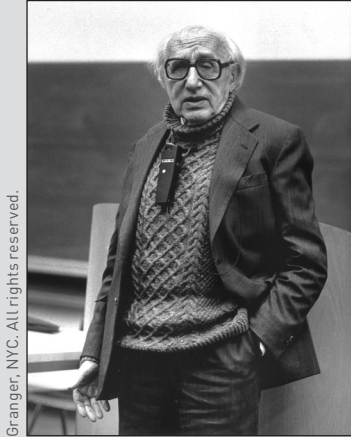


## NORBERT ELIAS

### A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH



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Norbert Elias had an interesting and instructive career. He produced his most important work in the 1930s, but it was largely ignored at the time and for many years thereafter. However, late in his life, Elias and his work were “discovered,” especially in England and the Netherlands. Today, Elias’s reputation is growing, and his work is receiving increasing attention and recognition throughout the world (Dennis Smith, 2001). Elias lived until he was 93 (he died in 1990), long enough to bask belatedly in long-delayed recognition of the significance of his work.

Elias was born in Breslau, Germany, in 1897 (Mennell, 1992). His father was a small manufacturer, and the family lived a comfortable existence. The home was apparently a loving one, and it imbued Elias

with a self-confidence that was to stand him in good stead later when his work was not recognized:

I put that down to the great feeling of security I had as a child. . . . I have a basic feeling of great security, a feeling that in the end things will turn out for the best, and I attribute that to an enormous emotional security which my parents gave me as an only child.

I knew very early on what I wanted to do; I wanted to go to university, and I wanted to do research. I knew that from when I was young, and I have done it, even though sometimes it seemed impossible. . . . I had great confidence that in the end my work would be recognized as a valuable contribution to knowledge about humanity.

(Elias, cited in Mennell, 1992:6–7)

Elias served in the German army in World War I and returned after the war to study philosophy and medicine at the University of Breslau. Although he progressed quite far in his medical studies, he eventually dropped them in favor of the study of philosophy. His work in medicine gave him a sense of the interconnections between the various parts of the human body, and that view shaped his orientation to human interconnections—his concern for figurations. Elias received his PhD in January 1924; only then did he go to Heidelberg to learn sociology.

Elias received no pay at Heidelberg, but he did become actively involved in sociology circles at the university. Max Weber had died in 1920, but a salon headed by his wife, Marianne, was active, and Elias became involved in it. He also associated with Max Weber’s brother, Alfred, who held a chair in sociology at the university, as well as with Karl Mannheim (described by Elias [1994:34] as “unquestionably brilliant”), who was slightly ahead of Elias in terms of career progress. In fact, Elias became Mannheim’s friend and unpaid, unofficial assistant. When Mannheim was offered a position at the University of Frankfurt in 1930, Elias went with him as his paid and official assistant (on the relationship between the two men and their work, see Kilminster, 1993).

Adolf Hitler came to power in February 1933, and soon after, Elias, like many other Jewish scholars (including Mannheim), went into exile, at first in Paris and later in London (it is