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On the Potential of Norbert Elias's Approach
in the Social Memory Research in Central and Eastern Europe[1]

Abstract: Norbert Elias never presented his views regarding collective memory in a systematic manner. However, his approach may be reconstructed on the basis of such works as *The Civilizing Process*, *Time: An Essay* and *The Symbol Theory*. The most important tenet of Elias is that human memory can only be explained by the symbol theory. Human ability to use socially created symbols in communication is applied in activities in which symbols are used (speaking, thinking, knowing and remembering), which makes memory a part of general process of symbolic communication. Memory research needs to account for the interactive and communicational origins of both individual and collective remembering. One of the crucial issues related to remembering is collective forgetting. According to Elias it operates by three main mechanisms: (1) elimination and creation of fantastic notions (fantasy being a substitute and subsidiary for experience), (2) modification of social canons of reference as a result of power struggle in social figurations, and (3) delegitimization of alternative imageries by means of marginalization or elimination of groups acting as their social vehicles. I discuss these mechanisms and the dynamics of memory they entail in the broader conceptual framework of the theory of civilizing processes referring to Central and Eastern European examples in order to demonstrate the productivity of Elias's interdisciplinary and multidimensional analysis in social memory studies focusing this region.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, memory, Central and Eastern Europe, knowledge, communication, symbols, fantasy.

Norbert Elias's theory is hardly ever referenced in the scholarship on collective memory, despite prominent exceptions such as Jeffrey Olick's *Politics of Regret* (2007: 85ff). It is deplorable, but hardly surprising. First of all, Elias never studied collective memory in itself. Life-long reluctance to risk a relapse into the trap of *homo clausus* anthropology (Merz-Benz 1996: 45) undoubtedly contributed to his taking a somewhat undiscerning stance towards memory as it used to be conceptualized in social sciences. As a result Elias's work is underrepresented in social memory research, despite its status of a standard (though controversial) reference in social history and cultural studies (van Dulmen 1996: 264).

I am convinced that following Elias in deliberately overlooking the refined distinctions between communicational, semiotic, cognitive, psychological and sociological approaches in memory research, we may upkeep what was probably most precious in his thinking, namely its openness to different applications. Thus we would gain

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footing to attack the gap between agency and structure in memory research from a new angle.

This is particularly vital for the researchers coping with the problems of Central and Eastern Europe, where complex paths of memory call for an extra input of innovativeness and thinking out of the box. I will come back to this issue in the final part of my paper, after having discussed the basic tenets of Elias's approach to social memory. After an introductory presentation of Elias's symbol theory I will focus on his concept of forgetting as collective communicational activity, which in my view lies in the very centre of both his theory of memory and of the difficulties we encounter in memory research in Central and Eastern Europe.

Climbing the Tower—Cooperation, Accumulation, Reflexivity

The title of this section refers to the image used by Elias in order to illustrate the development of human self-consciousness, including the scientific one (Elias 1994: 135). Elias puts it to us that humanity is a population of nomads climbing the stairs of a high tower. While we proceed, our view gradually becomes broader, thus subjecting our previous perspectives to reflection, which in turn allows us to distance ourselves from our former way of living on lower floors and move on to a fuller and more coherent picture of our own condition, recalling the lengths we have already covered. Elias uses this parable to draw our attention to the interdependence of knowledge, self-consciousness and their social context. However, the infinite steep climb is just as apt an illustration of the growth of knowledge.

Sociological approach to memory has shared the fate of many phenomena which become methodological artifacts long before they have even entered the field of research, forcing many generations of scholars to painstakingly undo the conceptual work of their predecessors in order to get nearer the thing itself. As a result, studying memory from sociological point of view much resembles the biblical house built on sand; a sublime theoretical framework is supported by a huge corpus of empirical findings ultimately resting on a very shaky delimitation of research object. This condition of memory studies is in my opinion a result of tension between the striving for conceptual precision on the one hand and the respect for the complexity of acutely imprecise human representations of reality on the other.

Norbert Elias was one of the first ever to remark on the uselessness of hypostasizing quasi-positivist conceptual distinctions for the sake of conceptual transparency and the first to defend humanity against the imperialism of social sciences. The greatest difficulty of understanding social life he saw in the invariantly situated nature of all human cognition (thus its relational character) as set against the universalist and objectivist claims of social science. This is in fact the problem of gaze (in the Lacanian sense *ante litteram*, meaning the focus of interest related to a certain perspective, see Bal 2002, chapter 1).

As early as in *Vom Sehen in der Natur* (1921) Elias's desire to overcome the weakness of the gaze in science is clear and strong (Merz-Benz 1996: 48). He constantly

strived to rectify the Neo-Kantian distortion of representing reality in science without compromising the relatedness of scientific cognition to its subject. Elias seems to believe in a sort of a holographic gaze, in which the final view is composed of many interfering outlooks situated in the same referential framework, each of them personal and connected to its bearer. His effort to achieve such a view is exemplified by the metaphor of climbing the tower.

The most important tenet of Elias's theory of knowledge is that the explanation of the nature of human knowledge is to be found in the symbol theory (Elias 2001: 173). By this token all activities in which symbols are used are in fact diverse functions of the same process based on human ability to use arbitrarily created symbols in communication (cf. Elias 1991: 115; Elias 2001: 37). Together, they constitute a "knowledge complex" composed of "knowledge, language, memory and thought" (Elias 1991: 5).[2]

The climbing metaphor allows us to outline Elias's view of memory as a symbolic communicational function. Firstly, climbing the tower is a collective effort: we are ascending as a community, not as an aggregate of individuals. Even though a person commonly called a "genius" may from time to time leap ahead of his or her contemporaries, Elias believes this to be nothing more than an extravagant manifestation of collective movement. This reasoning is clear in his *Mozart*, where the sociogenetic process is said to produce the genius as its epiphany (Elias 1991a).

Secondly, climbing is a cooperative process. Despite his valuable insights into the mechanisms of social conflict, Elias stressed the cumulative nature of social life conceived as a process (see e.g. Elias 1991: 6, 1997: 132 ff; Elias 2001: 25). Social structure is for Elias a set of preconditions and consequences of human interdependence, realizing in interpersonal interactions. His famous notion of figuration combines the interactional and the structural dimension of social setting (Mongardini 1996: 295). It is exactly in this point that Elias anticipates and precedes the agency-structure dilemma: structuring effects stem from the patterns of conduct, whose impact on individuals is habitual by force of their accumulated objectivity. Figuration is an entirety of subfigurations consisting of interlinked individuals, some of whom are able to exercise power in respect of others. The core of power is to influence the patterns of conduct of those in different positions in a figuration. Therefore, power equals the ability to induce conformism and so falls into the category of cooperation of the rulers and the subordinates instead of conflict.[3]

Thirdly, certain stages or phases may be distinguished in climbing the tower. From the lowest floor of the tower we only have a very limited view (covering just the few steps leading to the window and maybe a piece of ground directly surrounding the tower). As we move along though, our climb is punctuated with moments of perspective shifts. We move all the time, but only looking out from the next window

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[2] True to Elias's dynamic approach, I will mostly refer to elements of this complex by using verbs instead of nouns.

[3] There are certain similarities between this vision of social interrelatedness and the network theory. Incidentally, Elias did from time to time use the network metaphor (e.g. 1991: 92, 151), although there is no reason to assume that in so doing he was striving for technical precision.

do we realize that our view is broader and more comprehensive. This relates not only to the outside landscape, but also to the sense of difference between the current perspective and the former ones.

This moment of reflexivity is the crux of Elias's idea of accumulation in social processes. He contradicts the commonplace view according to which reflexivity would be a hallmark of modernity (e.g. Beck, Giddens, Lash 1994). On the contrary: it belongs to the internal logic of our journey to make our previous steps a part of our present-day experience, although the further we arrive, the more data we have for exercising our powers of reflection (which he calls "the worm in the apple of modernity;" Elias 1991: 28, see also Olick 1999a: 113).

Symbolic Communication as the Framework for Remembering and Forgetting

Having metaphorically pictured social development as climbing the tower, let us move to the role of the symbolic functions in this framework, starting with speaking, then passing to thinking and finally to knowing. My account of the three elements of the knowledge complex is based on *The Symbol Theory* (1991). Before I proceed, I should make one more remark, and it best be done in Elias's own words:

> One may perhaps feel that the use of term 'language', 'knowledge', 'memory' and others belonging to the same knowledge complex [in this book] deviates from their customary use. According to a widespread custom different functions of this knowledge complex are usually understood as if the different linguistic expressions used (…) for the various functions of this knowledge complex referred to different separately existing objects. Thus, the language function of a knowledge process may be socially treated as one object, the knowledge function as another, the memory function as a third. This tendency to treat different functions of the same knowledge complex as if they were separately and independently existing objects has been abandoned in this text. (…) Languages, thoughts, memories and all the other aspects of knowledge complexes are not treated here as either individual or social. They are always perceived as potentially and actually both, social and individual at the same time. (1991: 12)

Due to the somewhat enigmatic language used by Elias in *The Symbol Theory* I sometimes put his thoughts into a considerably different expressions to make it easier to demonstrate their applicability, but I always follow his direction not to differentiate the individual and the social in the manner leading to a hypostasis. This is the reason why I do not include in this text any discussion of Elias's concept of memory in terms of distinctions worked out in the memory studies, and notably of the collective, the social and the individual memory, together with all the consequences of this divide. I also do not refer to the problematic of communicational memory, but I would like to stress that to Elias all memory is communicational, even though the parties to communication may not always be co-present in the same physical space. I will instead focus on the conceptual connections between remembering and the remaining symbolic functions as social and individual at the same time, in order to stress the intrinsic inseparability of these aspects. The very fact separationof the four functions in order more clearly to discuss them is already against the logic of Elias's reasoning.

Speaking

Speaking is framed by conditions of communication created by figurations changing between different integration (i.e. complexity) levels. One of the most important factors in verbal communication is the content of standards prescribing legitimate modes of speaking for a person in a given position. According to Elias, interdependent individuals communicate using the channels available in the figurational setting and the message they convey in so doing is shaped and delimited by habitual patterns. To use an Austin-cum-Marxian expression coined by Jeffrey K. Olick and Daniel Levy, "people do things with words, but not in circumstances of their own choosing" (1997: 922).

We find an example of this open-ended determination in *The Civilizing Process*, in a dialogue of a merchant's son and an aristocrat regarding the proper way of referring to a person who is dead ("*le deffunct*") (Elias [1939] 1997: 238). The case shows the work of memory in speaking. This difficulty in adopting more refined manners stems from two main sources. The first is habitual nature of speaking; a familiar trope later taken up by Pierre Bourdieu. The second is the nature of constructions used in verbal communication, which Elias analyzes very much in the line of Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of language games.

Although Elias proclaimed himself to be totally immune to "*all trends of fashion, whether Sartre, Wittgenstein, Popper, Parsons or Levi-Strauss*" (after: Mennell 1989: 8), there are many traits of his symbol theory which correspond to Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy. One of those is the equation mark which Elias puts between learning and experience understood as processing the data from previous interactions by memory, not by means of rational abstraction of rules, but by an orchestration of habitus. The correct (proper) reaction to a message in spoken communication is a function of memorizing all the moves heretofore recognized by the community as legitimate. Elias attached a great importance to standards of correctness, and he believed that "[m]aping out, for examples with the help of textbooks, the changing social standards of knowledge in certain areas would also facilitate a testable type of synthesis" of the knowledge process (Elias 1991: 122).

Thinking

Thinking is "a human capacity for putting through their paces symbols anticipating a sequence of possible future actions without performing any action" (Elias 1991: 69); it is then a sort of a calculating soliloquy supported by fantasy. The use which Elias makes of the notion of fantasy leads to an interesting tension between constructionist and objectivist approach in his theory.

What people think is a mixture of images which are either adequate (i.e. objectively coherent with reality) or inadequate. Elias does see both the possibility and the need to distinguish between the two. Thus he distances himself from constructionist insistence on abandoning the problem of congruence of thinking with reality and redirecting attention to the problems of legitimization, justification and reliability of

beliefs instead (Barnes 1977; Bloor 1991, 1997). Elias shares the objectivist conviction that fantasy is a functional substitute for truth. However, he also stresses two strictly constructionist points: omnipresence and necessity of fantasy for human thinking and social origins of both fantasy and truth (see Elias 1991: 92).

True image of reality is created in a collective effort of reflexively assessing previously held beliefs. That is followed by reproducing them in language communication and, finally, gradually eliminating fantasies insofar as relevant reality-congruent data become available in the course of development of humanity (cf. Kilminster 2007: 135). This may look like a simplistic evolutionary account, but Elias does not envisage the social process as a finitist scheme in which humanity gradually reaches the level of pure (or: unsituated) knowledge. Instead, he insists that the situatedness of human imagery exists in every figuration and thinking is never absolutely reality-congruent (Elias 1991: 91ff). This may either mean that there will always be certain fantasies immune to eradication or that new fantasies will be produce along the way. Therefore, an agenda of social memory research derived from Elias's views should include the mechanisms of selection of images to be eliminated or preserved as well as the figurational *loci* of the potential for creating new fantasies, such mechanisms to be collective, cooperative and communicational. Thus we come to the issue of knowing.

Knowing

All the problems discussed above fall into the broad category of "sociology of knowledge," which is from time to time understood as entirety of studies pertaining to social production of knowledge. The latter is typically understood as a set of beliefs shared by a relevant social unit. In the light of such a definition social memory research would be a mere subset of sociology of knowledge. However, what Elias tries to say is that knowing is in fact a module of the same faculty which is responsible for all human symbolic activities and not a more general category comprising the processes of remembering among other things.

In order to preserve the specificity of the notion of knowledge, it is useful to broadly predefine knowledge as a set of beliefs which are at any given moment definable as the product of interactions in the figuration. There is one important advantage to this approach—it resets the classical framework of sociological research of knowledge, as it crystallized throughout the writings of not only Karl Manheim, but also Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss. Richard Kilminster is right in saying that Elias took the tradition of Mannheimian sociology of knowledge further beyond the belletristic limitations of Mannheim (Kilminster 2007: 131–132). It is possible that he takes it as far as Durkheimian school, and we should bear in mind that despite the limitations its perspective continues to shape our view of memory in an important way (cf. Olick 2007: 88; Misztal 2005). Be it as it may, the approach to knowledge expressed in *The division of the social labour* corresponds perfectly to the Elias-based agenda envisaged in this text (cf. Kilminster 2007: 136). If the issues of language communication and adequacy of mental representations are covered by other symbolic functions, namely

speaking and thinking respectively, sociology of knowledge turns to classifications, typologies and their correspondence with social structure and living conditions (see Elias 2001: 24).

It should be mentioned that Elias perceives the issue of living conditions in a manner distinctly different from that prevailing in the classical sociology of knowledge. He does not focus on either material or economic aspect, even taken as broadly as in Mannheim. Furthermore, he does not analyze social structure as a static representation of the division of social labour, as in the Durkheimian school. For Elias the term "living conditions" would denote the consequences of any individual's position in the figuration, which—broadly speaking—delimit the scope of power he or she may exercise.

Thereby knowledge and power become interrelated in a way alternative to the later and more prominent Foucaultian approach, much akin to Georg Simmel's account of knowledge as a structuring and organizing factor (see Simmel 1906). According to the latter, if we try to put his extravagant ideas in a more succinct form, knowledge is a set of beliefs and competences (reflected in thinking and speaking), which are socially recognizable and transmittable, but whose transmission may be limited by the fact that certain individuals may withdraw knowledge from others is essential in social structuring. If we thus merge Simmel with Elias, quantitative differences in the level of knowledge between people depending on their position become the defining feature of knowledge as a product of figuration. It is not possible to speak or think more than the others (although some speak and think better than others). On the other hand, it is possible to have more or less knowledge.

We come to an interesting point here: knowledge is created and reproduced in a process that is cooperative (transmission) and antagonistic (withdrawal and limitation) at the same time. In fact, the cooperative aspect of tower climbing is least readable in the case of knowledge, reflexivity is also underrepresented in the domain of knowledge. It seems that knowing, if analytically separated from speaking and thinking, becomes the most static and the least attention-grabbing of all symbolic functions. Nevertheless, focusing on the accumulation of knowledge, selection mechanisms, engines and dead-locks of knowledge production, we may address the process aspect of what is otherwise a static phenomenon.

Remembering, Forgetting and the Social Change

Having thus outlined the communicational context for Elias's concept of remembering as a symbolic activity, we may now proceed with the analysis of remembering and forgetting. The priority of forgetting in memory research has been a long established point in scholarship (cf. Ricoeur 2000, Connerton 2009). I do believe that Elias offers a somewhat unorthodox and appealing perspective on that subject, although his starting point seems relatively straightforward. Two issues of primary importance for Elias as far as remembering is concerned are the ways in which memories (as beliefs) are transmitted between the generations and the reasons why they are forgotten.

Remembering as a Symbolic Function

Remembering is an aggregate of the mechanisms of transmission and elimination of beliefs and memory is the aggregate of their product. As Elias puts it, "knowledge [pertains] mainly to the function of symbols as means of communication, language mainly to their function as means of communication, thought mainly to their function a means of exploration (…). All three are concerned with the manipulation of learned and stored memory images" (1991: 71).

The special feature of memories is that memories they are reflexively qualified as coming from and referring to the past experience, both of oneself and of the others. They are generated by the communicational activities in the present, though, which leads to the well-known paradox of remembering: it pertains to the past, but is always bound to be inaccurate insofar as not all the past is actually represented in the present. Therefore, in the case of remembering the notion of fantasy again takes the central place and forgetting become the universal fantasy-generator.

The particles of the past experience which are evoked in the processes of thinking, knowing and speaking would not add up to form any consistent picture of the past without the active work of forgetting. It divides the past into manageable pieces and glues them together (an inseparable link between forgetting and remembering famously phrased by Paul Ricoeur; 2000). Thereby—yet another Foucauldian motif anticipated by Elias—the analysis of discontinuities becomes the most important task of the memory research.

The issue of discontinuities in representations of the past is relevant for both individual and the collective memory. Despite Elias's reserve in severing the individual from the social, in the case of remembering the gap is very difficult to bridge, as the sources of discontinuities are so divergent. In the case of collective memory the discontinuities result from the transmittable nature of memories *qua* knowledge. The mechanisms of forgetting which are traditionally related to the individual level (including those described from the psychoanalytical angle) are not taken into account in the examination of discontinuities on the higher levels of integration. Although the mechanisms may be analogous, the process itself runs differently due to social element implicated in the very construction of memories. We rediscover here the Durkheimian dialectic of the collective and the universal as two interwoven aspects of the social (Durkheim [1895] 1982). Collective memory is universal, for it is created in the figuration in which (at many various levels of integration) all the individuals are bound. On the other hand, it is also collective, as it only emerges on the figurationally preset interaction level. The interplay of these two features makes collective memory social.

In this connection certain aspects of figurational impact on the processes of symbolic communication also turn out to be of utmost importance for the analysis of social memory. Symbolic communication relates to what can be the object of speech, thought and knowledge and how it can be objectified in a given figuration. In the case of remembering the question is very much the same, only difference being the fact that the object consists of past ways of speaking, thinking and know-

ing (and not, as could be wrongly assumed, their contents). How the past state of mind is being made representable in the present by way of forgetting and fantasizing is the most important question in research of memory. Finding and answer requires us to thematize the collective, the cooperative and the reflexive side of forgetting.

I propose to do so by exploring three contexts in which the operation of forgetting in Elias's theory may be analyzed. The first one is the elimination and creation of fantastic notions, the second is the change of social canons and the third is marginalization of alternative memories.

Fostering and Abandoning the Fantasies

Eradication of fantastic notions is one of the predictable consequences of the process of collective climbing the tower. Firstly, as we proceed upwards, we gradually discover that the images we formed of the part of the world which was beyond the reach of our sight at the earlier stages were inaccurate. This mental process is, of course, subject to an assumption that the collectivity of climbers does in fact feel the urge to think about the world behind the horizon. Nevertheless, it seems out of doubt that Elias attributed such a proclivity to the humanity as a whole and the main force responsible for it was what he called involvement (*Engagement*) (see Elias 1987). He understood it as an attitude in which emotional motivations and personal perspective prevail over rational analysis. Involvement is, in his view, the foundation of everyday attitude of humans. It may only be limited by means of methodical distancing producing neutrality, which is prerequisite to scientific cognition.

Elias's philosophy of social science is not the subject matter of this text. Therefore, I only wish to point out that what is required of a scientist, is not only highly rare but also highly unnatural in a person playing any other social role.[4] The constant cognitive and practical involvement in the view currently available forces us to fantasize in order to defend it as absolute. The paradox of our reflexivity is that we only reflect on the previous stages and never on the one we are going through at any given moment.

This proclivity to absolutize the present has two main consequences. Firstly, it becomes necessary for us to create images of what is not known yet, which would correspond to what we already know. Secondly, we have to repress into oblivion those images which are no longer in accordance with the present view.

Fluid Canons of Taste

The modification of canons of behavior is a good example of what happens when the social conditions of living (i.e. the figuration plus its internal dynamics) no longer

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[4] That the roots of the neutrality-engagement distinction are firmly set in the Neo-Kantian, Weberian perspective as expressed in both *Politik* and *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, could hardly be disputed. Just as in Weber's account of science and politics we discover the strongest diagnosis of the social condition of his times to be found in his writings, in Elias's warnings against uncritical engagement in science we find a hint as to his views on social life outside the scientific world.

accord with the social imagery. Shifting power balances inevitably result in new domi-
nant habitus gaining the upper hand over the older one and setting anew the standard
of what is proper and correct.[5]

The battle is hard, because the canons are fluid, which warrants their resistance
to any *en masse* deliberate reformatory influences. A merchants's son in the instance
citied above cannot be taught to speak properly in any other way but being corrected
in casu by the ones who set the standard. The nature of the canon is not rational
and it cannot be learned as a set of rules. By this token, acquiring a new habitus
may only take place in the Wittgensteinian framework of moves and mistakes in the
language game. Then, however, no guarantee may be given that once the move had
been learned (i.e. memorized), it will remain "proper," which is rather hard on the
beginners in the art of correctness.

The above point obviously applies to various cases of vertical social mobility, but
there is a more general, Mannheimian point to it. No social class or stratum may
have a fully adequate, neutral view of reality while keeping its position in the social
structure untouched. Certain amount of forgetting is intrinsic to situated knowledge.
This is demonstrated *a contrario* by the celebrated case of *freischwebende Intelligentsia*,
liberated from the class limitations at the price of having no proper place in the social
world (Mannheim [1929] 1955: 153).

Minority Imageries

Mannheim's case of *Intelligentsia* provides us with a perfect illustration of the third
case of forgetting in Elias's theoretical panorama, i.e. the delegitimization of imageries
by means of marginalizing or eliminating minorities which act as their social vehicles.
The minorities in question need not be organized (they need not even take a form of
social groups of classes). They may be got ridden of by means of planned action, but
alternative imageries may just become obsolete and slightly comical without anyone's
help, just as the people cherishing them. The marginalization should not therefore be
mistaken for any form of deliberate exclusion—it need not necessarily be the case.

Elias's point is probably best if somewhat obviously exemplified by the old aristo-
crats clinging on to their way of life long after the coming of the bourgeois era (Elias
[1939] 1997a: 106). An even more striking instant, however, is the clash between the
modernizing and uniting state power and the local feudal lords who were step by
step deprived of their privileges and powers by an organized action of public agen-
cies and despite their sometimes violent opposition (Elias [1939] 1997a: 213). Their
visions of public order, alternative to the one promoted by the centralizing state, were
pushed out to the margins of the social imagery, together with any remembrance of
the vocabulary, forms of conduct and standards of propriety.

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[5] Elias's most valuable insight on the cultural change as a collateral of the structural one is his study of
the pan-European triumph of the courtly, aristocratic habitus and its relation to the centralizing power of
the emerging modern state. However, the most convincing analysis of the change of social canons in Elias's
writings is to be found in his *Mozart*, where the case of a bourgeois genius fighting the standards of the
feudal world, a battle which he personally loses, but which his class is bound to win.

Old gentry became the laughing stock in France as a result of absolutist modernization and not of the bourgeois upstarts gaining power. Nevertheless, it fell to the Revolution to eradicate the last traces of aristocratic way of life in its courtly variant. Elias shows how this was done by promoting alternative standards of sensitivity, ideals of beauty, tastes and manners. However, it could not have been done but for one simple additional factor: the old aristocracy and gentry were losing significance, because they were pushed out of the new, modern social world, their very existence becoming as obsolete as their language.

Central and Eastern Europe as a Space of Forgetting

The above discussion of remembering and forgetting in Elias's theory, focusing on fantasizing on the past themes, eliminating alternative imageries and changing the canons of taste was intended to make one point. If remembering and forgetting are two faces of the same process (what is remembered are the things which have not been forgotten) and forgetting is more accessible, easier to define and to study, then it becomes the basic task of the researcher to look into the mechanisms of forgetting.

I now propose to apply this idea to the problems of memory research in Central and Eastern Europe. His vision may be a source of valuable new perspectives for the researchers of social memory, provided that we keep in mind the following conclusions from his symbol theory.

The Two Lessons of Elias's Symbol Theory

The first lesson is that no vision of memory may be accurate unless it accounts for the figurational conditions of symbolic communication. This requires tracing the figurational elements characteristic for the society (or any of its fractions) under examination. It equals a rather elementary postulate not to analyze collective memory as an abstract phenomenon independently of the experience to which it pertains.

The second lesson, however, is less rudimentary. The memory research may not take for granted any theoretical account of mechanisms influencing the memory-shaping process. In particular, we may not take for granted the description of figurational changes offered by sociology and social history. Remembrance and oblivion in Elias's theory are treated as signs of social change, but on the other hand, the social change may also be an effect of changes in memory. Memory is a precondition to structure and *vice versa*, as the structure is nothing more than a dynamically changing figuration of people using symbols in interactions and establishing their position towards one another through and in language. The use made of Elias's term "figuration" by authors such as Jeffrey K. Olick (e.g. 2007, chapter 5) provides a clear illustration of the benefits this approach may bring in memory studies. Memory—as a symbolic function—is an important factor in social change and cannot be reduced to the social structure as its epiphenomenon (in which point Elias agrees with the majority of contemporary researchers, cf. e.g. Szacka et al. 2010).

Let us now briefly examine how these two insights, concerning the valuation of the actual experience in memory research and the role of memory in social change apply to Central and Eastern Europe.

Stick to the Experience

Sticking to the experience means respecting its uniqueness. It is true that on the ground of Elias's eventist vision of history uniqueness of every occurrence is assumed from the philosophical point of view, but the whole meaning of what could be called historically situated social research is to transpose this philosophical principle onto research methodology.

One method to achieve this goal is to take account of the fact that apparent similarities between social processes need not necessarily mean that there is a similar kind of experience behind them. The experience—both individual and social—is a function of the process which always encompasses elements not envisaged by any single theory. However, the limitations of perspective are inevitable in any theory, therefore the postulate to stick to the experience is in fact just a warning not to absolutize the partial perspective in the research process.

In the scholarship on memory (and not only on that) in Central and Eastern Europe we encounter a danger of such an absolutization of theoretical accounts and perspectives forged in other domains of social research. Frequently it results from the quest for interdisciplinarity, an overloaded buzzword of today's human and social sciences. When drawing on sociology and political history in memory research, we often overestimate the structural and power-related dimension of social phenomena (cf. Mark 2010). As a result, we tend to underestimate the effects of other causes on memory or, at the very best of cases, treat them as merely secondary influences. The effect is to reify the memory as such by relating them to status social phenomena (cf. Olick 2007: 90). This applies, among the other things, to the fundamental issue of regional identity.

It has become a dogma that Central and Eastern Europe as a region is exceptional in many respects. Its particularities include the imperial past (cf. Magris 2001, 2009), the mixed experience of colonizer's and colonized status (cf. Korek 2007), the status of the cultural melting pot, the interplay of ideologies (cf. Riabchuk 2002, 2003), the fate of bloodshed and oppression hanging over these lands throughout the 20th century (cf. Snyder 2010), the totalitarian experience, the cultural lag and many, many others. In all probability those similarities amply justify the focus of research on the regional level and the advantages of such an approach seem indisputable. Their productivity is particularly evident in the transformation studies, including the research following the EU accession of many states of the region. I will refer to this example instead of the more familiar if somewhat older ones related to imperial and totalitarian past.

The EU-context became a commonplace framework for referencing this regional experience (Mink 2008: 470). It is widely considered self-evident to take a formally defined fact of EU accession as a metaphor—or a metonymy—of a social process

(cf. Krzemiński, Raciborski 2007). Nevertheless, if we come back to Elias, this assumption will not hold water. According to his view the figuration and the experience should be perceived as a whole. Therefore, our mode of tracking the common trajectories of peoples in Central and Eastern Europe based on the similarities in their metonymically marked political history includes a false premise. Our inferences proceed from the resemblance of political situation to the assumed affinity of experience. This is the case in both sociology and sociocultural memory studies). This way we end up with an agenda of memory research which may become "over-regionalized" as a result of overestimating the common elements and disregarding the differences by a nonchalant "most of these countries" (see e.g. Tismaneanu 2009).

Elias's methodology would suggest a reverse order: to step from the diagnosis of similarities of position of the individuals in the figuration and thereupon proceed to the tentative hypotheses regarding their experiences. Only then can the study of memory as symbolic function escape the traps of textuality and superficiality. To put it in a simple way: people may declare and describe an apparently very similar sort of experience (war poverty, uncertainty of exile or euphoria at political liberation). However, as long as we do not account for the figurational position of our informants, we may neither be sure that they indeed report the same experience, nor confidently ascribe the similarities to the influence of structural and political conditions evidenced in the area in which they occur. Regional identity may not be taken for granted or assumed, it needs to be demonstrated.

If we do not stick to the interrelation between the figuration and the symbolic activities (including remembering), we fail fully to grasp the structural and interactional aspect of experience. Consequently, we focus mainly on the work of memory, but very narrowly defined and always threatened to be prevailed upon by externalized verbal element, whether induced by the researcher or accessed by unobtrusive research techniques. The threat as such is a universal feature of memory research, but it gets graver if we are dealing with a region in whose case the exceptionality of experience has become a popular cliché.

Remembering and Forgetting as Instruments of Social Change

Another cliché of the Central and Eastern Europe region, this time a less abstract one, is related to the relationship between the mechanisms of remembering and forgetting and the social change.

A simple facit of Elias's conception as discussed above is that a researcher striving to know the memory of people must always inquire not only what they remember, but also what they have forgotten. This seems straightforward enough, but as we look at the memory scholarship, the question of what if retained seems infinitely to dominate the question of what passes into oblivion. In addition, both questions seem to be heavily overweight by the issue of politics of memory (see e.g. Tănăsoiu 2005, Kowalska 2008, Mink 2008).

This is understandable up to a point, because in order to know what has been forgotten, we need first to know what could have been remembered—we need to create

an alternative representation of the past.[6] This is an operation which we frequently avoid in the fear of subjectivity and arbitrariness of such alternative representations. Nevertheless, all Elias's analysis of speaking, thinking and knowing is in fact oriented towards the problem of what is absent than towards the actual contents at any given moment.

This procedure of reasoning seems to be lacking in memory research, except for the lame form of intuitive and simplistic contradicting people's memories with so called "facts." It seems surprising as the famous formulation by Paul Ricoeur (2000), according to whom forgetting both forestalls the cultural work of memory and engages the cognitive distance necessary for granting significance to past events, belongs to the most frequently quoted in the Central and Eastern Europe scholarship (see. e.g. Borbely 2011: 66). Nevertheless, the effort to concentrate on forgetting by means of a reconstruction of possible, hypothetical memories used as a heuristic tool it is seldom evidenced.

Researchers usually circumvent the dangers of theoretical constructions by contrasting alternative memories of the same occurrence (e.g. Szacka 2006; Jakoubek, Svoboda, BudilovÓ 2009; Karstedt 2009); Central and Eastern Europe is frequently described as a region in which the competition of memories is exceptionally ardent. Thus we fall from the domain of fantasy and social imageries into the domain of power relations without any attempt to relate the two, whereas Elias would hardly think them separable. No wonder our focus on politics of memory is bound to be deficient: we may only compare the effects of politics of memory with what is (or was) remembered, but we have no means to criticize it by comparison with what could but was not remembered. This deprivation diminishes the critical potential of memory research and makes it much more difficult for a sociologist to play a positive part of a "destroyer of myth" (see Olick 1999a: 114). Instead of speaking for minority groups whose memories were effectively marginalized, we only give voice to those who were lucky enough to have lasted long enough, as only articulated memory can be saved from amnesia threatening memory research.

In this point the postulate of sticking to the experience comes to aid: only if we do start with the social figuration and proceed to track the connections leading to the interactions between the actors in it, we may make sure that we access the actual experience as opposed to theoretical artifacts and superficial associations. This is even more important in the case of societies whose memories were instrumentalized and refurbished in an organized manner (Karstedt 2009: 29ff). For example: we know that a large part of experience was forgotten in the imperial and totalitarian regimes of Central and Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, if we do not want to take it for granted without substantial evidence, we need to try and reconstruct the experience and undertake the risk to represent it in an alternative way—to imagine a different memory. It would be an operation formally similar to the application of a Weberian ideal type: a heuristic fiction of memory based on given figurational premises may

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[6] Such attempts are sometimes made in CEE memory research, although without any focus on the methodological implications of such a procedure, see e.g. Jakoubek, Svoboda, Budilova 2009.

drive us to seek out the fractions of experience which could be represented—but were not.

Conclusion

I have presented Elias's symbol theory as a comprehensive approach combining the account of four functions of human symbolic communication: speaking, thinking, knowing and remembering. Thereupon, I have reviewed the contexts in which forgetting operates in Elias's theory, thus going against Elias's intentions in trying to isolate one symbolic function. I have argued that Elias's theory may serve the purpose of fruitful analysis of social phenomena related to remembering and forgetting. This is primarily due to its general character and open-endedness. Elias's position as a classic of sociological thought is very special: here we truly have a case of a single scholar trying to reconstruct the whole tradition and becoming one of its most ardent critics, while his position of an outsider was gradually shifting into the status of a holy relic.

My account of Elias's idea is by no means exhaustive. Using the metaphor of climbing the tower in order to present the crucial features of communication (including the remembering and forgetting) as cooperative, collective and reflexive activity, I have deliberately left aside the whole context of Elias's propositions. Not only did I put aside a vast part of his work dealing with the dilemmas of evolutionary and biological roots of human communication. I also omitted his remarks regarding ethics and mission of social sciences, which would also apply to memory research. Both these fields are admirably covered by Richard Kilminster in his work on Elias's post-philosophical sociology (2007, see pages 101ff), which I repeatedly referred to in this paper. I may only declare that to my belief Elias's views are also in these fields far from the mainstream discourse of social sciences (cf. Heilbron 1990: 153).

Another source of the productivity of Elias's theory lies in his directly addressing two issues of major importance as far as the notion of collective memory itself comes into question. The first is the experience-bound nature of all memory (in the sense of intricate and inseparable link between the dynamics of social change on the one hand and the contents of the social memory on the other). The second was the impact of memory on structural processes and the symmetry in the relation between memory (as well as the other functions of symbolic communication) and the experience remembered and forgotten.

I have suggested that Elias's approach may be revealing for memory researchers in Central and Eastern Europe due to the fact, that the most popular research fields in our region are the areas of forced forgetfulness and fantasized remembering, both of which are conditioned by and have impact on figurational changes. Practically speaking it would mean that following Elias's symbol theory we need, firstly, to combine a sociologist's view of figuration and social process with a historian's view of experience, and, secondly, to work on the holographic and dynamic perception instead of relying on the perceptions of the social actors themselves. The presence of the researcher must be an added value in the memory research and not just a locus in which

diverse narrations of social actors overlap. Only in that way the memory research may retain its reflexive and critical character, which marked its emancipating value and contributed greatly to its current standing. Elias's multidimensional analysis can enforce reflexivity in collective memory research, helping us make one more step in our journey up the tower stairs.

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