

## Editorial

### *Education and civilization*

Ademir Gebara<sup>1</sup>  0000-0001-6727-6878

The *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de Campinas (PUC-Campinas, Pontifical Catholic University of Campinas)* is the University I attended when I was taking my undergraduate courses, so it is with great joy that I participate in this editorial effort, in the organization of this thematic session called Education and Civilization, where texts focusing on different empirical realities and theoretical approaches are presented around the proposed theme.

Border “Civilization and frontier *habitus* in the work of José de Melo e Silva”, by André Soares Ferreira, PhD, is an article from his recent doctorate thesis at the Faculty of Education of the *Universidade Federal da Grande Dourados (Federal University of Grande Dourados)*. In this article we observe that in the historiography of the border region studied, the concepts of Education and Civilization are intertwined, indicating a civilizing process with deep regional marks, in this case, marked by the dry border region of Brazil and Paraguay.

The article “Education in Amazonian communities”, based on the doctoral dissertation of Gláucio Campos Gomes de Matos, PhD, researcher of the *Universidade Federal do Amazonas (Federal University of Amazonas)*, defended at the School of Physical Education of the *Universidade Estadual de Campinas (Campinas State University)*, under the guidance of Maria Beatriz Rocha Ferreira, PhD, both authors. This article focuses on the education of river-dwelling (*ribeirinho*) communities through an ethnographic research supported by Norbert Elias’s Theory of Civilizing Processes.

Norman Gabriel, PhD, of the University of Plymouth points out that Elias did not explicitly address educational practices, but was always interested in social learning processes, especially in the relationship between children and adults, with this learning based on something typically human: enjoying learning. Starting from John Macmurray and John Dewey, adding a psychoanalytic approach, his article advances the overcoming of the dichotomy between traditional education and progressive education.

To better integrate the above mentioned texts, I will make a brief introduction to Elias’s theories; The plural in this case is an important alert to two fundamental issues. The first is that we are dealing

---

<sup>1</sup> Universidade Estadual de Campinas, Faculdade de Educação Física. Av. Érico Veríssimo, 701, Cidade Universitária Zeferino Vaz, 13083-851, Barão Geraldo, Campinas, SP, Brasil. E-mail: <am\_gebara@yahoo.com.br>.

Como citar este artigo/How to cite this article

Gebara, A. Education and civilization. *Revista de Educação PUC-Campinas*, v.24, n.3, p.345-343, 2019. <http://dx.doi.org/10.24220/2318-0870v24n3a4667>



with an author who, at the age of eighty, explicitly assumes the construction of two theories. In the first case, with the "Theory of civilizing processes" (Elias, 1993, 1994a) and, in his later years, already blind, with the advances in the construction of the "Symbolic theory" (Elias, 1994b). It is worthwhile for the curious reader who is interested in Elias to read his testimony, translated into Portuguese by Zahar in 2000 under the title "Norbert Elias by himself" (Elias, 2000).

Let's look at something about Elias and the Theory of Civilizing Processes. Norbert Elias was born in Breslau (Poland), which today is part of Germany, in 1897, and died in Amsterdam (Netherlands) in 1990. Son of a Jewish family, his father, Hermann Elias, passed away in 1940 in Breslau, and his mother, Sophie Elias, passed away around 1940 in Auschwitz. Having served in World War I as a soldier, he fled Germany upon the rise of Nazism in 1933.

His academic trajectory in Medicine, prior to his participation in the 1914 War, and later in Sociology, both completed in Germany, mark his intellectual background, as one of the important aspects of his way of thinking is the articulation between learned and genetically acquired behavior.

For Elias, sociology refers to people – people living in "interdependencies" in various forms, precisely these social figurations, in which multiple interdependencies that shape and involve living in society are established. Mobile social "configurations" are established, both internally and externally to a particular group. They are always flowing, in the experiential process, and the resulting transformations, some rapid and ephemeral, others slower but perhaps more lasting, define and redefine the balance of power between people and groups. These social configurations are, therefore, unexpected consequences of the countless possibilities of social interactions experienced, with "power" always being placed as a fundamental element of any configuration. In this case, we should not think of power in the Marxist sense of control of the state apparatus or of relations of production, but as something that runs through all human relations in a multidimensional way. Power cannot be thought of as a component of a fragmented society (spheres, variables, levels); There are no universal prominences or generalizations, in other words, the state, as a synthesis of a certain conception of power, is strategic to industrial societies. However, in view of the long and differentiated process of constitution and establishment of the forms of power, other forms of institutional power organization also occurred, interacting with the unplanned, 'blind' configurations experienced in daily life.

In this direction, we find one of the basic elements of a long-term process intertwining unintentional actions of both groups and individuals. This process is called the "civilization process". It is a necessarily unplanned and unpredictable process, especially with regard to the long-term changes that have occurred in human figurations<sup>2</sup>. Finding empirical evidence of this statement is, as Elias himself warns, one of the central goals that led him to write "The civilizing process" (Elias, 1993, 1994).

The central point upon which the theory of the civilization process rests is the existence of this "blind" (unplanned) and empirically evident process. It is the process of "cortization" and/or "parlamentarization" of medieval warriors; That is to say, in practical terms, that: the violence embedded in the daily lives of warriors gives way to the debate and refinement of the attitudes of courtiers. Conflict resolution and violence control are now being distinguished in relation to the immediate and explicit use

---

<sup>2</sup> For Elias, the terms configuration and figuration have the same meaning; at different times in his writings he operates with both concepts referring from small occasional groups to more permanent national configurations.

of force/violence. Far from constituting an antithesis, violence and civilization are complementary processes, they are specific forms of interdependence. Civilization will depend on the stage of control of violence, the monopoly of taxes that allow it to be a sufficiently effective force to enforce internal pacification. That is, economic growth and state establishment play a key role in this process. Elias ends his Introduction to Sociology by putting this question very clearly:

The rise and fall of groups within configurations and the concomitant structural tensions and conflicts are central to all evolutionary processes. They have to be placed at the center of any sociological theory of evolution. Otherwise, it becomes impossible to get to the central (theoretical and practical) problem that sociologists constantly face. The problem is whether and to what extent uncontrolled tensions and conflicts between different groups of people can be subject to conscious control and guidance by those involved in them, or whether such tensions and conflicts can only be resolved by violence, either as revolutions within states or as wars among them (Elias, 1980, p.191, our translation)<sup>3</sup>.

How then to understand this process of civilization in such a way as to characterize it? It constitutes its main element, especially considering the cases of France, Germany and England, although at different times, besides the cortenization of medieval warriors, a change in the private nature of power, implying a process of democratization and representativeness in the conduct of public affairs. Alongside this, it is a process of expanding interdependent relations, as regards both the division of labor and the emergence of an international market. From the point of view of the democratization of decision-making processes, it is important to consider the changing dependency relations between the elite and the population. It is good to remember the new configuration of social classes, minority groups, the emergence of women as a political force; These examples make the new configuration of interdependence processes very clear.

In short, Elias's theory becomes clearer as we observe how the controls are systematized through which it becomes possible to mark the stage of development of society. This stage can be determined by: (1) a process of political, administrative centralization and internal peace control (emergence of states); (2) a process of democratization, due to the increase of chains of interdependence, especially by the leveling and functional democratization of the exercise of power; (3) the refinement of conduct and the increasing self-control in social and personal relations; In this sense there is a clear increase of consciousness (super ego) in the regulation of behavior.

It can be said that the central question of 'configurational studies' turns to the connections between power, behavior and emotions, in a long-term view, meaning that research problems are taken from the perspective of processes. There is a network of relationships between human beings, in which the balance of power constantly changes, asymmetrically, without dichotomizing authors and actors, the individual and society. It is not a matter of solving what is real through new theoretical concepts; processes cannot become states.

<sup>3</sup> In the original: "A ascensão e queda de grupos dentro das configurações e as tensões e conflitos estruturais concomitantes, são centrais em todos os processos evolutivos. Têm que ser colocados no centro de qualquer teoria sociológica da evolução. De outra forma, torna-se impossível chegar ao problema (teórico e prático) central com o qual os sociólogos constantemente se defrontam. Este problema é se e até que ponto as tensões e os conflitos não controlados, entre diferentes grupos de pessoas, podem ser sujeitos a um controle e a uma orientação conscientes por parte daqueles que neles estão envolvidos, ou se tais tensões e conflitos apenas podem ser resolvidos pela violência, quer como revoluções dentro dos estados, quer como guerras entre eles".

It is important to keep in mind that the process can also be a process of decivilization (Nazism, for example). It is also necessary to emphasize that this model of analysis is centered in the history of Europe, more specifically in the history of England, France and Germany. It would be a Europe-centered process, not necessarily Eurocentric, and in this respect one of the most interesting questions in the Theory of Civilizing Process is: to what extent do colonized societies build their self-image based on the European "consciousness of civilization"?

According to the essential elements identified to characterize the civilizing process, Elias formulates a "triad of basic controls" that would demonstrate the developmental stage of a civilization:

a) Control of natural events: we could then say that the natural sciences have developed much more, since the control of non-human events takes priority. Scientific and technological development correspond to the level of control achieved by man in relation to the natural. In this process, the role of education is quite evident. In general we can say that the teaching of natural sciences and technology has been one of the pillars that typify the educational system, at least in terms of school curriculum content and assessment processes.

b) Control of relations between humans, that is, of social relations: it is evident, and Elias reaffirms this in several passages, that it is quite characteristic of modern societies that the dimension of the hypotheses of control over natural relations is superior and grows faster than the dimension related to the hypotheses of control over social relations. Or, still, natural sciences have developed much more than social sciences, as a result of the greater difficulty in controlling social relations.

c) From what the individual has learned during his or her life in order to exercise self-control: without taking too much risk with regard to fidelity to Elias's thought, I believe I can affirm herein that the central role of Education in his theory, especially when it comes to the articulation with the field of science and technology. The development of human knowledge always occurs within lived configurations, being a fundamental aspect of the development of these people in society.

Like every theoretical model of analysis, Elias's proposal has received some criticism. According to Van Krieken (1998), this criticism can be concentrated on four fundamental aspects: (1) Given the question of continuity and change, would there have been the degree and type of transformation in human conduct, as Elias argues? (2) Are civilization and barbarism broad enough definitions to account for the contradictions and conflicts of civilizing processes? (3) Does the emphasis on the blind, unplanned nature of civilizing processes obscure human intervention? Are we talking about civilizing processes or moments? (4) Is the relationship established by Elias between psychic life and social relations clear enough?

In a nutshell, without an a priori adherence to Norbert Elias's thinking, and recognizing the need for a critical approximation of his views, the author's contribution to reorienting sociological theory in the sense of breaking polarization in some Manichean moments in "classical bipolar" cases (micro and macroanalysis, structure and conjuncture, determination and indetermination, historical and sociological) is undeniable. It is important to make a contribution by emphasizing social relations in long-term processes experienced by interdependent human beings in society, acting according to their "habitus". It is not a matter of uncritically accepting the long-term perspective in the historical approach; Rather, it is about calling attention to the problem from Elias's perspective, in order to visualize new possibilities of approach, new problems and new perspectives to focus on the History of Education.

## References

- Elias, N. *Introdução à sociologia*. Lisboa: Edições 70, 1980.
- Elias, N. *O processo civilizador: formação do Estado e civilização*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1993. v.2.
- Elias, N. *O processo civilizador: uma história dos costumes*. 2. ed. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 1994a. v.1.
- Elias, N. *Teoria simbólica*. Lisboa: Oeiras, 1994b.
- Elias, N. *Norbert Elias por ele mesmo*. Rio de Janeiro: Jorge Zahar, 2000.
- Van Krieken, R. *Norbert Elias*. London: Routledge, 1998.

Received and approved on 6/19/2019.