

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Norbert Elias and **Eric Dunning**, *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilising Process*, edited by Eric Dunning. Collected Works of Norbert Elias, v.7. Chester Springs PA: University College Dublin Press / Dufour Editions, 2008, 336 pp. \$US 119.95 hardcover (978-1-904558-43-9)

First published in 1986, Elias and Dunning's watershed work on sport and leisure has been reissued as part of the *Collected Works of Norbert Elias* by the University College Dublin Press — a laudable endeavour given that the corpus of his writings was released in a rather desultory manner. It may come as a surprise to some that Elias was a pioneer in the sociology of sport. The topic is not as incongruous as it might initially seem: as a "civilizing spurt" it provides exemplary subject matter for substantiating his celebrated thesis that the civilizing process occasions more sublimated patterns of behaviour and feeling. Hence he envisions the study as advancing knowledge in both the domain of sport and the social *habitus* more generally. The former is also intended as a contribution to the understanding of small group dynamics and the sociology of emotions; the latter as a critique of the fractured specialization he laments has taken hold of the sociological imagination.

Elias's introduction — a comparative politico-historical *tour de force* in its own right — lays out the argument that frames the book's diverse yet interrelated chapters. The long-term and far-reaching consequences of the monopolization of legitimate means of violence by the state and the advent of parliamentary politics in England, in conjunction with a broader nonmilitaristic form of competition among states, is reflected in the now prevalent use of leisure time for the pursuit of restrained violence. While the source of this particular genesis differs from the civilizing drive galvanized by the French court, the end result is the same: "The ruling of conduct and sentiment became stricter, more differentiated and all-embracing" (p. 5), culminating in a heightened sensitivity to violence, the attenuation of excitement, and escalated formalization of rules that characterizes an array of sports. In this vein, the book examines the relatively rapid and diffuse adoption of English sport across Europe, which first took place among the upper classes, landed aristocracy, and gentry in the 18th century.

Violence is still a central aspect of many contemporary sports. But significant qualitative differences between 18th century sport and contemporary sport can be discerned: in boxing the establishment of weight categories and adoption of protective equipment; in rugby and football (soccer) the consolidation and standardization of long-standing local rules; and in fox hunting the substitution of pleasure derived from a cruel end by enthrallment with the process of hunting itself. And so it is that, especially in industrial and highly routinized societies wherein propensities for serious and threatening types of excitement have abated, play acquires a compensatory character that allows for "a new 'refreshment of the soul' in the otherwise even tenor of ordinary social life" (p. 53). It thus evokes a special kind of tension and pleasurable excitement, which allows ostensibly contradictory feelings to flow. Recognizing this, Elias hopes, will compel sociologists to transcend the simplistic dichotomization between conflict and solidarity, and work and leisure that has marred much research.

This edition departs from the previous one in several stylistic and substantive ways: changes have been made by Dunning to Elias's sometimes idiosyncratic grammar and updated footnotes have been inserted throughout the text. In the third chapter, material originally part of a shorter version of a paper which included comments made for the International Committee for Sport Sociology Conference in 1969 has been added. Likewise, the fourth chapter is supplemented by a section which, although written in English, was only incorporated in the German and Dutch translations. Other noteworthy additions include the second part of Elias's unpublished essay on the genesis of sport as a sociological problem (Chapter 5) and a previously omitted chapter on sport and violence (Chapter 6), along with articles published by Dunning in 1979 and 1983 (Chapters 9 and 10) on bonding and the social significance of sport. Chapter 12 is a wholly new rendition that elaborates upon and updates Dunning's essays on football hooliganism that appeared between 2000 and 2002. Dunning has also added a welcome postscript to Chapter 11 on gender (from which Chapters 8 and 9 would have greatly benefitted as well), wherein he discusses developments that have taken place in the field since the publication of their work. Unfortunately the addendum is too cursory to do justice to the fecund debate that ensued with feminist scholars in particular. This encounter is important because it encapsulates a critique of other key theoretical and methodological issues ancillary to the civilizing process, notably, the purported gains of detached and figurational analysis.

As his work became more well-known in the 1980s and 1990s Dunning was drawn into debates with feminists, who argued that treating

gender as a mere function of relational activity masks male power resources, while simultaneously calling into question the desirability and possibility of value-neutrality and detachment. Although many were guilty of oversimplifying and misinterpreting key conceptual tenets, they nonetheless exposed important weaknesses of the paradigm — such as its Eurocentrism and equally insufficient concern with universal and particular developments — and inaugurated a rich dialogue and research agenda. Moreover, they ultimately converged with Elias and Dunning's appreciation of the incomplete nature of knowledge, the inherently processual makeup of social phenomena, and the merit of theoretical modes of investigation. Figurational sociology has been severely criticized for being descriptive and untestable, but this has not in the least hindered its heuristic value and the role it has played in promoting greater dialogue between the natural and the social sciences. With respect to sport, though, its greatest shortcoming continues to be the lack of a serious cross-disciplinary research program and accretion of empirical data.

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