The Idea of Social Time in Norbert Elias

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ABSTRACT. This article reviews the relevance of Norbert Elias's contribution to the study of social time, concentrating on how the theme of time is currently at the core of social theory. Elias's definition of time enables us to understand that dominant time, which varies historically according to different kinds of society, expresses the need for an organization of work and reflects above all each society's privileged values. Social time always results from a choice; it is therefore qualitative even when, for instance, it has been formulated in strictly quantitative and mathematical terms. But time is also a norm, perhaps the most pervasive among social norms. If one adopts a temporal viewpoint, it becomes easier to rid oneself of the conceptual dichotomies – nature and culture, individual and society – which constitute the main dilemma that contemporary sociological thought has inherited from its 'founding fathers'. Furthermore, the time discipline to which people willingly submit indicates the level of self-restraint, the taming of impulse, and therefore the level of 'civilization' they have reached. KEY WORDS • Elias • self-control • social theory • time

Norbert Elias's contribution to the 'sociology of time' is crucial for various reasons:

1. Elias's discussion of social time[1] follows a precise conceptual definition.
2. His theory of civilization attaches great importance to the development of a methodical, disciplined temporal *habitus* as being one of the most significant elements in the not overly restrictive but nevertheless continual self-control to which civilized man acquiesces.
3. His theory of symbols gives a very clear example of the operation of the symbol of time.
4. In his struggle against the use of dichotomous categories in the social

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sciences, he uses time to demonstrate how a sociology of configuration works, by analysing the field of tension created by realities which are only apparently in opposition, such as nature and culture or the individual and society.
5. He overturns the terms of the old debate on the relationship between free time and work time, freeing it from all ideological colouring and revealing the alternation of self-control and freedom of the instincts underlying the alternation of work time, time for daily duties and leisure time.
6. Within a sociological atmosphere chiefly focused on the study of social time as collective norm, he provides the tools for a study of time as individual choice.

How Can Social Time be Defined?

Defining the concept of time would seem an essential priority for the sociologist who is doing research on social time. That sociologist would also have to work to keep the idea of time clear of the two traps into which discussions on time regularly fall, the self-evidence trap and the mystery trap. Self-evidence and mystery are present in the much quoted passage in the *Confessions* of St Augustine, in the dilemma he identifies: intuitively, everyone knows very well what time is, but its mystery becomes impenetrable when we try to explain it.

Unlike the philosopher, the sociologist can undertake the more modest task of tracing in collective life the nature of that human experience which we call temporal and the consequences of working through that experience: norms and ways of organizing time invented to satisfy prevailing needs, individual choices, and the values and priority meanings that are attributed to it.

Elias undertakes the none too easy task of defining what social time is, of establishing what the essential, historically unchanging components are of what we call 'time', both from the viewpoint of the norm and from that of experience and choice. Emile Durkheim is ahead of him, of course, in this undertaking, but only in highlighting one of the aspects of time: the supplementary aspect of the collective and 'sacred' construction of time. The individual's experience and personal construction of time are problems which are neither raised nor explored in his work. In Elias's thinking, on the contrary, the questions posed by social time are clearly formulated and exhaustive answers are given.

Since conceptions of time change, what concept of time can take account of the experience, both individual and collective, which the idea of time evokes? How is it that everyone, in making a choice, constructs their own personal time while still remaining subject to the restraints of social and natural time? What needs for organization and integration do the different societies in the past manifest in setting up temporal systems? Why is the expression of these needs

inevitably bound up with priority values, meanings and conceptions of the world connected to conceptions of time?

How can a concept of time be constructed so as to be a useful tool in social science research? What concept can express with any clarity the subjective relations and the operations performed by human beings in transforming the experience of change into time and respecting the norm? How do people use this tool that they themselves invented and that sums up so well the experience of a *transitory state* in the face of which there is the need to *choose*, to declare some *relative freedom?*

Elias's sociological definition of time is a good starting point for answers to all these questions. In Elias's view, 'Timing thus is based on people's capacity for connecting with each other two or more different sequences of continuous changes, one of which serves as a timing standard for the other (or others)' (Elias, 1992: 72) or, even more clearly, '… the word "time" is a symbol of a relationship that a human group of beings biologically endowed with the capacity for memory and synthesis, establishes between two or more continua of changes, one of which is used by it as a frame of reference or standard of measurement for the other or others' (Elias, 1992: 46).

The social construction of time, therefore, goes back to a specific *human ability to work on the experience of change, to react, to organize and confer meaning on the experience*. Norbert Elias's definition becomes clearer and its expository strength is revealed if it is read in terms of psychological researches into the perception of time and in the light of the mythological and religious figures to which the idea of time has given birth.[2]

In nearly all the studies on research into the origin of time awareness, understood as the working through of the experience of change, two types of experience are indicated as central: that of continuity/discontinuity and that of recurrence.[3]

1. The main form of experiencing time (change) concerns continuity/discontinuity. These are obviously polar categories which can only be defined in terms of each other, since they complement each other and are only capable of consideration in their reciprocity. We experience discontinuity when we realize that a change has taken place in some part of our reality: in our body, in our thoughts, in the physical or social world around us. This type of experience stems from an event, in relation to which one can see a before and after, something referred to in expressions like 'from then on' or 'from that day on'. In individual and collective life *memory* is structured round events like this, which become particularly significant when one reflects on one's own identity. When we want to define ourselves either individually or collectively, a fundamental role is given to this experience of change, in which memory is anchored to the event in pronouncing a future project.

2. The second experience of time (change) is the regular cyclical return of the same phenomena: pulse beats, sleeping and waking, day and night, Christmas and Easter follow each other and provoke behaviour that seems unchanging. The seasons of the year alternate with social seasons and give place to *recurrences*, not of events which can be seen as having a before and an after. Before and after become relative terms, so every before is necessarily an after and vice versa. Spring comes before summer but after winter, just as Christmas comes before Easter or the moment in which certain taxes or bills have to be paid, which both precedes and follows the moment in which others have to be paid. Clearly this second experience of time is much less dramatic than the first in that it dilutes the idea of the irreversibility of change.

These are just the two main forms of experience of change; many others have been analysed and could be mentioned but here we are concerned only to note the progress which is made possible by Elias's definition.[4]

What kind of experience is the experience of change? Mythology offers abundant proof that the experience of change is associated with an awareness which causes anxiety and is difficult to accept: the awareness of limits, of death, of the transitory nature of everything about human life. Consciousness of time and consciousness of death are clearly related. Chronos is a threatening god who eats his progeny. All religions have tried to exorcise the idea of time through the invention of a sacred time that, as Mircea Eliade has shown, has the role of cancelling out historical time from a person's life, with the experience of the return of identical things, the reversibility of time's arrow, the suspension of the future (Eliade, 1959a, 1959b).

All religions have found ways of cancelling out human awareness of the implacable mutability of everything that surrounds and constitutes humankind. The myth of eternity, in Christianity, in which the future ceases forever and choices can no longer be made, takes away from the future life all that most conspicuously distinguishes the human nature of existence – there being a flow of intelligible changes which occur together with other flows of change, dominated by the awareness of death and in which it is possible and indeed necessary to make choices.

If one reflects on the myths that humanity has created to explore the experience of change, the mythological figures of time, Chronos and Chairos, are distinctly different from Chaos, who is the symbol of disordered, incomprehensible and constant change of everything all together. This would seem to suggest that the experience of time has from the very start been an experience of change which, however problematic and anxiety-inducing, is ultimately comprehensible to human beings and susceptible of being controlled and made meaningful. Right from the first experience the idea of 'time' would seem to

suggest an experience of change which is ordered, capable of meaning, and within which choices can be made. If it were not so, there would be no explanation for the mythological figures, e.g. Chaos, which stand for other forms of change and its resulting uncontrollability and incomprehensibility.

On the basis of Elias's indications, we can thus put forward the hypothesis that what we sum up in the word 'time' is the attribution of meaning to change, done by human collectivities but capable of individual construction, and its organization in terms of goals and other affirmation of values. The creation of time might be a uniquely social way of pronouncing on the 'meaning of life'. It simultaneously satisfies organizational goals – establishing when to work, when to play, when to pray – and moral objectives for the collectivity – deciding what is most important to achieve in life, i.e. in a period which seems circumscribed. It might be a good agreement with the gods and/or with one's peers, to have respect for tradition or to make a lay project for control over nature, the growth of economic prosperity and scientific and technological progress. Whatever the historical context from which the experience of time springs, whatever the prevailing collective norms, the theme of time is always accompanied by the theme of *limit* (scarcity of time which is more or less consciously felt) and the theme of *choice*. Temporal norms would seem to play the eminently social role of guaranteeing the organization of work, the systematic satisfaction of reciprocal expectations in people's behaviour towards each other, at the same time as they express evaluations and moral positions in face of the fundamental experience of change and the awareness of death. Human societies construct *changeable ways* of measuring time with the *non-changeable* purpose of connecting change to the meaning they intend to confer on collective works, history and individual life in general.

'Civilized' Social *Habitus*

In what contemporary society calls 'time', Elias identified one of the central points of reference as that set of internal self-control mechanisms that civilized people adopt in every aspect of their lives. The 'civilized' temporal *habitus* is a form of social sensitivity, a way of behaving and of feeling both individual and part of the collectivity, which has emerged historically along a certain line of development, following a secular path whose design can be reconstructed although there is no one creator. If it is true that living in society requires a certain amount of denial of spontaneity and satisfaction of one's instincts, then the kind of restraint which the different historical forms of collective life impose on their members varies spectacularly, both qualitatively and quantitatively, in terms of time restraint, as the researches of numerous anthropologists, travellers and historians have confirmed.[5]

As for the forms of repression of drives that the civilizing process has progressively imposed on the individual, Elias maintains that there is an evolutionary tendency which goes from a powerful, discontinuous kind of self-restraint allowing plenty of opportunities for satisfaction of the instincts, to a weak but constant, internalized self-restraint which offers very few chances of transgressing.

The models of self-restraint in simpler societies than we live in nowadays are generally discontinuous, linked to particular circumstances: they may require enormous efforts, at times superhuman, but normally permit a certain degree of spontaneity. When it is a question of attacking in time of war, or of surviving torture, physical exhaustion, or fear during initiation rites, or again if it is necessary to be super fast in pulling in the fishing nets or getting the harvest under cover before the arrival of the hurricane, very high level skills of self-discipline are required. But these skills are for specific moments, linked to emergencies, and they do not compromise the individuals' normal possibilities of giving way to their inspiration or expressing instincts and passions. Even from the viewpoint of the collectivity, periods of sacrifice or self-mortification (let us imagine a siege, ritual fasting, or the sacrifice of victims in atonement – practices common among 'simple' societies) alternate with periods in which there is abandonment to very powerful and uncontrolled pleasures which are beyond temporal discipline, at least in the strict sense (the sacking of a city, torture, the slaughter of enemies, periods of celebration).

In highly organized, differentiated societies the restraint model is turned on its head. As a general norm, it is as mild as it is implacable, as pervasive as it is invisible. It is difficult to recognize that there is an external restraint at all, since it has been internalized and tends to spread to cover all the circumstances of life. The self-regulation in matters of time found in modern societies is not a biologically or psychologically determined phenomenon but a widespread social *habitus* which is accepted apparently spontaneously by nearly everyone. As Elias notes, a 'self-regulation in terms of time which one encounters almost everywhere in later-stage societies is neither a biological datum, part of human nature, nor a metaphysical datum, part of an imaginary a priori, but a social datum, an aspect of the developing social habitus of humans which forms part of every individual person' (Elias, 1992: 148–9).

Acceptance of the temporal norm has taken a form which, having passed through a long series of historical transformations, through civilizing and uncivilizing waves, and still in constant flux, is typical of the contemporary world: it has become continuous, uniform, almost without moments of high intensity but very demanding and pervasive. Above all, it has somehow hidden itself from the individual conscience and become perceived subjectively as a personal psychological inclination. Elias notes that those who declare themselves incapable of breaking the rules of punctuality have the impression that

they are describing a personal idiosyncrasy rather than admitting the extent to which they have completely internalized a social *habitus* concerning co-ordination of times. 'The time experience of people who belong to firmly time-regulated societies is one of many examples of personality structure which are compelling as biological characteristics, yet socially acquired' (Elias, 1992: 141). This *habitus* of worrying about efficiency and punctuality has grown over a long period of history along with other sensitivities and rejections which, put together, are the result of what Elias has analysed as the 'civilizing process'. In the contemporary world, external temporal restraint transforms itself into self-restraint, an all-pervading acute sensibility to all aspects of the temporal regulation of life.

Given that restraint models in all societies change historically, the history of the relationship between external and internal restraint illustrates very clearly the relationship that is established between individuals and the society they belong to. Everyone more or less freely and individually organizes their time, their day, their life, their role in history, but at the same time in abeyance to the restraints put upon them by their social position, their physical resources, the historical period in which they live.

In highly differentiated societies, in which everyone is linked to everyone else in long chains of interdependence, what in 'simple' societies is an external restraint – the necessity to obey certain norms which the mighty in society take upon themselves to enforce – is transformed into spontaneous loyalty to an internalized rule, into self-restraint, and it becomes difficult to behave otherwise than as the norm dictates. A long historical course following the alternating events of the civilization process leads to the apparent paradox that an abstract concept such as time can manage to exercise so great a control over personal and collective life.

In industrially advanced countries the chain linking people is so long and tortuous that the collective necessity to determine time and regulate it minutely is imposed as one of the principal rules for cohabitation. The importance given to respect for temporal norms in these societies gradually becomes a 'feeling for time' in the people who belong to these societies. In Elias's words:

> One of the characteristics which make this connection between the size of and the pressure within the network of interdependences on the one hand, and the psychological make-up of the individual on the other particularly clear, is what we call the 'tempo' of our time. This tempo is in fact nothing other than a manifestation of the multitude of intertwining chains of interdependence which run through every single social function people have to perform, and of the competitive pressure permeating this densely populated network and affecting … every single act of individuals. This may show itself in the case of an official or businessman in the profusion of his [sic] appointments or meetings, and in that of the worker by the exact time and duration of his movements: in both cases the tempo is an expression of the multitude of interdependent actions, of the length and density of the

> chains composed by individual actions, and of the intensity of struggles that keep this whole interdependent network in motion. In both cases a function situated at a junction of so many chains of action demands an exact allocation of time: it makes people accustomed to subordinating momentary inclinations to the overriding necessities of interdependence: it trains them to eliminate all irregularities from behaviour and to achieve permanent self-control. This is why tendencies in the individual so often rebel against social time by his [sic] super-ego, and why so many people come into conflict with themselves when they wish to be punctual. (Elias, 1982: 247–8)

Time and the Theory of Symbols

If time is a social construction, it can only be understood by going over the historical phases, discovering how it stems from the maturing of various orders of change in the course of which western culture has become increasingly oriented towards the use of ever more abstract symbols, suited to cognitive styles whose point of reference is the natural sciences, and towards rules of conduct which are made compatible through extreme mutual interdependence.

Let us take a look at how the notion of time that we use nowadays corresponds to a certain level of evolution in the theory of symbols.

'Time' is the symbol for a relationship set up by a human collectivity among different orders of change: this symbol undergoes great modifications when the society goes from being 'simple' to highly differentiated. From the perspective of the civilization process this symbol has changed in keeping with the ups and downs of life, with periods of stalemate and others of rapid evolution, but always in a direction that we can recognize and reconstruct even though no single person has consciously pursued it. Human societies have followed a long path that has led them to tend to use symbols that imply recourse to syntheses which are ever wider and more generalized. Nowadays 'time' is a symbol that expresses a very high level of synthesis.

'Time' is the symbol of a *relationship* set up between the individual (the continual transformations in body and thoughts) and some external change, such as, for example, a natural or social change – sunset, shop closing time, the sound of bells. This relationship is expressed in increasingly abstract, general terms as the civilization process evolves, which means that the relationship tends to get further and further away from the context in which it was set up and from any concrete manifestation.

Just as the notion of 'winter' progressively loses its primitive meaning of cold season in which one 'feels cold', and becomes a linguistic formula shared all over the world to mean the months from December to April, even in countries where it is the hot period of the year, in the same way time has become in highly differentiated societies a symbol of relationships: '… it does not symbolise

relationships between particular persons or situations' as in simple societies. 'In this respect time belongs to the same order of symbols as those with which mathematicians work. It is a purely relational symbol' (Elias, 1992: 133).

The *sabbath* is a good example of this kind of symbol, because it recalls a specific cultural world and social relationships moulded by a common belief and shared working habits. The date at the top of a letter, on the other hand, is a temporal indication that serves as a symbol of a relationship abstracted from any context. The symbol is pure in that it has no relationship to people or things. The date conveys information that can be used even by people from very different environments and cultures.

Before human beings became accustomed to using 'purely relational symbols' like those used in mathematics, much human work was accumulated and transmitted from one generation to another; accordingly many historical changes were gradually brought about. Understanding a sociological phenomenon also requires the capacity to write its history, to reactivate the memory of the various forms it has taken and which tend to be forgotten. 'Yet human beings must fail to understand themselves and the possibility of their open future if they fail to integrate into their fund of knowledge that of the development leading from the past to the present' (Elias, 1992: 198).

A historical perspective is as indispensable for the sociologist as it is for anyone else who wants to understand him/herself: in both cases one has to know the past and identify the processes that connect the past to the present and then the present to the future.

An analysis of how the construction of symbols changes historically in relation to other historical circumstances permits us to see the kind of symbol time is, how it has been used for centuries to represent concrete, specific, determined relationships between human beings and their environment (the time for milking, the new moon, cock crow, the coming of spring) up to the present almost complete abstraction. To fix a date for the day of harvesting the wheat or fix it for 26.7.2001 implies the use of very different relational symbols. The first requires there to be certain social practices in life which are shared, that there be agreement on when and where certain collective activities should occur, while the second does not demand any context and can therefore be applied to an infinite number of situations. It can serve to organize the most varied situations in any geographical area, in any climate, in the most disparate social and economic conditions.

Against Categories Created on Dichotomies

One thing which Elias insisted on almost obsessively in all his work is the necessity for the sociologist to abandon the use, so prevalent in western philo-

sophical thinking, of dichotomies as categories in the analysis of reality. Reference to these categories leaves one in an impasse of oppositions such as individual/society, or nature/culture, from which it is very difficult to find a way out. It is superfluous to recall that this is one of the most difficult problems to solve in social theory and one to which all great sociologists have found their own answer. Abandoning dichotomies involves considering why it is human beings who make the decisions and create history, yet within a social framework that often seems decidedly restrictive; or again, why it is always human beings who decide what they intend to do, but within the physical and biological restraints imposed by nature. The solution to this old problem in sociological thinking, which is clearly manifest in the traditional opposition between structure or systems theories and action theories centred on the intentions of the actor, is probably not so easily solved as Elias thinks, but the adoption of a temporal perspective certainly facilitates the undertaking.

As Barbara Adam has rightly noted:

> Dualisms are deeply anchored in our thought and they permeate social theory. As synchrony and diachrony, structure and change, individual and society, nature and nurture, quantity and quality, objectivity and subjectivity, order and chaos they haunt our theories and analyses. A focus on time brings these dualisms into high relief and shows them to be untenable. (Adam, 1990: 16)

A non-dichotomous framing of the relationship set up between natural, social and individual time makes it easy, according to Elias, to identify the process of individualization. That is the process through which individual choice is made recognizable while the constrictive collective character of the norm, the limits imposed by social, and natural structure and by physical and biological constitution, are still clearly in evidence. When one researches the use and individual conception of time, it becomes obvious how the attribution of meaning and a natural or normative restraint converge to provide an explanation for certain attitudes and behaviours: every individual invents original, very personal solutions to shape the raw material of natural, social and biological times to their own needs, to construct their own individual time.

Research into how individuals organize their own time reveals the various strategies and personal styles everyone uses to create a more or less authentic 'production': faced with an identical temporal restraint, everyone reacts with different solutions. Let us take the most ordinary example from the student world: everyone has an exam date fixed for 15 July. There will be those who systematically revise for two hours every day for several months beforehand, and those who prepare in as little time as possible, waiting until the day before the exam and working through the night on a high-risk interpretation of what is wanted. As for the natural and social conditions that underlie the student's action, the student may be hindered by a hostile family or favoured by an under-

standing one, hampered by bad health or aided by an excellent physique to make learning easy. Faced with an identical temporal restraint, social, biological and natural times are likely to be very different, but above all, there will be diversity in the strategy and the narrative students will construct in their use of the natural, social and biological/psychological time at their disposal to achieve a personal choice. Obviously there will be cases in which the element of constraint will be particularly conspicuous – the case of someone with a difficult family, bad health and overwhelming distractions – and there will be cases where the element of constraint seems almost non-existent in that all the external circumstances are favourable. These are the cases where no great merit is given to the actor in that everything has pointed to success. This is to forget how often, even in the same conditions of social, psychological and physical privilege, the actor chooses not to apply him/herself.

A good metaphor for this work of composition of natural times (e.g. day, night, seasons), social times (e.g. institutional timetables, family organization), bio-psychological times (e.g. periods which are easy or difficult for health and general wellbeing), is the metaphor of the mosaic (see Cavalli, 1985). Everyone is free to construct his or her 'mosaic', i.e. individual time that best corresponds to personal projects and possibilities, while making use of the tiles, colours, shapes, i.e. the natural and social times that are outside personal control. What counts in this work, which is as free as it is restricted, is that the material which the action has to take into account is not external to it. One cannot consider individual intentionality and the restraints as opposite worlds. Restraints and resources together form the general framework within which individuals work and which they have to take into account in varying degrees. The structures come into the action through the awareness that individuals have of their existence. Social and natural times constitute the raw material with which individuals construct their work time. This reflects their tastes and inclinations, but also the existing limits, the impossibility of using other raw material. The material used stays the same but the variety of inventions adopted is the proof of the partial unpredictability of the result of the interaction that takes place between individual and collective levels of the experience.

Free Time and Work Time as Configuration

In the analysis of free time and work time too, Elias unravels and reorders the terms of the debate which for years opposed the Marxist and the liberal vision of the question by his adoption of a configurational approach. The introduction of free time as one of the poles in the articulation of modern daily life constitutes, as is well known, one of the central points of dispute in the various interpretations of the consequences of modernity. The theme of the opposition of free

time and work time as a typical basis for social organization and the articulation of daily life in industrialized societies very quickly attracted the attention of the social sciences and became a subject for controversy which has raised theoretical and, above all, evaluative problems of great importance.

As technological progress and union struggles combined to lead to a progressive reduction in the length of the working day and in the number of working days per year, free time became a subject of increasing interest because it seemed both to contain great promise and to pose a great threat. On the one hand, it is said to foreshadow a 'new civilization of free time', a possibility never before available outside the work sphere to fulfil potential that work denies, one's global personality; on the other hand, it is predicted that it will produce deeper alienation, an extension of cultural manipulation and artificially induced needs.[6]

This set of opposing reflections constitutes one of the great chapters in the sociology of work.[7] Elias changes the nature of this long and passionate debate by putting the accent on the question of instincts' *self-suppression* required by work time, and all other compulsory times, and on the *liberation of the passions* which that part of free time he calls *loisir* allows. The question of self-fulfilment in free time and the growing alienation that that causes is less important in Elias's view than the alternation of self-control and surrender to instinct which *loisir* brings to people's lives. Above all and once again, the recourse to figuration forces him to abandon the terrain of ideological dispute and put these factors into an undeniable social reality. Work time and time for *loisir* form a configuration, a model of interdependence, a field of tension in which no *loisir* allows total release of the instincts and no work time demands total self-suppression.

Elias's sociology is one of configuration, i.e. it analyses any social phenomenon from the starting point of the field of tension that is created between that phenomenon and the directly opposing one. What does it mean to read as configuration the relationship that is established in modern life between *loisir* and work time? It means that what happens in work time has to be interpreted in relation to what happens in the time of *loisir*; consequently, when one is modified, the other has to be too. For example, the violence that breaks out in certain periods in free time situations has to be read in the light of the level of regulated and continual self-repression that is demanded in work sphere time. If work time is that time in which, as a result of the long process that Elias defines as civilization, the individual forces him/herself to keep constant systematic control over instinctive impulses, then *loisir* will have to be the area of life in which by contrast and in socially accepted ways, spontaneity and release from self-control are allowed, even if never completely. It follows that when the conditions of self-restraint at work change, the conditions of letting go the reins in *loisir* also tend to change.

In considering free time and work time, Elias does not reason in terms of false oppositions nor in terms of new possibilities for self-fulfilment as do the Marxist and liberal schools of thought. He thinks in terms of interdependence. A field of tension is seen as lying between two imaginary poles where conditions that never exist in reality, total self-control and total surrender to the instincts, are concentrated. Between them there exists a continuum of intermediate positions related to the level of self-control required.

Work time generally includes paid activities whose performance requires constant, moderated self-control while free time includes various activities, among them *loisir*. The latter is the only time for activities which are freely chosen to satisfy personal pleasures, to meet the need for relaxation and entertainment. Elias does not speak simply about free time but about a spectrum of free time because, within the configuration made by the various times of the day, the various activities are often superimposed as are the colours of the solar spectrum, though they can be distinguished and ordered according to the degree of self-control and routinization they require. Free time covers quite a considerable number of routine activities and demands a good level of self-control. Activities generated by domestic organization, bureaucratic/administrative necessities and the meeting of daily needs all come into this category. Other activities fall into the sphere of personal fulfilment and include voluntary work, professional training, information from newspapers and television, hobbies, and require a lesser degree of self-discipline.

Loisir includes different activities: play in its many forms – from a game of cards to sports, from dancing to socializing and recreational activities and hobbies where something is undertaken which gives direct gratification. All these activities have in common that they meet the desires of those engaged in them directly and allow a high level of release from self-control.

In the civilizing process, Elias reconstructs the evolution of a growing, yet increasingly moderate, control over instinctive impulses on the part of the individual who, in becoming 'civilized', becomes increasingly ambivalent in his or her attitudes, eternally divided between the enjoyment of the advantages of 'civilization' and the desire to be free of it and meet instinctual needs. The ambivalence shows in the incapacity to be either totally rational and self-controlled or totally free and instinctive. Everyone has to find the ways, the times, the occasions for expressing this double-edged tendency without going outside the field of tension created by the double polarity of work time and *loisir* time. Social norms, on the other hand, cannot demand of individuals the continual self-control that makes a 'civilized' person of them unless they give the possibilities compatible with this 'civilization' of satisfying at least partially personal instincts and spontaneity. The more a person has to control him/herself in work time, the greater will be the need for breaking out in *loisir* in mock war during a football match, in insults against a partner at cards, in mimicking in a

dance a violence that has been both suffered and caused. For Elias this means treating the traditional opposition of work time and free time as one configuration, a field of tension set up between two interdependent poles whose extremes never actually manifest themselves in a pure state in social reality.

If it is true that violence and war are the prime, basic passion for human beings, this passion has to find a way of expressing itself within the accepted practices of 'civilized' society, especially in *loisirs* such as sport, whose changes Elias follows in the course of the civilizing process (Elias and Dunning, 1986).

Social Time and Individual Time

Sociological interest in time appears first as analysis of the ordering, structuring and integrating nature of the temporal norm, the collective norm *par excellence*. In effect, the number of temporal norms to be respected in a society is well nigh infinite. So it is obvious that much of the interest that time holds for the social sciences is given to its normative aspects. This is the area in which Emile Durkheim, the first sociologist to state the social nature of time, worked. Durkheim saw time as one of the 'categories of the intellect'. These categories, indispensable for the normal functioning of the human brain, which include, with the notions of time and space, those of kind, cause, substance, personality and number, have a religious basis. Since for Durkheim religion was a uniquely social product, the intellectual categories cannot but have their origins in the entity which is over and above and outside the individual, Society. Individual time exists too, of course, but Durkheim says that the 'states of consciousness' with which time is constructed would not be sufficient to allow human beings to think timewise. This line of research, begun by Durkheim and developed by Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, shares the same basic characteristics: a distinct preponderance of social aspects over individual aspects, with the two set up in opposition to each other.

The rhythm of collective life, its uniform, regular breathing, constitute the real, genuine substance of time. Faced with this superior reality, individual time is forced into a position of confrontation. Either it presents itself as an area of irrelevance and ethical weakness or it chooses deviance, or again it internalizes the social instances.

One can conclude that the discovery of time in sociology comes as part of the discovery of social rhythms, collective norms, in an intellectual climate more favourable to the fascination of the 'collective representations' that live in the individual than looking for how the individual contributes to producing them.

A negative bias against what is individual downplays the aspect of time which is sociologically most interesting, its capacity to constitute a link between the social, individual and natural worlds in the individual choices that are made

at the different levels of a single human experience. In the writings of Hubert and Mauss, even more radically than in Durkheim, it is certainly not the individual construction of time that they are interested in analysing. The fact that it is swallowed up by superior forces is 'fatal'. In the studies of the Durkheim school the relationship between social and individual time goes largely unexplored; the two times are in opposition to each other and individual time seems doomed 'normally' to get lost in the superiority of the collective norm.

In France the Durkheim inheritance is taken up by Maurice Halbwachs in two great works on memory where, again, the collective aspects of time get most attention (Halbwachs, 1925, 1949). In Halbwachs' view, remembering is reconstructing in the present a collective past, recomposing 'social frameworks' which speak of the history of a group, whether it is a family, a people or a political party. Individual memory lacks autonomy if it cannot find links with collective memory. Again and again in his writings Halbwachs seems to question the very integrity and independence of the individual, as far as the dimension of social time – memory – is concerned. Outside the social flow that sustains it, in the absence of collective times to attach to, memory seems to vanish along with the very existence of the individual who remembers, thinks, makes autonomous decisions. Individual temporal awareness is none other than the junction of various currents of memory, the meeting point of collective times. The individual dimension of time here too gets secondary consideration, not enough to highlight the process of individualization through which every subject passes who lives along with others and is at once free and conditioned.

The Durkheimian tradition of studies on time concentrating solely on collective times and temporal structures was transferred to the United States when Pitirim Sorokin became professor at Harvard and began a research programme into social times. Along with his assistant, Robert K. Merton, he wrote 'Social Time: a Methodological and Functional Analysis' and then 'Sociocultural Causality, Space, Time' (Sorokin and Merton, 1937; Sorokin, 1943).

Through Sorokin and Merton, interest in the normative, integrative and ordinative aspects of time began to be cultivated in America too, where it was extended, made more systematic, but kept substantially within the limits of the Durkheimian inspiration. In their 1937 essay the manner in which the concerted nature of temporal norms is described, as being a kind of great reservoir of collective feelings at the root of all individual behaviour, presupposes a complete internalization of social times on the part of the individual. There is no examination of the individual's refusal of the norm, as likewise there is no talk of an individual's contribution to changing prevailing norms. The opposition of individual/society, though not the subject of the essay, is nevertheless implicitly accepted and its resulting dilemmas remain unresolved, barring extreme cases of total internalization of norms or deviance.

Many years later, in 1984, Merton took up the theoretical work on time again,

proposing a new concept, 'social expectations of durations' (SEDs). What one expects will happen in the future – because it is envisaged by precise legislation, cultural norms, or for other reasons – has a decisive influence on individual action. If we can agree on the fact that social action is strongly conditioned by structural factors (age, sex, level of education, etc.), then we have to concede that SEDs are included in structural data. Merton introduces time into social theory in this manner, giving it full recognition because SEDs are part of the structures. On the other hand he takes away much of the significance of this recognition by analysing the expectations only in their collective aspects. Time and individual expectations and the processes through which SEDs are formed are not examined at all (Merton, 1984).

Even in the other researches on social times in the US, such as, for example, the many and brilliant writings of Eviatar Zerubavel, the temporal dimension that is analysed is still always the social and normative dimension (Zerubavel, 1977, 1979, 1981, 1985). All together, even the works of Zerubavel bear the imprint of traditions that remain substantially indifferent to questions of individual time, incapable of criticism of prevailing temporal norms, and ill equipped to adopt a historical viewpoint or indicate how and why changes come about in the conception and organization of time.

This long and glorious tradition of studies on social times, which fully belongs to social theory because it highlights the effect of temporal structures on individual behaviour, is open to the well-known criticisms of the structural-functional model that have been made for over 30 years now. Elias's work on time, which like all his work sets out to eliminate the conceptual dichotomies, is the conclusion of many years of fundamental research. As has already been emphasized, Elias is able to demonstrate that from a temporal perspective there is no opposition between what is individual, social or natural. Individual, social and natural time are not in opposition on the basis of Elias's definition of time, but turn out to be none other than three different levels of the same human experience, that of change and choice. Individual time turns out to be built on a choice which uses the material made available by existing social and natural times. Without tools for perceiving the choice that generates a person's individual time, the question of how and why the representations of time change in the course of history, would be unanswerable.

Elias's analysis of time complements the Durkheimian approach to the question. His approach progresses along the same lines, but enriches it with new insights. Elias is not content merely to demonstrate the social nature of time: he also offers an explanation of why time has become what it is today. Time is no longer merely the collective rhythm of different activities, but a social construction which varies in the course of the process of civilization, becoming today an extremely abstract symbol, a cognitive instrument borrowed from the natural sciences and thus a constrictive social *habitus*.

This work of historical reconstruction is not accomplished by reference only to the normative definition of time. In addition to the norm, Elias takes into account the active, creative intervention of individuals and their different experiences of time in explaining the historical change that this concept has undergone throughout the centuries and its concomitant changing social practices and representations. These reflections on the theme of time enable us to reach some understanding of how the social, the individual, and the natural levels of human existence are linked. Elias's work gives us an insight into how normative bonds and subjective intentions, constraints and choices contribute to the solution of what constitutes individual time. Individuals construct a wide range of different time schemes, they each have their own particular way of going about things and coming into contact with the collective temporal norm. People are continually adjusting and readjusting the facts to suit their own particular needs and skills, and continually reassessing the relationships constituted by different social times.

The study of time helps us to understand the interplay of structural constraints and individual intention in social action. It is likely that one of the reasons why the various elements of time have exerted such a fascination on sociologists is that the study of time offers a good opportunity to explore the nature of individual choice. Time implies order, constraint, but also meaning and a degree of free choice. The study of individual and collective temporality seems to offer sociologists a way out of a deadlock and opens up an interesting perspective on an extremely complex theoretical issue: how and to what extent do social structures determine individual behaviour, and how in turn do individuals modify social structures to suit their own purposes? From the perspective of research into social theory, these are the questions that any research on social times must answer.

Time and Social Theory

Elias has made a fundamental contribution to the principal characteristic of studies on time: that it is one of the central chapters in social theory. His lead has been followed and enriched with new insights in recent years. Durkheim, his school and the great American scholars who have followed in his steps, developed the same themes over a period, even if only one-sidedly. They have in fact limited themselves to showing the restraining power of temporal structures. Elias completes this work of theoretical construction by reconciling action theory and structure theory, both in his 'Essay on Time' and in many other parts of his work. That the adoption of a temporal perspective constitutes a promising way out of the problems inherited from the best established theo-

retical approaches is demonstrated by the most recent developments in social theory in the works of the best known contemporary scholars.

In the opinion of Philip Abrams, for example, given the disappointing results which action theories, structure theories and theories of evolution have brought to us, it is time to take into consideration at last that collective life is made up of processes: the relationship between choice and restraint becomes comprehensible only if described in terms of how it develops in time. The entry of time into social theory, therefore, does not only eliminate the distinction between a static and a dynamic analysis of phenomena. It is much more radical: it is a question of including intention and personal experience along with social restraints in one single indivisible phenomenon which is constantly constructed in time. The fulcrum of social analysis has to become this continual process of construction (Abrams, 1982).

There is another, more ambitious line of research which has it that temporality becomes the central element from which to start in understanding the social world, the kernel for the production of theories of society which can deal with the old dilemmas.

Two scholars who are in every other way very far from each other, Anthony Giddens and Niklas Luhmann, have found themselves substantially in agreement in indicating time as the basis of their social theories, the peg on which social systems hang.

Giddens's structuration theory puts forward a new and better response to the old question 'How is society possible?', based on the observation of temporal (and spatial) forms in collective existence. What in his view prevents an adequate understanding of social life is the onesidedness of the 'micro' and 'macro' approaches, where on the one hand exclusive emphasis is given to the search for meanings neglecting the obvious restraints on individual action, while on the other hand the excessive power of these restraints prevents us from understanding how individuals ever manage to keep on being able to make choices: 'The opposition between "micro" and "macro" is best reconceptualized as concerning how interaction in contexts of copresence is structurally implicated in systems which span large sectors of time-space' (Giddens, 1984: xxvi). The theorem of the duality of structures is crucial to his structuration theory, which is mainly focused on social practices, the forms and the order they acquire in space–time, and their recurrence in the form of routines (Giddens, 1984: xxii). As Giddens repeatedly emphasizes, '… social practices, biting into space and time, are considered to be at the root of the constitution of both subject and social object' (Giddens, 1984: xxii).

Niklas Luhmann, too, thinks that time is the principle around which to construct a new theory of society. He is above all interested in the meaning that time takes on, the change in temporal horizons, the changing relationships that have been set up in history between past and present and future, and their

scarcity in modern times. But he too '… conceptualizes time as constituted at every level of existence and provides a time theory that unifies the social theory perspectives of system and action' (Adam, 1990: 15).

The most recent and ambitious contribution to a new social theory where time plays a central role is offered by Luhmann in *Soziale Systeme* (1984) in which he sets out to link the theory of *autopoiesis* and systems theory. Only the briefest reference to this important work is possible here. The theory of *autopoiesis*, introduced by the Chilean biologists, H.R. Maturana and F.J. Varela (1975, 1980), has been discussed, reworked and applied to other disciplines, among them the social sciences. For Luhmann *autopoiesis* is not limited in its application to biology and knowledge theory in the social sciences but also offers adequate tools for a general theoretical review, what he calls the theory of self-referential autopoietic systems (Luhmann, 1984: 19). The elements which constitute any social system are, in Luhmann's view, the communicative actions, actions which would be meaningless in themselves if they were not part of a recursive network that included information, communication and comprehension. The actions are constituted self-referentially. Time and self-reference presuppose each other in that it is not possible to imagine something which is simultaneously object and subject if not by reference to circular time which recursively reproposes alternatives of opposing situations. Only a temporal perspective, in any case, allows a self-reflecting check on action. Luhmann reformulates the basic concepts of sociology in terms of the central role that time plays in self-referential systems. The concept of structure is radically changed and translated into a temporal concept, becoming 'the relationship between elements beyond their temporal distance' (Luhmann, 1984: 383).

Action and event become linked concepts, since they both refer to 'the instant which passes immediately' and an event can be understood sociologically only if its temporal characteristics are taken into account (Luhmann, 1984: 389). Social systems have to be able to guarantee the link and 'the link is possible only in the temporal sphere' (Luhmann, 1984: 390). Finally, Barbara Adam has faced the question of time and social theory directly in the most original piece of writing in this research process, working around an idea of time that links natural and social sciences in a vast area of interdisciplinary reflections.

In conclusion, it seems to me that, in order to situate Elias's contribution to time studies correctly, we have to distinguish two radically different lines of inspiration and research in what is nowadays loosely called the 'sociology of time'.

There exist (and they are, in fact, on the increase) studies on time which have only rarely anything to do with social theory. These researches do not work on time to develop a theory of society and history. They use it as a theme for study of the great transformations that are changing the face of the world we live in.

This sphere includes fields of analysis that have recently produced great, highly visible developments in that they examine and account for processes of re-definition of most of the parameters of our existence. The conditions of life in contemporary society have, in fact, been significantly transformed by a series of great changes which raise problems about aspects of time: there have been changes in the forms of experience of time and the temporal horizons we relate to, in the sense that the link which connected past, present and future has been altered (Jedlowski, 1986; Leccardi, 1991; Sennett, 1998).

Large cities receive and have at the same time to co-ordinate new and different flows of circulation. The cycles and the ages of life we relate to have very little in common with those of the generation before us; the computer revolution has, according to some, cancelled out time for communication and radically transformed the relationship between time and space (Martinotti, 1993; Saraceno, 1986; Castells, 1996).

To quote Manuel Castells, 'I propose the idea that timeless time, as I label the dominant temporality of our society, occurs when the characteristics of a given context, namely the informational paradigm and the network society, induce systemic perturbation in the sequential order of phenomena performed in that context' (Castells 1996: 464). Immediately afterwards he clarifies further by adding, 'Space shapes time in our society, thus reversing a historical trend: flows induce timeless time, places are time-bounded' (Castells, 1996: 465).

Time policies to adopt in urban environments to make administrative institutions, shops or school times more efficient, discussions on changes or proposed changes in the length of the working day or in the right to have time to oneself – all these are subjects of great sociological interest nowadays (Balbo, 1991; Zajczyk, 2000).

I would not, therefore, consider Elias a scholar who, as is often claimed, has made an important contribution to the 'sociology of time' but rather someone who has constructed his own theoretical paradigm *through* his studies of time and in his other works, exactly as Durkheim and Merton have done. Elias has given the name of 'sociology of configuration' to this new model, in which the actor and the system are not in opposition but indivisibly connected. He has laid down the theoretical foundations in *What Is Sociology?* (1978) and he has applied them with great consistency in all his empirical and documentary studies. Elias's model has long been recognized as a guide to empirical research by his pupils and by what is nowadays his school, very active in the Netherlands, Ireland, Germany and even, though to a lesser extent, in the Anglophone countries. His analysis of time is an integral part of this new paradigm. Like nearly all the great sociologists who have talked about time, Elias, too, has in reality been talking about social theory.

Notes

1. When Norbert Elias decided to give a title to his 'Essay on Time', so great was his interest in sociology and so deeply felt his long standing war with philosophy that he did not take the trouble to specify that his study concerned social time.
2. An author who would seem to have made a particular contribution to the sociological formulation of the concept of time is Fraisse (1967).
3. See in this connection Rammstedt (1975) and Fraser (1968).
4. A time experience that Jacques (1982) rightly considers fundamental for understanding modernity is the 'project with a precise aim'. The time experience in this case does not have a before and after, an absolute or a relative – it is structured round the past-present-future relationship, with its goal which has to be reached. It is this time experience that Jacques indicates as Chairos rather than Chronos, in which emerges the meaning of time as the appearance of an opportunity, a novelty actively pursued. In association with this experience, in Jacques's opinion, the human specificity of time experience is delineated as intentional experience, full of plans and teleological tensions.
5. The comparison between the conceptions of time in pre-modern and modern societies is extensively dealt with in Tabboni (1984).
6. The opposition of work time and free time is analysed as an extension of the field of alienation in Karl Marx's writings, in the Marxist school of work sociology and, finally, in the Frankfurt school.
7. On the liberal side, the most important works are Mannheim (1950) and, much more clearly, the many works of Dumazedier (1962, for example).

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