

Special Section (continued)

## Conversation with Norbert Elias

*Dennis Brown*

In November 1989 I visited Norbert Elias at his home in Amsterdam. My intention was to benefit from his memories of S.H. Foulkes and his ideas about their mutual influence, in preparation for a possible biographical study of Foulkes. Elias had readily agreed to my visiting, and I was very graciously received into his large and elegant apartment, by a young woman who kept me company while I waited for Elias to appear. Though very frail, hard of hearing and restricted in vision, he was very involved despite his failing memory. In some ways he told me more about himself and his ideas than about Foulkes. At the time this seemed a bit disappointing, but in retrospect, looking at the typescript of the audio tape he allowed me to use, it reveals a lot about a seminal influence on Foulkes's thinking, still alert to the world and creative with his intelligence at the age of 92, as can be seen in the record of our conversation.

**NE:** I'm afraid my memory is not as good as it used to be. I fear the harvest may not quite come up to your expectation but I will do what I can.

**DGB:** Thank you very much. Could we talk a bit about how you met and then perhaps something about how your relationship developed, how your way of thinking influenced Foulkes and perhaps the converse. You say you met in Frankfurt in the late 1920s, was it?

**NE:** We hardly met before 1930. He also had some contact I think with Mannheim and I think we met through Mannheim. I cannot recollect the actual occasion, but I seem to remember that Mannheim — I don't know whether Elizabeth remembers what contact he had with Mannheim.

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I know also that he had contact with the Institute of Social Research [later known as the Frankfurt School].

**DGB:** Were you part of that school?

**NE:** Not at all.

**DGB:** Were you at the Institute of Sociology?

**NE:** Yes, the Department of Sociology — the two lived in the same building, that is to say the University had rented from the Institute rooms for the Department of Sociology so the fact that the Department of Sociology and the School of Horkheimer and Adorno were in the same building was purely administrative. Foulkes, I think had contact with both. The relationship was civilized but he, too, did not agree on social issues.

**DGB:** That is the Department of Sociology and the Horkheimer School saw things differently — the difference you describe is between Foulkes's thinking and that of the sociologists or are you describing differences between the two groups of sociologists?

**NE:** No, I would not call them two schools of sociology. Horkheimer would have, I think, liked to have had a share in sociology but in this respect Mannheim stood in his way, so it was a difficult rivalry in, shall we say, the social sciences. Horkheimer and Adorno were another shade on the political left. They were more Marxist and Mannheim was not. I was Mannheim's assistant. I am very sorry, I try to remember but no details appear on the screen of my memory.

**DGB:** Your acquaintance with Foulkes began then in Frankfurt when you were working with Mannheim and he was working as a psychoanalyst. Did you have any official meetings of the psychoanalysts with the sociologists, or was it more a personal friendship?

**NE:** It was personal contact and in general sympathy for psychoanalysis — you may know that Mrs Mannheim later became a psychoanalyst herself so my own acquaintance with psychoanalysis I owe to Foulkes, but to make that quite clear he was not my psychoanalyst.

**DGB:** Did you have an analysis with someone else?

**NE:** Yes.

**DGB:** Was your own analysis in Germany? Before you came to England?

**NE:** In England.

**DGB:** You came to England after Foulkes, did you?

**NE:** I do not remember

**DGB:** He came I think in 1933.

**NE:** I came to England in 1935. But I am not sure that we immediately took up contact because I lived in Cambridge and he lived in London and I think the Frankfurt contacts we took up again when he had clearly decided that he would develop the group side of psychoanalysis.

**DGB:** Was that when you began to spend more time sharing ideas?

**NE:** Yes. Do you know when he decided to . . .

**DGB:** His interest in groups?

**NE:** Yes.

**DGB:** Well, I think it dated from 1940 when he went to Exeter in the West Country and he describes in his writing his first attempt to work in groups, first of all with families — the family of the patient — and then getting several of his patients whom he had seen individually, together in a group, but continuing to see them individually at the same time. That was in 1940 before he went into the army, I think two years later, as an army psychiatrist, and a lot then began to develop in his thinking while working at Northfield at the military neurosis centre.

**NE:** Yes, my memory shows a void of that time. We probably had relatively few contacts during that time and then I do remember very vividly that he told me of his Northfield experiences and I know a bit of Bion and the Tavistock which also stems I think from Northfield.

**DGB:** Yes, because Bion was at Northfield before Michael Foulkes. He spent six weeks together with John Rickman, but their experiment was not very successful, at least the army didn't like the way they were working, it was a bit too revolutionary and unstructured for the army.

. . . . .

**DGB:** Do you then have clearer memories at a later stage after the war when the Group-Analytic Society was formed, of which you are a founder member?

**NE:** You should know that for years he prepared the Group-

Analytic Society in a small circle with de Maré, that was a small circle — if you mention names they will come back.

**DGB:** James Anthony?

**NE:** Yes.

**DGB:** Martin James — was he around . . .

**NE:** I remember that one of them left early, defected as it were, but Anthony before he went to America was a regular attender and de Maré and . . . there were regular meetings in preparation for the declaration . . .

**DGB:** Which was 1952, but before that, in the late 1940s you were meeting in Upper Wimpole Street?

**NE:** I think we met in Hampstead Garden Suburb. There were regular meetings, I was first not clear and I do not know whether he himself was clear what movement he wanted . . . so we discussed possibilities and I was there as it were, the only non-medical person whom he had as friend and an expert in sociology.

**DGB:** Tell me, in what way do you feel your expertise in sociology influenced Foulkes? Were there ideas of yours which he took over directly?

**NE:** From very early days on I tried to overcome the language which forces us to speak as if individual and society, individual and group are different and opposed entities. I don't know whether you know the book *Die Gesellschaft in Individuen* — it has not yet appeared in English but it is about to be translated.

**DGB:** No. Unfortunately I don't speak German. Your book *The Civilizing Process*, as it was called in English, is of course well known.

**NE:** Yes, that is the theoretical interest which Foulkes was interested in. It comes out indirectly, that is to say the very idea of the civilizing process implies that the individual is thoroughly socialized and individualized at the same time. What was for me a new discovery was that I could show how the social norms change and if one translates this from the abstract to social norms in human terms one must also say that the individuals change, individuals of different generations grow up with somewhat different social rules, you can see it very clearly in the freedom of the younger generation today compared to that with my youth. So I think it was this knowledge that individuals can only be

understood in groups and groups only as groups of individuals. If one did not want one or the other as something which one has to reduce to human level, that we had in common and I could add to his — how shall I say? — inclination in that direction. I could add a good deal of theoretical precision. For instance I think the . . . I do not know to what extent even today is still in group-analytic theory used, that one sees the individual and the group as two levels in the group. That was one of the things which I brought in, as it were, and later turned out in group-analytic treatment wanders from the group level to the individual level and from the individual level to the group level, both having roots in the focus of one's attention.

**DGB:** A sort of foreground/background dialectic . . .

**NE:** Yes, I am not quite clear whether I would see it foreground/background but I want to have it on an equal level so there are two levels of equal weight. And thoughts of this time can be found in the first part of *The Society of Individuals*, as it will be probably called because this book consists itself of parts which I wrote at that time, or even earlier.

**DGB:** When did you write that book?

**NE:** That consists of parts of my wrestling with the subject as early as . . . and things that I wrote in the late 1930s and 1940s and early 1950s, so it is these parts devoted to the problem of the individual and society from the first part of this book which appeared last year; the second part are contributions wrestling with the same problem at about the 1950s, I think, and the last part is what I now think so it has a diachronic perspective from the book.

**DGB:** I look forward to reading it.

**NE:** We were very much at one, that we did not want to reduce one to the other, nor did we want to dissolve, so that was, I think, even before we earnestly talked with similar inclination.

**DGB:** One of the things that has been brought to my notice recently by Malcolm Pines was the writing of Dilthey who was a historian philosopher and I was struck how many ideas like transpersonal processes, like the deeply social nature of the individual and even using gestalt ideas to some extent, it made me wonder whether Foulkes had

actually read Dilthey or that it had come to him through you. Was Dilthey somebody who you remember reading?

**NE:** I don't remember and speaking for myself I have no very great sympathy because he is a metaphysicist and he was quite fashionable — and there was not very much one could read if one was interested in such problems. But he worked with concepts such as geists, spirits, in English one would say ghosts, in Germany it is a very great word of the philosophers' tradition but I am not metaphysically inclined, nor was he, so I have no actual memories of him . . .

**DGB:** But it was quite striking, even ideas like the individual as a nodal point, a sort of intersection in a web, like a neurone in the nervous system.

**NE:** Yes, I had already at that time developed instead a concept of figuration in one of my first books, *What is Sociology?* Human beings form figurations. The image which you gave with the neurone metaphor is contained in individual figuration. If one says 'a group', one has difficulties to say 'a group of individuals' and I was looking for a word which would make it possible just to say that. A figuration of individuals, or if you prefer to say, configuration of individuals, that came very near to what Foulkes needed. That is — I have in *What is Sociology?* a slight picture which shows the naive perspective of the individual in which she or he is in the centre of the group and then an act of detachment or distancing is necessary in order to see oneself as one among others, and that is what I wanted to express with the term figuration. So that comes very close I think, I mean in all these matters I cannot say how much my influence was in that respect. I liked doing the group work and as a matter of course I did every now and then groups till rather late and the latest was when I was approached by a professor at my university in Germany whether I would not take a group of them and that was as late as in the 1960s. So I had for a year, or maybe a bit longer, a group in Frankfurt and my lectures were attempts to bring psychoanalytic theory to the students.

**DGB:** So then your contact with Foulkes continued intermittently — through the rest of his life?

**NE:** It was very close during the time till the Group-Analytic

Society was founded [1952]. Then I saw him when his first wife was still alive, and of course Elizabeth too was at these meetings so she would know who the other members were.

**DGB:** But you've been round the world since then. You went to Ghana didn't you? I see you have a lot of amazing trophies round the room, a lot of sculpture, wooden figures.

**NE:** Yes I have a collection of African art which I made while I was in Ghana. Yes, I got around a bit and I had an exhibition of my collection in Leicester so it filled three quarters of the museum, it's a very large collection, what you see here is only a little. I mean you need really — I feel very sorry that I can provide you with relatively little for your biography.

**DGB:** Well I am very honoured to be able to meet you and you have shared some thoughts which will be very valuable to me and if other things do occur to you at some stage, perhaps if I left my card with you, you might feel moved to contact me.

**NE:** Yes. I mean, I feel it is a very worthwhile task.

**DGB:** Well it's a very interesting task because his life has brought together psychoanalysis and the social perspective in a way which I think is tremendously important, I think psychoanalysis has not digested it properly yet.

**NE:** I don't think so. I do not know what the development in England is now but I do remember one of the occasions I went to see Melanie Klein who was a very friendly person but she had not the slightest understanding of groups and as she is the mother of English psychoanalysis I do not know what the development is.

**DGB:** Well, Melanie Klein has obviously had a very large influence on British psychoanalysis but the Kleinian branch is one of three branches. There are those who would argue a lot with what Melanie Klein said, particularly her preoccupation with the internal world to the exclusion of the external, if one can think about it like that, although there have been some Kleinian analysts like Isobel Menzies-Lyth and Elliot Jaques, as well as Bion, who have attempted to look at social phenomena and group dynamics in a way which is interesting and quite powerful. But it doesn't take into account the individual in this equation and this is, of course, what group analysis as Foulkes developed

it was very much preoccupied with, the bringing together of the individual and the social context.

**NE:** I think that was the basic attitude which we shared where, as I say, I think I could help a good deal, because I was quite clear that in society at large the separation of individual and society was in part due to the fact that different parties accentuate differently. The right the individual, and the left the group and one carries these values of a partisan conviction into the theory which is not very good.

**DGB:** You might have heard of Mrs Thatcher, our lady Prime Minister, giving the game away last year when in all seriousness she made a speech in which she said, 'There is no such thing as society.' She really believed that.

**NE:** I was very strongly interested in ideologies and it may well be that this is an item which I brought into our community — that as long as society at large is split in terms of the basic views giving individual and society different values, one speaks and thinks as if individual and society had a different existence and that is beginning now I think to change. One can at least hope that it is now nearing the end of this division.

**DGB:** The great political changes taking place in eastern Europe are some indication of the possibility of bridging the two.

**NE:** I must say I am extremely glad that I am still alive to see it. I would never have dreamt it.

**DGB:** I don't think anybody would have believed it a year or two ago. How do you keep in touch with the news because reading is difficult for you?

**NE:** I am very much in touch with the news — radio and conversations, I have three assistants, they are young and you have seen one of them and I can share their interests, so I keep in touch.

**DGB:** Well, I hope very much to have a copy of your book when it is published, I will look out — who is going to publish your new book?

**NE:** Blackwell.

**DGB:** And that's expected in the next year. Have they got the manuscript?

**NE:** The translator has it. I think by now the translator will have finished but they have bad experience, when I get the



English translation I change too much so probably they won't send me the manuscript. They have published so far three books, they want to publish everything they can get. And I have also published in English . . . is it *Theory, Culture & Society*?<sup>1</sup> But for your purposes I think *The Society of Individuals*. It has become very fundamental for my thinking generally that we do not divide everything into antagonistic polarities and nature/culture and I may say that I am at the moment writing a very long essay on Freud's theory of society and I am afraid I have to say while I have the highest esteem for his psychiatric individual-centred theory, I think his theory of society is quite wrong and I have to say that because his influence I think is, in spite of the incredible opposition, still growing.

**DGB:** Freud got biology together with psychology but there was a bit of a problem getting the social perspective in, except in an antagonistic way, society as an oppressor or as something the individual has always to fight rather than as something which can promote the individual and express the individual.

**NE:** That comes out very strongly in his sociological writings and it is important to make quite clear his greatness and at the same time so far as the theory of society is concerned one must go beyond him. This discussion of Freud's theory of society that I write, really grew out of a lecture I should have given but did not give when I got the Amalfi prize in Italy and I got the Amalfi prize for this book *The Society of Individuals* — if I may say it myself that's the best sociological book of the year. So I was quite proud.

. . . . .

I am glad to hear that the Group-Analytic Society is flourishing, it's very good to know. So as you said, if I remember, if I still can force my memory to produce more I will certainly try.

**DGB:** I am very grateful. Tomorrow you might wake up and think, 'Ah, I forgot to tell him that.'

**NE:** And you will ask, 'Why did he forget it?'

#### Note

<sup>1</sup> *Symbol Theory: Theory, Culture and Societies* is the correct title.

**References**

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