvement and detachment "alloys," exploring its potential as a basis from which to undertake interventions in the sphere of human figurations (Elias, 1956: 226, 2007: 69; see also Rohloff, 2019: 51).

CRITICAL REALISM, DEPTH AND EMANCIPATORY CRITIQUE

Critical realism is characterised by an ontological commitment to the existence of a "world" that has a degree of independence from human discourse (Wight, 2007). It conceives knowledge as a matter of "approximation," in which a never-ending process of development of the sciences allows our theoretical and conceptual constructs to approximate a more or less accurate – but never complete – description, explanation, and understanding of the world (Wight, 2007). In this regard, it shares Elias's also realist position regarding the need to overcome dichotomous oppositions between "true" and "false" knowledge (Elias, 2011: 134-136). Rather, for Elias, like the critical realists,

knowledge must be conceived of as always entailing an approximation: more or less "reality-congruent" representations of the world, of which the knowers form an integral part (Elias, 2007, 2011).

Concomitantly, critical realists maintain that the social world also possesses objective properties that confront members of human societies as structures that condition the limits of their social being and action. While these social structures are discursively and intersubjectively constituted, their long-term, multi-generational and processual character grants them an objective, causal power over the people who constitute them, even while remaining open to change by each generation (Bhaskar, 1998).

The awareness of the existence of these structures and their causal effects is conducive to the argument about the need for the development of a "sound body of knowledge" that orientates human beings' capacity to "predict and control" their conditions of existence that are not immediately accessible (Wight, 2007: 398). These structures are understood frequently to hide "beneath" the immediate "surface" of events causally affecting their development and structuring patterns of social relations. A greater degree of reality-congruence of human knowledge and, consequently, of people's capacity for steering the social processes of which they are a part thus depends on "breaking through" and "penetrating" the veil of immediately perceived social reality and its common-sense explanation and justification. In this sense, the degree to which people can penetrate and attain more realistic knowledge about the hidden, deep structures of their mind- and discourse--independent world has a clear "political significance" (Fluck, 2010: 260).

From this standpoint, the appropriateness of social action depends on the availability of reliable knowledge about underlying social structures, without which, any attempts by human groups to exercise a greater degree of conscious control over people's conditions of existence and, especially, to promote the emancipatory transformation of social order is doomed to failure. The possibility of political action is thus premised on breaking the veil of superficial "false beliefs" about social phenomena and developing more adequate knowledge about the underlying social structures at work – be they capitalist, class, race, or gender relations. These structures condition human societies while hiding behind the façade of forms of legitimation and justification that can no longer sustain themselves once the deeper structures are disclosed. However, critical realists also maintain that while "the identification of false beliefs and their sources is one thing, the nature of the action we should take as a result is quite another" (Fluck, 2010: 269).

However, the argument remains that any form of adequate political intervention in human societies, especially that oriented by an "emancipatory interest," depends on the capacity of social researchers to develop a better understanding of the "underlying" social structures of the human world. Hence, to be "critical," to oversimplify greatly, is to unmask the difference bet-

ween "appearance" and "reality," to penetrate below the surface, to progressively move towards a *deeper* reality.

"DEPTH" IN SOCIOLOGY: FIELDS VS WORLDS

Visual metaphors of "depth" are by no means confined to critical realism. Indeed, variants of the surface–deep structure metaphor are pervasive in much of Western thought. They are at play in Plato's allegory of the cave, or Rousseau's notion that humans are born free but everywhere are in chains. The core motif, again, is that an essential human freedom is subverted by symbolic artifices, structures of ideology that act as a kind of "surface filter" obscuring a "deeper" truth whose disclosure opens the possibility of emancipatory action.[1]

In sociology, this idea of distrusting what we "see," is one of the first things typically taught to students. In his classic *An Invitation to Sociology*, Peter Berger (1963) goes as far as to state that the recognition that "things are not what they seem" the first wisdom of sociology. Accordingly, a the primary goal of sociology is to discover the many different "layers" of social reality, with each new layer allowing us to reframe our understandings and perceptions of the whole. The ideas of Bourdieu, who now ranks as the most internationally-cited sociologist (Swartz, 2013), and whose work has arguably received more empirical application than any other sociological figure (Sallaz & Zavisca, 2007), also express aspects of this basic sociological wisdom.

Bourdieu's conceptual image of "fields" is a case in point. As a defining example, Bourdieu famously depicted the field of cultural production by an explicitly visual metaphor of a series of rectangles contained in each other:
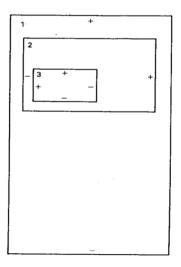

Figure 1
The field of cultural production (Bourdieu, 1993: 39)

In this figure, the literary and artistic field (3) is contained within the field of power (2), itself situated within a broader field of capitalist class relations (1). The key point Bourdieu illustrates here is that the literary and artistic field has a degree of autonomy from the field of class relations. Its position along one axis of polarity (the field of power) is relatively low; but its position in the field of class relations is relatively high.

By thinking with this imagery of fields, we can understand that, for example, what comes to count as art is not simply determined by the market relations of capitalism. Some semi-autonomous principles of literary and artistic prestige pertain specifically to the literary and artistic field itself. Yet, despite its relative autonomy, the literary and artistic field is still profoundly influenced by the logic of the field that contains it – that of economic and political profit. In Bourdieu's sense escaping *underpinning* capitalist relations of production is impossible. Thus again, we are steered by Bourdieu's imagery towards a consideration of "deeper" layers, structures which act upon the worlds of observable interaction. Social fields are always fields of *forces* which – like magnetic fields influencing the arrangements of iron filings – are irreducible to what exists of the "surface." Indeed, in his introduction to *The Rules of Art*, Bourdieu (1996: 1) – echoing Berger's first wisdom – sees the uncovering of "depth" structures as the primary goal of sociology: "The goal of sociology is to uncover the most deeply buried structures of the different social worlds that make up the social universe as well as the 'mechanisms' that tend to ensure their reproduction or transformation."

Bourdieu's adherence to a notion of deep structural mechanisms constitutes a principal point of difference between his ideas and that of another highly influential sociological figure, Howard Becker. Becker's alternative to Bourdieu's fields is the conceptual imagery of "worlds," notably – in pursuing again questions of cultural production – *Art Worlds* (Becker, 1982).

For Becker, art worlds – and here they are intended to serve as a more general model for other spheres of social life – refer not simply to fashionable consumers, powerful agents, struggling artists, and so forth, but to the full range of people *doing things together* in the cultural production of art. Accordingly, security guards in a gallery are as much a part of art worlds as the celebrated artists whose work is exhibited. Becker's conceptual image of worlds thus invokes all the "[...] people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things [which] produces the kind of art works that art world is noted for" (Becker, 1982: X). So, art is not simply the product of "great individuals" who possess a rare gift. It is a collective endeavour which produces both individual pieces of art and the cultural milieu which determines what comes to count as art.

The concept of "world" is in several respects akin to the idea of a social network, but, as Becker extensively demonstrates, it is not just a network of interacting people. It is also entails sets of *conventions* and *repertoires* relating

to style, composition, taste, and various forms of value. These "conventions" and "repertories" are particular ways of understanding, judging, expressing and creating art works. They are simultaneously forms of social constraint and enablement that are the largely unintended outcome of people's participation in social worlds.

From a critically realist stance, however, a key shortcoming of Becker's conception of world is that it is unable to capture "extra" or "hidden dimensions or properties" of social reality due to it comprising an essentially "flat" ontological orientation (Layder, 2021: 46). Accordingly, it offers no purchase on structures that operate beyond the level of social interactions, "behind the backs," so to speak, of social actors.

Indeed, it is precisely along these lines that Bourdieu is directly critical of Becker's conceptual imagery of "worlds." He proposes that the artistic field is much more than:

> ...the sum of individual agents linked by simple relations of interaction or, more precisely, of cooperation: what is lacking, among other things, from this purely descriptive and enumerative evocation are the objective relations which are constitutive of the structure of the field and which orient the struggles aiming to conserve or transform it (Bourdieu, 1996: 204).

Thus, Bourdieu again, steers social analysts instead to a more layered ontology, with a stress upon "objective" structures which can only be seen by their effects on the relations of interaction that he understands to constitute the totality of Becker's "worlds."

CRITIQUING THE CRITICAL

But what of the problems with the notion of "objective" or "deep" structure itself? What if we were to critically analyse this "critical" conceptual imagery: *to critique the critical*? Moreover, how is it that the conceptual imagery of depth has become so pervasive in sociological thinking and so closely associated with notions of critique?

The first place to look resides in the history of ideas. Critical realism can be understood as part of a tradition that traces back to Immanuel Kant. It centres on a critique of positivism and naive empiricism that we would now associate with the philosopher David Hume and the logical positivists of the 1920s. Margaret Archer (1998: 189) nicely expresses the problem in suggesting that the "Humean model" seeks constant conjunctions in ways that are considered inherently non-explanatory since it can only deduce associations and not their underlying mechanisms. Thus, it is considered an incomplete model for being unable to explain non-observable properties.

Accordingly, positivism only gets at what we can *see*, anything non--observable is beyond the ken of positivist knowledge. Realism, it is held, can

"see further" due to the acknowledgement of non-observable entities in the social universe and to the operationalisation of theory – a notion that is aptly captured in Kant's classical distinction between the "noumenal," the "real" stuff hidden below the field of vision, and the "phenomenal" which is what appears to our senses.

However, other possibilities explain the persistence of notions of "depth." Elias's core argument when criticising this kind of idea, particularly in the work of Kant, was also couched at the level of imagery. He referred to the growing dominance in Western thought of a particular kind of self-image: "the we-less I." The closed individual. Elias (2012b: 516) called this image: *homo clausus* (Elias, 2010, 2012a, 2012b).

The feeling of a dividing line between "me in here" and society "out there" characterises the experience of *homo clausus* today. This has become a pervasive trope in much of Western culture and thought since the renaissance. For Elias, it is grounded in a set of long-term sociogenetic and psychogenetic processes by which particular groups in particular historical periods come to experience themselves as "selves," as objects of their own reflection, and to experience society as "something" "out there" that acts and operates independently. Elias argues that this imagery finds expression in concepts that refer to a division between a deep hidden interior reality and an exterior surface, and in cognate divisions such as that between structure and agency. Social theorists and philosophers employing such imagery are, for Elias, expressing aspects of a socially contingent self-experience – whose development is extensively documented in his classic *On the Process of Civilisation* (Elias, 2012a). This imagery, pervasive though it is, is Elias proposes, deficient as a basis for understanding the social world. As a corrective, Elias (2012b: 120) offers an alternative image of humans as *homines aperti*: open, bonded pluralities of individuals. This imagery underpins his concept of *figurations*.
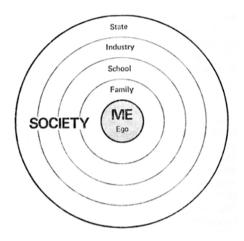
As we shall explore in greater detail below, these contrasting conceptions of the human self-image have major political and sociological implications. At the extremes, *Homo clausus* understandings of people involve an oscillation between, on the one hand, deterministic ideologies which view social life as little more than the expression of hidden structures of domination, and, on the other, voluntaristic ideologies, particularly notions such as sovereignty and individualism (Dunning & Hughes, 2013: 57) and related ideas of individual self-sufficiency and responsibility. By contrast, an *homines aperti* conception of people emphasises the fundamental *inter*dependencies of people – how, for instance, they are biologically endowed with a capacity for learning (Elias, 2009a: 145) and are accordingly directed to one another in a myriad of different ways. As we shall explore, this has implications that run counter to the political ideas associated with *both* voluntaristic and deterministic political ideologies.[2]
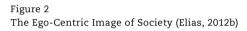
Furthermore, the association of "depth" conceptual imagery with *homo clausus* perspectives renders it inherently static, failing to capture the open--ended, largely unplanned, and fundamentally *emergent* character of social reality. It involves an aspect of what Elias (2012b: 107–108) called "process reduction" – whereby social processes are reduced to unchanging states associated with hidden underlying causes, be these an individual's "true inner self" or the "causal essence" of social phenomena. Connectedly, these images thus tend to be associated with a *mechanistic* understanding of social processes, expressed in their associated language of underlying "structures" and "mechanisms." However, the notion of a deep causal "thing" or "things" governing a separate surface reality is limited in its adequacy to apprehend social processes, which are characterised by fluidity and emergent properties. Hence, the imagery of depth is ultimately *substantialist*, assuming a kind of thing – a "mechanism," "structure," "power" – that resides at the centre of social reality. This "thing" is conceived to be more stable, permanent and important than the apparent surface of events whose shape and visible manifestation "it" influences. The "cognitive potential" of this imagery is thus seriously limited (see Dunning & Hughes, 2013).

As an alternative to depth, we might instead employ the notion of *complexity*. Analysing the role of *complexity* and *emergence* in the work of Elias opens the way for an alternative set of conceptual imagery. This alternative set, we argue, also facilitates a discussion of the political implications of process sociology.

FIGURATIONS

Elias's starting point for the development of his conceptual imagery of figuration is a critique of the onion-layered concentric circle models of ontology typically employed in much of sociology (see Figure 2). While ultimately different from the critically realist depiction of layers, this onion--layered model nonetheless involves similar conceptual imagery. As we have suggested, this is often how students of sociology and related disciplines are taught to visualise society: as involving a zoom-out from "the individual" to a series of semi-autonomous institutions – from "the family" and "education system" to "the state" – which together constitute society. Indeed, the Bourdieusian idea of fields containing fields discussed above is reminiscent of this kind of imagery.

Figure 2
The Ego-Centric Image of Society (Elias, 2012b)

For Elias (2012b: 8), this exemplifies an ego-centric expression of *homo clausus*: with a "me" at the centre, like the bullseye of a dartboard. These concentric circle models of ontology mirror the geocentric picture of the Earth's place in the universe that prevailed until the seventeenth century. Elias suggests that the move from a geocentric to a heliocentric world view was an example of a breakthrough in terms of human knowledge of the physical universe shifting from the dominance of ego-involvement towards greater detachment from such conceptions. People accepting the Copernican view of the Earth relied on their greater and growing scope for detachment – variously from prevailing modes of self-experience, from long-held beliefs, from religious cosmologies – and their capacity to accept knowledge that ran counter to their wish ideals (Elias, 2007: 33-34). The pervasiveness of the concentric circle of ontology in sociology is in part due to ascribing an objective reality to the constraints social structures exert on those who constitute them and the tendency to import language from the physical sciences to describe such processes.

In place of ego-centric conceptual imagery, Elias instead advocates the concept of *figuration* (see Figure 3 below). Here the primary focus is the *relationships* formed by a plurality of individuals, and how they steer and orient the behaviours, plans, and intentions of those who are the units of its constitution.
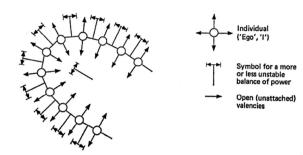
Figure 3
A Figuration (Elias, 2012b)

To explore figurations, Elias employs several visual metaphors. The first is dance (Elias, 2012b: 23). Dance, Elias argues, is less problematic than organic or mechanistic analogies as it is a real-life social process. For Elias, dancers on a dance floor can be understood as a "mobile figuration" with recognisable patterns, like the Waltz, Samba or Tango. Such dances are analogous of, say, gender or class relations. Dance is not a structure or thing outside, or underlying, the individual dancers: there is no dance without dancers. Dances are, like all figurations, independent, to a degree, of any specific individual *but not of individuals as such*, they are *emergent relational* patterns of the interdependencies between individual dancers. Similarly, class relations can be understood as emergent, typically asymmetrical, relational dynamics of the productive processes needed for the maintenance of biological and social existence. Class relations, just like dances, are relatively autonomous in the patterns they assume from the specific individuals who constitute them, but they do not exist without these individuals; they cannot, in this sense, be understood as a separate, or underlying, structure.[3]

Elias (2012b) also employs the example of games to model other real world figurations. Here, a key example is chess. In simpler games of chess when one player is clearly dominant in skills and resources, that player can steer the course of the game to a significant extent (even though she or he must still take account of the moves of their opponent). In the case of figurations with a lower degree of complexity, with relatively few players and significant power asymmetries between them, predicting the course of the game is relatively easy. However, when the complexity of the figuration increases, for example, when we consider a game between two well-matched players, predicting the course of the game even two or three moves in advance becomes considerably more complex.[4] This is all the more so when we consider games, other than chess, involving many more players, and in which power asymmetries, in terms of skills and resources available to the respective players, are more or less evenly distributed. With this increase in

complexity, the game's changing course, its emergent relational pattern – or "figuration," becomes something predominantly unpredictable, opaque and unplanned, but nonetheless something which all players become *subject to*. For Elias, this kind of game is analogous to other figurations, like complex human societies in which human plans and intentions interlace in a way such that these figurations follow a course no single individual planned or intended.[5]

Contrasting Elias's notion of figuration with Becker's "worlds" and Bourdieu's "fields" further enables our exposition of emergent complexity as an alternative to the conceptual imagery of "depth."

Figuration vs World

The works of Becker and Elias show a considerable affinity, particularly in how both employ metaphors centrally invoking the notion of emergent order (see Hughes, 2015). However, a key difference is rooted in the distinction between the concepts of interaction and interdependence. *People doing things together* is very different from interdependence, or perhaps better, interdependency chains, which is central to Elias's concept of figuration. Where the concept of interaction typically invokes face-to-face encounters, interdependency chains stretch across time and space. Interdependence is not *mutual dependence* or *cooperation*, it always involves *power balances*. A simple example of an "interdependency chain" is a traffic jam. When we become stuck in such a jam, we typically see only the cars in front of and behind us. Yet, the interdependency chains involved might typically stretch further, both spatially (perhaps for many miles), and temporally (relating, say, to an incident now cleared that happened earlier in the day). We (like most others involved) experience the jam as an obstacle to our own progress, we might complain about "the traffic" in our way, without considering ourselves as "traffic." This one interdependency chain is entangled and enmeshed with many others relating to fuel, transportation, technology, non-human nature, and so forth, all of which simultaneously involve complex global, economic, socio-material interdependencies (e.g. supply chains for petrol and diesel) in turn entailing, ultimately, geological time-spans. Such webs of interdependencies – figurations – are simultaneously relationally and processually oriented: to the dynamic balances in the relationship between the long-term *becoming* of a figuration and, say, the short-term (biographical) *becoming* of those who constitute it. In this and other key senses, figurations are multi-dimensional; they involve complexities and enduring dynamics that can only properly be apprehended diachronically. As we further outline below, this imagery differs greatly from the static (and rather fanciful) ideal of a social analyst "peeling back surface layers" to reveal the objective mechanics of a "hidden, deeper reality."

Figuration versus Field

As with Becker, the sociological approaches of Bourdieu and Elias have considerable consonance (see, for example, Paulle et al., 2012; Hughes, 2015). Ostensibly, the imagery of "field" and "figuration" shares great similarity. Both entail a focus on power balances, asymmetries, the interweaving of plans and intentions, and emergent relational patterns that are not reducible to face-to-face "interactions." However, in Elias's analyses, human figurations are not understood as "overlaying" one another in the manner of contained rectangles, or, say, Russian Dolls (see again Bourdieu's depiction of the field of cultural production, figure 1). Instead, Elias consistently depicts figurations as entailing an inter-meshing, intersecting, entangling, interlacing, and – to use one of Elias's key terms – a *sui generis* level of *integration* that is quite distinct from that of molecules, unicellular organisms, or, for that matter, mechanistic structures (*a la* critical realism). Thus, for Elias, class relations are not an ontologically separate "field" that "undergirds" others (such as the field of cultural production), they refer instead to a particular set of enduring dynamics of human figurations. Indeed, to think "figurationally" means that when we refer to particular institutions or social groups, we are always referring to figurational *nexuses*: junctures, "sections," or "locales" of a total figuration. This involves a decisive move away from "parcelling" out the social world into different "realms" or "layers" and then considering how they "overlap" and "intersect," and towards a view of the social *as* webs and tissues of intersection, interlacing, inter-dependence, etc. as these unfold across time and space.

In these and other ways, the imagery of "figuration" is thus more open and expansive than "field." One figuration invariably is part of another. Moreover, we must apprehend figurations diachronically – and here Elias's diagrammatic depiction (see again figure 3) reaches its limits. Elias's conceptualisation steers us towards a consideration always of figurational *dynamics*: how, over time, certain regularities persist, endure, change slowly, whilst others change rapidly. But we should not understand these regularities as underlying structures with a greater degree of permanence. Rather, they are emergent characteristics whereby some dynamics, some patterns of interdependence between people, become more durable than others over time. Indeed, an orientation towards human figurations entails a shift away from analysing continuities and changes in the "structure of" "society" and towards *the structure of changes and continuities in the figurations that comprise "society."*

Deep Structure vs Enduring Figurational Dynamics

We might, in this way, replace conceptual metaphors of "depth" with more temporally-oriented, less process-reductive, alternatives, which are attuned to capturing and/or expressing emergent, more or less enduring, figurational dynamics.

Where critical realists employ the static imagery of "depth," Elias steers our thinking towards a repertoire of processual imagery. Whereas Elias's language was never completely apace with his imagery and thinking, he did point towards what were invariably diachronic gestalts: figurations/processes that we can only understand as an emergent whole. He employed the imagery of directions or "curves" in processes: movements towards a particular trajectory.[6]

Elias also directed our thinking towards emergent complexity and its dynamic relational patterns, exploring the interplay between the sociogenetic and psychogenetic dimensions of such figurational developments. For instance, to return to his discussion of game models, Elias (2012b) highlights how, as figurations become more complex, their structure becomes increasingly "opaque" to those who comprise them. Particularly in the case of large-scale figurations, such as those of markets or perhaps entire societies, the people involved typically come to experience such figurations as having a "life of their own." Such experiences might lead to the notion that economies, markets, human societies, etc. are supra-human entities that have an independent existence. This compounds feelings of *homo clausus* and helps explain why the metaphor of depth itself is so appealing: the notion of something deeper, a force, a power, akin to a "god" or immanent logic, some-"thing" invisible "pulling the strings" to determine the course of society is an egocentrically affirming analogy. Likewise, this observation helps explain why so many in the social sciences adhere to the egocentric view of society (highlighted in Fig 2 above). Such "figurational blindness" (Elias, 2012b: 18) was, for Elias, interwoven into much of the fundamentally dialectical characteristics of civilising processes, in particular, and of human developmental processes, in general.

PROSPECTS FOR A CRITICAL FIGURATIONAL SOCIOLOGY

Most significantly for our current discussion, Elias's observations regarding figurational blindness return us to aspects of emancipatory critique: in particular, the idea that certain characteristics and complexities of human figurations are not directly visible and must be "seen" to be understood and ultimately addressed. Indeed, Elias (2012b) explicitly suggested that the task of sociologists was to be *destroyers or "hunters" of myths*. This is perhaps similar to the critical realist idea of emancipatory critique and, indeed, to the latter's inspiration, namely Marx's notion of critique. However, for Elias, sociology was principally a "scientific" more than a "political" enterprise. That separation, between scientific and political endeavours, was never absolute, however, and could only be striven for by generations of sociologists attempting to free themselves from what he called "heteronomous evaluations."

We can observe the most important differences between Elias and the critical tradition in this respect. At Elias's funeral, the Dutch sociologist Joop

Goudsblom mentioned in an oratory that Elias never worked to "please any power." His call was for the emancipation of sociological knowledge, not the emancipation of a particular social group, or class, or interest. However, in this respect, Elias neglected two key points that critical theorists have long understood. First, whether or not we, as sociologists, "take sides" in particular political struggles, our ideas always do. While our sociological work may not have explicit political *investments*, it invariably has political *ramifications*. And second, Elias' arguments on the role of sociologists as destroyers of myths, and on the need for sociological thought to cultivate the study of humanity-as-a-whole as the ultimate "survival unit," contains within it a humanistic set of values: that of improving humanity's well-being chances as the ultimate goal of sociological knowledge.

From such a perspective, then, we can better understand how, in the current political context, Elias's work involves, and shares with critical theory, an in-built critique of forms of nation-state exceptionalism such as those inherent in contemporary alt-right fantasies of American (and recently British) isolationism, unregulated capitalism, and ethnic and patriarchal triumphalism. Further, it critiques forms of economic and political thought nurturing ideals of isolated, egotistic individualism that ignore the globally interdependent character of human figurations and, indeed, of the relations with and of the planet's ecosystems.

In this respect, figurational sociology is *inherently* political. That said, much of Elias's focus concerns sociologists striving to work independently of political incursions. As Robert van Krieken (1998: 82) has suggested, Elias's work appears relatively simplistic in this respect: he appears to be advocating a variant of Weber's notion of value-freedom. We partially disagree with this charge. Weber talked of value neutrality, not value-freedom. The difference is significant. Elias never suggested that sociological work could be free of values. It is always value-laden. The question is not just whether it contains values, nor even whose values (i.e. those of a scientific community committed to understanding the world, or those of other vested interests), it pertains to the different ways values may come into play in such work. Here, Elias's ideas were framed in terms of his arguments about involvement and detachment. It is worth revisiting these to tease out the political implications of process sociology and its relationship with the critical project.

Involvement and Detachment

Elias (2007: 73, 169-170) understood the potentially emancipatory role of sociology as entailing a "detour via detachment" and "secondary involvement." As such, Elias does not eschew an involved role for sociologists. Instead, he advocates that sociologists should channel their involvement via particular "routes." The idea of a detour involves something of a reworking of Marx's

eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. In Elias reformulation: "the goal of sociologists is to build more adequate understandings of the social world. Armed with such understandings, they can become better equipped to change it." This, in essence, is what he meant by secondary involvement.

Thus far it would appear that Elias champions detachment as the only route to all knowledge. The idea of a "detour" seems to involve the notion that we must put involvement aside to arrive at better understandings of the world. Indeed, much of his writing (e.g. his examples of Poe's *Fisherman in the Maelstrom*, Copernicus, etc.) centres on sociologists freeing themselves from involved and fantasy-laden knowledge. However, Elias also sees "involvement" as a crucial source of insight. For example, he suggests that while we do not need to know what it feels like to be a particle to study atoms, we do need insights into what it feels like to be human to grasp human figurations[7]. Here again, Elias's case for involvement is synthetic, with a range of epistemic affordances possible from both "remove" and "proximity" to the subject-objects of study (Hughes et al., 2021).

While Elias leaves some of the tensions between involvement and detachment unresolved, he provides some potentially useful conceptual imagery that helps us think it through. Here, his notion of *alloys* of involvement and detachment is of use (Kilminster, 2004). "Alloys" suggests different degrees and modalities of blending involvement and detachment and of channelling political investments into research. Following from this, we might envisage such sociological strategies of, for example, "dispassionate involvement" where sociologists draw upon their highly involved feelings as a source of insight and as a resource to understand substantive aspects of particular social figurations. Conversely, we might conceive of "passionate detachment," a strategy involving channelling political passions – for instance, a commitment to reducing or ending the oppression of women and ethnic minorities – into a research programme that intends to develop a more adequate understanding of the emergent relational conditions under which such oppressions and the power asymmetries they entail persist, increase, diminish, and might decrease. Elias's call for such "passionate detachment" entails seeking to ensure that the knowledge thus developed has a high degree of object-adequacy or "reality congruence"; this implies developing (individually and institutionally) the capacity to accept such knowledge irrespective of what it might entail for our preconceptions and political convictions. On this basis, then, obtaining a more reliable and accurate stock of knowledge about social processes, which might in turn serve as a more secure basis for secondary involvement, might be possible.

Secondary involvement, indeed, involves suspending to a degree ambitious emancipatory interventions in the social world until there is a sufficiently secure basis to make them. This "detour" is more than solely an individual psychic one. As Rojek (1986) has suggested, it is also at once an

institutional and social process. It entails not just the steps that individual researchers might undertake; but also how sociologists can, over successive generations, build "small islands" of relatively greater certainty. Here, Elias employs the imagery of sociological knowledge processes involving a baton relay race across generations: an ongoing "conversation" of evidence, theory, and subsequent social and institutional developments (Hughes et al., 2021).

Furthermore, this concern with the relationship between secondarily involved emancipatory practice and the development of more reliable sociological knowledge invokes a consideration of those instances in the history of humanity in which major projects of transformation of human figurations were consciously implemented. In other words, it brings to the centre of analysis instances of "civilizing offensives," to use de Rooy's (1979) term. Such offensives refer to where human groups have engaged in active attempts to transform social relations, the emergent relational patterns of their figurations, and the associated habitus of people's personality structures, in directions considered emancipatory, or at least preferable to the *status quo ante*, by their promoters. Obvious historical examples of these instances are, amongst many others, the French revolution, the colonial European civilizing missions in the nineteenth century, or the Russian and Chinese communist revolutions. Studying these historical examples of major civilizing offensives allows a consideration of the dialectical dynamics between emancipatory political intervention and the largely "blind" and open-ended character of the emergent relational patterns of human figurations. On that basis, this type of study might help build in the future a sufficiently robust social fund of reality-congruent knowledge, which might allow sociologists to orient forms of secondarily involvement committed to the emancipatory transformation of human figurations in ways that avoid the horrifically high human cost that similar attempts had in the past.

Political Caution

Elias had an acute understanding of the complex psychogenic and sociogenic changes required to successfully intervene in the sphere of human figurations: to overcome oppressions, privations, wars, poverty, famine, and many other torments that plague humanity. This arose from what we might describe as a much sharper, when compared to Marx, grasp of the challenges posed by emergent social complexity and how it reinforces the unplanned character of the developmental dynamics of human figurations. For example, Elias was particularly aware of the challenges posed by violence in social relations, and the difficulties connected to controlling violence within and between human societies – a concern that, ironically, remained under-developed in Marx who, while posing violence as a means of social change, remained surprisingly silent about how to control the violence unleashed during

the emancipatory socialist revolutions he envisioned. This silence, connected with a thesis of the quick "withering away" of the state after the establishment of socialism, left Marxist-inspired movements everywhere theoretically unprepared to deal with the complexities of "socialism in power" and open to totalitarian extremes as means of violence-control (Losurdo, 2015). Elias, on the other hand, sees violence control, in its various expressions, as a key aspect of his analysis of civilizing processes and figurational analysis of long-term processes of human development. Although, as with the economy, he carefully stressed that violence control was not deterministic of any of the other elementary survival functions, including those discussed above.

Consequently, Elias's work has much greater *political caution* than the notions of emancipatory critique. By this, we mean that we might distil from Elias's work a kind of formula that is intimately tied to his ideas about knowledge. According to this, all interventions into the sphere of human figurations have a ratio of intended and unintended consequences. The more partial/incomplete and fantasy-laden our knowledge of the world is, the more interventions based on that knowledge will have a high degree of unintended, relative to intended, consequences in the longer-term. For example, subsequent political actions based on Marx's partial picture of human figurations, most notably the implementation of communism by various political regimes have had a relatively high ratio of unintended consequences relative to intended ones, including high levels of violence and human misery.

Conversely, and as we saw above, the more reality congruent our knowledge of the social world – the more it agrees with that to which it pertains – the more intended consequences interventions based on that knowledge will have in relation to unintended ones, though the question of whose intentions, and whose "heteronomous" interests, remains paramount. Here we mean to invoke a kind of shifting ratio that pivots on degrees of reality congruence. Frequently, this has been interpreted as meaning that sociologists should delay political action, or attempts to inform political action, until they have sufficient knowledge to serve as a basis for their interventions in the world.

Steve Dunne (2009) has proposed that this position essentially amounts to a kind of cop-out for figurational sociologists. It involves relegating political action to a future that effectively will never come. In other words, Elias and the figurational approach he advocates shies away from political action, and leaves us stranded in the here and now awaiting a sufficient stock of reality congruent knowledge. This is an important concern: it raises the question of whether sociologists must wait hundreds, maybe thousands of years before they can act in any kind of meaningful way to address the most pressing concerns of their own lifetimes.

In many ways, Elias's core argument is the converse of Dunne's – that sociologists have "retreated" to the present, with many becoming caught up in the "depth" conceptual imagery expressing the political concerns of the day in ways that essentially block their capacity to embark upon the kind of

sociological endeavour that is ultimately needed to address those very concerns. Nonetheless, Dunne raises an important question: that of what sociologists can do in the present beyond "passing on the baton" in a multi-generational process of developing more reality congruent knowledge about the human condition.

Here, as a means of concluding this paper and returning to its key arguments, we propose the need to think of a continuum of political interventions working alongside a related continuum of figurational complexity.

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A MODEL OF INTERVENTIONS IN THE SPHERE OF HUMAN FIGURATIONS

Dunne's question begs a quite complex equation involving the multiple continua depicted in Figure 4 below.

Local/Simple Figurational Nexuses	Large-Scale Figurations/ Humanity as a Whole
Simple/Asymmetrical Power Balances	Complex, Multiple and Nuanced Balances of Power
Destroying Myths/ Emancipatory Critique	Knowledge-Based Models of Government/Governance
Expanding Sociological 'Islands of Certainty'	

Figure 4
Multiple Continua of Figurational Complexity and Forms of Sociological Intervention

To explain, one way to approach this question is to consider three key axes or continua. The first relates to degrees of figurational complexity and scale. A relatively simple, small-scale figurational nexus, perhaps the one between a parent and a child, can be placed towards the left-hand side of the continuum. An extremely complex figuration – say that of international society – is placed towards the right.

At the current level of knowledge about human figurations, our interventions are likely to have greater chances of success (in terms of the ratio of intended to unintended consequences) regarding simpler figurations. For example, sociological knowledge about the relations between parents and children

can inform some degree of successful interventions on the part of parents to steer their relationships with their young children. Steering this figuration based on the existing stock of knowledge regarding family figurations has arguably better chances than steering international society based on the existing stock of knowledge about the dynamics of humanity's global figuration. Nevertheless, smaller-scale figurations are never isolated, and always form parts of more complex and larger figurations. As a result, steering smaller-scale figurations can never be undertaken in an absolute sense since broader figurational dynamics will also influence these smaller-scale interdependencies. As a simple example, we might think of how a war between nation states might significantly impact upon the figurational dynamics of family relations, as, at the time of writing, can be observed in relation to the Russian–Ukraine war. Elias's explicit interventions, where we find them, were typically towards the left-hand side of this equation. Examples include his work with Foulkes within the group analytic circle (see Dalal, 1998). His ambitions for the future of sociology, however, were more progressively ambitious, including eventually developing the basis to prevent inter-state conflicts.

The next key part of the equation relates to the power balances characteristic of the figuration in question. As the previously mentioned game models show, in instances of greater asymmetrical power it is far more possible for those groups/players with the greatest power potential to steer the course of the whole figuration. For example, the figuration of a prison formed by the interdependencies between guards and prisoners is amenable to considerable control by regimentation. However, as power balances become more equal, and the complexity of the figuration increases, so too predicting or steering its development becomes harder. Furthermore, sociologists' power chances – as those advising or engineering the intervention – are also part and parcel of the equation in this respect. We are invariably embedded within the figurations we seek to influence; we never stand outside of social reality. And this "our," is also an open question: us as sociologists? Us as a particular group within society? This, of course, is also part of the power dynamic equation.

Finally, there is the question of what "political interventions" means. At the current level of the stocks of sociological knowledge, what these might entail has limits. Demystifying the premises and ideologies that underline some forms of political action that are not consistent with what we already know about human societies and their emergent developmental dynamics is already possible. Most likely, this is what Elias had in mind when he talked about the role of sociologists as "destroyers of myths." But while this level of intervention is arguably within the reach of contemporary sociological knowledge, we are perhaps not yet ready to posit alternatives, let alone develop more reality congruent models of governance sufficient to avert human annihilation through inter-state warfare or climate change. Indeed, in the 1980s, Elias's best guess was that humans were likely to be wiped out through a conflict escalation between the then Soviet Union and the USA.

For Elias (2007, 2011), in the longer-term, informing the development of global governance to keep apace of global figurations was identified as the ultimate objective of sociological knowledge. A defining concern is ensuring the survival and well-being of humanity – and accordingly of a planet that can sustain human survival and well-being – as the "ultimate survival unit." However, such an enterprise will likely take many generations and our ambitions as sociologists might gradually move along these continua as sociological knowledge is developed. Furthermore, this requires a greater consensus on what sociology is for – a stronger sense of a collective endeavour and enterprise. This is a distinct vision for sociology: instead of more fragmentation and specialisation, greater synthetic integration and collective development of greater funds of reliable sociological knowledge to inform the common human pursuit, and simultaneous aversion, of possible, anticipated futures.

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* In Eastern philosophy too, similar ideas are recurrent. For example, in the Vedic Hindu tradition, there is *maya*: the illusory character of the surface material world, an artifice which needs to be transcended by meditation for arrival at deeper spiritual truth and freedom. Similar notions persist in the contemporary West in normative critiques of a 'material world': as superficial, devoid of any authentic and enduring meaning; bereft of any experiential depth (Miller, 2015).

2   Significantly, Elias's critique of the *homo clausus* conception of human beings and his proposal for an alternative imagery of *homines aperti* and human figurations echoes a much earlier critique, that of Marx (1993: 83) against the Robinsonades. In other words, the notion of the self-enclosed, isolated, rational, and self-interested individual that served as the main orienting conceptual image for classical economic theories. Marx opposes, much like Elias, the image of open, interdependent, and mutually constitutive groups of people, whose existence and character is an emergent feature of the relational social networks which they together constitute. Marx's critique of capitalism, and his understanding of the role of class *relations* in its context, can only be perceived from this relational, open image of human beings. Marx's insight is that some aspects of the social world – such as the actual workings of power in class societies – are only analytically visible when we have a theory of capitalist class *relations*, when we understand capitalist economies based on a *relational* conception of human beings and their societies. The question remains, however, of whether retaining the imagery of depth, as some critical realists have been keen to argue, is necessary to *get at* these class relations.

3   While Elias recognised Marx's 'great discovery' – that 'ownership and control of the means of production constitute the key determinants of class relations' (Dunning & Hughes, 2013: 64) he was critical of Marx presenting this as the fundamental origin of conflict between dominant and subordinate groups, and for this to appear as the central goal of human groups beyond any others.

4 The rules of chess in themselves are another dimension of this 'game' analogy. Rather than occupying a 'deeper' realm of social reality, they involve in themselves another kind of game – an interdependent figuration. For example, the *en passant rule* introduced in the fifteenth century followed, and was necessitated by, the preceding introduction of the double step rule for pawns. This 'figuration' itself arose out of the interlacing plans and intentions of chess players, authorities, as these played out in the development of the game.

5 Elias also gets us to think about other games: multi--tier games; games without rules, which become games with rules such as the Primal Contest model. The primal contest model also helps to show that no type of figuration dominates: two antagonistic groups are 'functionally interdependent' and determine one another's moves: 'Fierce antagonists, in other words, perform a function for each other since the interdependence of human beings due to their hostility is no less a functional relationship than that due to their position as friends, allies, and specialists bonded to each other by the division of labor. Their function for each other is in the last resort based on the compulsion they exert over each other by reason of their interdependence' (Elias, 2012b: 72).

6 Note, however, that Elias never conceived these trajectories as uni-linear pathways. Civilising processes, as a case in point, have many trends and countertrends. They can, as Robert van Krieken (1998) has observed, be understood to have a dialectical character as much as they produce their own 'discontents.' Figurations, then, rather than defining an uncritical, politically conservative lens on the social world, constitute an attempt to better apprehend 'the experiences in whose shadow we live... [how] a number of civilisational perils arise...' such that we might better 'understand why we actually torment ourselves in such ways' (Elias, 2012a: 8).

7 Note that as a supervisor, he always encouraged his students into researching topics in which they had at least some personal and direct experiential involvement.

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CAMPOS, MUNDOS E FIGURAÇÕES: USANDO ELIAS PARA REVISITAR O IMAGINÁRIO CONCEITUAL DE PROFUNDIDADE E A CRÍTICA EMANCIPATÓRIA

Resumo

Este estudo explora o significado do imaginário conceitual, particularmente a ideia de "profundidade" e sua relação com os ideais de crítica, ação emancipatória e os conceitos de estrutura e ação social. Examinamos como o imaginário da profundidade é evocado pela crítica de sociólogos conhecidos por ontologias sociais "planas". A partir de uma triangulação comparativa ente o "campo" de Pierre Bourdieu, o "mundo" de Howard Becker e a "figuração" de Norbert Elias, argumentamos que não apenas a acusação de "planicidade" é injustificada no caso das ontologias de Becker e Elias, mas os axiomas sobre os quais ela se assenta são estáticos, substancialistas e mecanicistas. Baseados no trabalho de Elias, consideramos os méritos de um imaginário conceitual mais dinâmico, refletindo sobre suas implicações para a forma como podemos revisitar a "política" da sociologia figurativa e os entendimentos da crítica emancipatória.

FIELDS, WORLDS AND FIGURATIONS: USING ELIAS TO REVISIT DEPTH CONCEPTUAL IMAGERY AND EMANCIPATORY CRITIQUE

Abstract

We centrally explore the significance of conceptual imagery, particularly ideas of 'depth' and its relationship to ideals of critique, emancipatory action, and conceptions of social structure and action. We consider how depth imagery is invoked in critiques of sociological thinkers understood to employ 'flat' social ontologies. We develop a three-way comparison between Pierre Bourdieu's 'field,' Howard Becker's 'world,' and Norbert Elias's 'figuration' to argue that not only is the 'flatness' charge unwarranted in the case of Becker's and Elias's ontologies, but the axioms upon which it is made are static, substantialist, and reductively mechanistic. Drawing on the work of Elias, we consider the merits of alternative more dynamically oriented conceptual imagery, reflecting upon its implications for how we might revisit the 'politics' of figurational sociology and understandings of emancipatory critique more generally.