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## Gendered Figurational Strategies in Norbert Elias's Sociology<sup>1</sup>

*Abstract:* Norbert Elias conceptualized social inequality as a result of shift in relative social forces of individuals in figurations, in which framework he also viewed the inequality between men and women. In this paper I examine the main thesis of what could be named Elias's gender sociology: firstly, men and women use different strategies in their striving for an increase in relative power depending on their social position, and secondly, one of the most effective strategies which may be successfully used by the weaker party in order to change the distribution of power between the sexes is redefining the arsenal of cultural weapons used in this struggle. The antagonism between men and women trying to draw as much power as possible to themselves in the zero-sum social game can become very fierce, especially if the use of physical violence is legitimized on a respective level of civilization. On the other hand, according to Elias's basic theoretical assumptions all individuals in a figuration are interrelated and interdependent, which restrains direct violence as well as suppresses radical liberation tendencies. This makes it easier for women to engage in strategies of coping with oppression on institutional, symbolic and proxemic level, which are discussed in the final part of the paper.

*Keywords:* Norbert Elias, figuration, feminism, proxemics

### Introduction

The issue of social inequality is virtually inevitable when undertaking an analysis of both individual and social life in historical perspective. According to certain authors, such as Charles Wright Mills, the interest in the sources and results of inequality would be a mark of a truly insightful social scholarship (Mills 1959: 10ff). The rationale behind this opinion is that inequality is one of those aspects of social structure most tangible to individuals—and individuals, more commonly known as people, are both the ultimate object of study in the social sciences and addressees of their findings. Inequality is closely linked to the first-person perspective from which most of our everyday intuitive measures of social position are construed and applied. Insight into the nature of social inequality is therefore very likely to contribute to attempts to bridge the gap between the micro- and macrostructure or, in other words, between agency and structure. Attributions of social position transposed onto relational attitudes and actions of individuals add up to build broader patterns of social behavior, thereby constituting and perpetuating the differences in perceived and real life chances of in-

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dividuals. Those chances depend heavily on the attributions which members of society apply to themselves as well as on those which are applied to them by others.

The nature of social inequality is adequately represented by all sorts of conman and trickster scenarios to be found in folklore, popular wisdom and fiction since Homer's times until Felix Krumm and the talented Mr. Ripley. All these fables tend to point to one thing: inequality is "in the eye of the beholder" insofar that by changing the socially accepted signs of social position the effects (both positive and negative) of inequality may be partly or altogether reduced or enhanced. The prince and the pauper are, as we all know, both ascribed a social position and not born with it. They become unequal by virtue of their external traits which may be modified, leading to a change in their relative standing. By the same token (just slightly radicalized) the reactions of social environment may be altered without any external change in the individual in question, producing the same effect of leveling inequalities. If a prince is treated by everyone like a pauper, he will sooner or later become a pauper fully fledged. Psychological and behavioral change in the individual in question (e.g. new elements of self-image, different looks and stance, attribution schemes) inevitably follows as a way of individual adaptation to altered structural conditions. Therefore, the concept of inequality is intrinsically related to social knowledge (in particular the recognition patterns referring to social position), its practical consequences and correspondence between the self-perception of an individual and the state of knowledge of his or her environment. The stratification model and the knowledge of individuals need to be coherent in order for inequality to operate smoothly and the methods of their mutual readjustment belong to a basic set of survival techniques of the social system.

But inequality, thus technically characterized, has also its more human (or, rather, inhuman) face. Norbert Elias's childhood and youth in Breslau, Germany (now Wrocław, Poland) in the last years of rule of Wilhelm II undoubtedly made him especially sensitive to this aspect of inequality, and his future experience of an exile did nothing to relieve it. Institutionalized Prussian anti-Semitism put strict limitations to aspirations and life chances of Jews—discrimination was their daily bread. One of Elias's schoolfriends summarized it aptly, responding to boy Elias's declaration that he would very much like to be a university professor in these words: *Die Laufbahn ist dir bei der Geburt abgeschnitten worden*. As Elias himself once remarked, he had been granted a very long life (Rehberg 1996: 30–31), and in the course of it he had seen a lot of what sociologists term "inequality" and what is in everyday language usually called injustice and maltreatment. On the other hand, however, Elias's historical bias and rare ability to see the micro, interactional aspect of social life together with the macro institutional one protected his work from detrimental impact of resentment and allowed him to keep his scientific distances without losing the engagement, which is the only possible source of lasting vitality in scientific work (Heinich 2002: 28).

In *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (1939) Elias introduced the concept of the "social force" (*gesellschaftliche Kraft*) in order to account for the differences between individual chances to influence the state of social affairs. In *The Established and the Outsiders* (1965) with John L. Scotson they focused on relational positioning strategies between heterogeneous groups in the conditions of social change. In *The Symbol*

*Theory* (1991), published after his death, social inequalities are already explained as a result of symbolic representation of reality mediated by the socially conditioned perception scheme. In every case the inequality was conceptualized as a result of a shift in relative social powers of individuals, with power flowing from members of one social group to another. There seems to be ample evidence that social inequality was one of the focal points of Elias's theory. The more surprising is the fact that his vast range of interests does not seem to include one of the most evident cases of structural inequality, namely that between men and women. The surprise is, of course, somewhat diminished by the fact that Elias's book on gender sociology was never published as a result of a misadvised action of a cleaning lady who threw away a ready manuscript on men and women in comparative historical perspective (Mennell 1989: 25).

The part of the lost book which Elias was able to reconstruct became an article on relationships between the sexes in Ancient Rome<sup>2</sup>; but a good deal of analyses of marriage and sexual life are to be found both in *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* and in his subsequent writings. There seems to be enough material for a historian of sociology willing to reconstruct Elias's gender theory. Nevertheless, there is no monograph systematically presenting Elias's views in that domain against a backdrop of his figurational sociology, despite a growing number of research work in gender sociology drawing on his perspective, which, as a rule, is focused on the problem of civilized behavior as a domination tool and emancipation weapon (Hammer 2006: 407). Thus it seems a right thing to do to start with this dimension of antagonism between men and women, in order to move to the issue of its symbolic aspect.

Elias's main thesis regarding the symbolic determinants of inequality between men and women could be summarized in two points. Firstly, men and women use different strategies in their striving for an increase in relative power depending on their social position. Secondly, one of the most tempting strategies which may be successfully used by the weaker party in order to change the distribution of power between the sexes is redefining the arsenal of cultural weapons used in this struggle. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of this strategy may be disputed in the light of Foucaultian and Bourdesian approaches. Although not referred to directly by Elias, they offer certain insights into the possibility of the nature of oppression changing its phenomenal form without any modification of its social function. The role of various social disguises used in order to compensate for the constant level of oppression in changing social realities is particularly significant in this respect.

My starting point is the notion of figuration, from which I move on to the distinction between the established and the outsiders, in order to discuss the strategies of coping with structural oppression highlighting in particular its everyday spatial and proxemic aspects as envisaged by Elias. Then I pass to symbolic interpretation of differences

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<sup>2</sup> The article in question had actually been first written in English (and published in this language as "The changing balance of sexes in the history of civilization," *Theory, Culture and Society* 4 (2–3) 1987), but was published first in 1986 in German translation by Michael Schröter as "Wandlungen der Machtbalance zwischen den Geschlechtern. Eine prozeßsoziologische Untersuchung am Beispiel des antiken Römerstaats" (*Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* 38 (3) 1986). In this paper I use the reprint of the German translation in the 16<sup>th</sup> volume of Elias's *Collected Works* published in 2006 by Suhrkamp (ed. Heike Hammer, 139–181).

in the positions of men and women. I focus on strategies aimed at changing their unequal standing by means of altering the symbolic values of female and male social roles and the context of everyday interaction. I draw on Elias's remarks on proxemic, spatiotemporal aspects of inequality between men (the established) and women (the outsiders). I conclude with a discussion of shift in the forms of oppression from direct, proxemic and physical domination by means of direct physical violence to symbolic and disguised control of discourses.

### **Figuration as a Lieu of Inequality—Structural Sources of Everyday Oppression**

A figuration is commonly if not very precisely defined as a set of social relations in which individuals relate to one another and to reality as a whole (Merz-Benz 1996: 47). The very term most probably comes from Nietzsche (Mongardini 1996: 295) and is closely related to the latter's philosophy of life. A figuration consists of individuals entering in diverse relations to various ends: the actors come and go, the objects of their activities change constantly, new categories of goals appear and new relational techniques are introduced. Nevertheless, consistent and durable *a posteriori* patterns emerge out of this diversity of individual actions to which members of society unconsciously conform, which is typically referred to as social structure. The most important feature of a figuration is therefore its paradoxical nature: the dynamic volatility of individual action and the stability of its structuring effects coexist within one framework.

This paradox is of course a product of the very tension between agency and structure which we have not been able to reduce thus far. Many theorists noted that aspect of social life. Among most renown terms coined in order to account for it we find Georg Simmel's "social form," Max Weber's "ideal type" (which Elias judged as an "unfortunate term;" [2006c: 242]), Nicklas Luhmann's "actor-network theory" or Anthony Giddens's "structuration." This is not a place to undertake comparative analysis of Elias's "figuration" and all the alternative attempts to conceptualize the micro-macro gap, but it seems that Elias's idea is closest to that of Simmel, who was also influenced by philosophy of life and stressed the weight of structuring effects on interaction patterns. However, Elias's focus is not on the normative aspect of structural differences, but on the internalization of habitual manners of behavior as well as on their emotional correlates, in particular shame and embarrassment (Heinich 2002: 9). In this, as in many other aspects, he is closer to our contemporary sensitivity than to that of many classical authors. The latter were frequently oriented towards macrostructural research featuring the type of man Elias referred to as *homo clauses* (Hoffman 1996: 257), whose main features were closed-ended cognitive apparatus and a set of ready classification schemes independent of social surroundings. In all his writings Elias advanced an alternative approach according to which not only the contents, but also the instruments of human understanding of the world are shaped by the interactive context of human life. Thereby he presented a human being as *homo apertus*, whose openness manifested itself in historical changeability which Elias

attributed not only to social structures and their internal mechanisms, but also to the human nature. It may be noted as the main difference between Elias's view and that of Sigmund Freud, to whose concept of subconscious Elias's ideas were frequently and plausibly referred (Mennell 1989: 96).

Nevertheless, if human nature be changeable depending on the figuration, we may still legitimately ask about the nature of factors determining the direction of these changes. The basic one is the distribution of power in figuration or, as Elias calls it, the relative "social force" of individuals. Social force means the objective chance of "having one's own way" in the system by steering other people's behavior. This is, of course, quite similar to Weberian understanding of power. However, according to Weber the core of the phenomenon of power lies in forcing others to act contrary to their own will, whereas Elias sees the "social force" in every instant when a person is influencing others to conform to his or her will (be it in accordance with their own wishes or not). This would also include changing the perceptions of people against whom the force is used in such a way as to make them actually believe that they are doing as they wish themselves. Elias must thus be deemed precursory to Pierre Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence consisting essentially in making subordinate social groups do the bidding of the dominant ones by means of imposing on them a set of ideas which exclude the very conceivability of a contrary action. In other words, this is an old mechanism of making other people believe they are subjected to others' power because it simply "should be that way" (e.g. because the world is construed socially in a way which makes any alternative balance of powers unthinkable). This is a strategy applied by all successful dominant groups and in particular by men in their relations with women.

### **Women as Outsiders: Male Strategies of Domination**

The aforementioned strategy of domination has two components: the objective limitation of life chances of subordinate groups and the vision of the world imposed on them according to which their position is legitimate. Both these conditions are fulfilled when the subordinate group is treated as an "outsider" group and the dominant one adopts the standing of the "established." Elias and Scotson subjected the established-outsiders relation to examination based on empirical data from qualitative and quantitative research in a small English town christened "Winston Parva." This Chicago school-style monograph from 1965 is valuable because it allows us to determine the most important features of a relation which applies to any form of exclusion. It is also worthwhile, as neither Marxist nor Weberian approach to exclusion and domination is applied by the authors (Mennell 1989: 115), which makes this small book a very rare example of grounded theory *avant la lettre*. Finally, it also implies a motif of discussion with sociological tradition; we find in it the Simmelian motif of a stranger, unreferenced yet clearly visible.

The strangers, in Elias's case being factory workers moving in search of work to a small town from a nearby big metropolis (outsiders), encounter a group of

town dwellers, whose families have been there for a few generations. These are the established; there are also rich families of newcomers who form a third category of the population, but they do not count much in the analysis. The habits and lifestyles of the two categories differ greatly and no wonder that certain distance between them appears at the very beginning of mutual contacts. What is interesting is the following course of events.

The distances lead to a segregation of the two groups in virtually every respect: they meet, eat and spend their free time in different spaces. The outsiders are normally not invited to participate in the social life of the established and *vice versa*. The results of this situation are, however, different for each group. The established become more and more consolidated, conscious of their background and proud of their sense of belonging to a larger community. They also start to typify the outsiders in the manner so acridly described by Simmel: the outsiders as a group are perceived as very much alike in their view and manner, bad qualities are generalized and the good ones particularized, the sense of “them” being “worse” than “us” is ubiquitous. And this pertains not only to the established, as this view is shared by the outsiders themselves; they also feel “worse,” undignified, undeserving. These feelings result in their developing a sort of Durkheimian anomic mentality, whose basic feature is the sense of being alone in the world and lacking guidance in life. This is the reason why the outsider families tend to “keep to themselves” and there is no consolidation of the outsiders’ group—in fact, there is no outsiders’ group at all.

It must be stressed that the relationship described above only pertains to relations between collectives. In individual contacts no discrimination was observed and the images of personally acquainted individuals from the outsider group entertained by the established were neutral. As a whole, however, the town split into two casts, one of them striving for domination in both institutional (participation in association and clubs, social life) and symbolic sphere (transmission of verbalized images of strangers). This was also transposed into the sphere of proxemics—the established and the outsiders divided the space of the town between themselves, apparently striving for a “separate but equal” model, which inevitably leads to inequality. In all these three spheres the outsiders are the excluded group. The combination of institutional, symbolic and proxemic aspects makes the exclusion figurational and increases the likeness of its reproduction.

The above analysis has been successfully applied to relations between men and women (Mennell 1989: 25), with the contention that women were successfully pushed into the outsider position in the institutional and symbolic meaning of the word. Elias himself noticed that the twentieth century witnessed a period of particularly relentless struggle between the sexes, which in some ways resembles other social conflicts, but, on the other hand, is a very special case. The similarity consists in the mechanism of exclusion of members of subordinate group, making them outsiders and preserving the monopoly of the established over cherished social goods (such as prestige or support by social cooperation networks). The difference lies in the strength of interdependence between men and women. Although by virtue of Elias’s basic theoretical assumptions all individuals in a figuration are interrelated, but the

way the two sexes rely upon each other is unique, as no other kind of interrelatedness has such an obvious link to the biological preservation of humanity (Elias 2006: 242). This of course adds a new aspect to male strategies of domination, depending on the stage of social development.

The basic means of domination, Elias seems to claim, always was and will be always physical violence, which inevitably challenged life chances of women: in a society in which recurrence physical strength is a part of everyday life and is required of actors performing certain social roles, women are relatively worse off, as they are, on the average, weaker. Again, the individual-group differential plays a role: some women may be stronger than some men, but the strength of the group of women is invariably smaller (Elias 2006b: 147) in every society dominated by warriors. However, according to the central thesis of Elias's sociology the general direction of social development is to eliminate direct violence from social life (which in Europe took a form of state monopoly of violence). As physical violence is too dangerous to be allowed in many spheres of life, it is generally legally delegitimized also in spheres where it was traditionally authorized (nowadays men in the West are usually not authorized by the law to beat up not only their wives, but also their children and dogs). This—and nothing else—gives the female outsiders a chance to counteract.

### **Changing the Rules: Female Coping Strategies**

The female coping strategies as described by Elias could be summarized by the proverb: "Better a sparrow in the hand than a pigeon on the roof." It seems reasonable for the outsiders in the institutional and symbolic world controlled by men to pick a few spheres in which they could overtake control and, with time, gain some level of independence. The strategies applied to this end can be identified on the institutional, symbolic and proxemic level, corresponding to various dimensions of oppression discussed above.

#### **Institutional Level**

On the institutional level women tend to monopolize certain areas of social life and exclude men from them. By this token men retain overall domination in the social figuration, but in various substructures of it they become gradually subordinate, which enhances the balance between the sexes. This description applies particularly well to household relations and it had frequently been treated as an ultimate proof of natural female bias towards this sphere of life. However, nothing in Elias's approach suggests that this domestic prevalence of women should have any other grounds but the fact that masculine warriors in early human era were relatively disinterested in it, thus leaving it to the weaker sex. From this an interesting conclusion might be drawn that while physical differences between men and women lose their impact on cultural forms and social structure, domestication of women and resulting elimination of men from household affairs may be resented and perceived as deprivation by men themselves.

Another institutional strategy was to cut out a small piece of men-dominated field and monopolize this scrap, thus highlighting female presence in spheres of male interest. Such was the case of Roman Vestal Virgins, which also illustrates the perverse nature of male domination: a woman entering a male field must abandon her gender status, in the Roman Republic linked to the family life (Elias 2006b: 150).

### Symbolic Level

Symbolic coping strategy of women consists in changing the image of a woman in the culture. Elias provides an illustration of it in *The Civilizing Process*, describing the shift in balance of sexes on medieval courts, where the lady of the house (a married woman, typically having children and not exactly young by the standards of the day) was raised to a status of idealized erotic object. This strategy amounts to changing the male perception of women, which in turn slowly makes certain heretofore acceptable forms of interaction (like beating a wife in front of other people) inadequate and obsolete. The change proceeds from symbolic order to the structural one: men, who cannot legitimately use their physical force against women at their own discretion, lose a point. Forced by the symbolic order to admire and cherish the qualities represented by women, men lose another point, which had heretofore always been easily won by disdain. Men are forced to respect women and admire them and to modify their behavior accordingly.

*Amour courtois* is, of course, just one instant of a process which in Elias's view is highly typical for the whole European civilization: men start to treat women as they would treat men of higher social rank (letting women pass through the door first, kissing hands, waiting in a standing position till a woman sits first, etc.). This external expressions of respect are, of course, ambivalent. Undoubtedly, they introduce certain additional limitations to men's behavior, which serves well the women seen as the weaker sex (it is one step more difficult to hit someone whose hand you have been taught to kiss). However, Elias definitely judges these external forms to be just a cover for the underpinning male domination—a sort of symbolic retribution for real oppression. Those cultures in which there is nothing embarrassing in overt subordination of women may well do without this sort of smoke and mirrors. In Europe, as social figurations became more complex and women started to gain some fields institutionally, domination had to go underground. By this token the feminist strategy of refusing all external expressions of respect resulting from nothing but gender difference as unduly discriminating is in accordance with Elias's interpretation. Lifting the veils obscuring the figurational reality is a sound method of adjusting the symbolic and the institutional order of social life.

### Proxemic Level Strategies

The actions taken on the proxemic level are as a rule a consequence of the institutional and symbolic developments; they are not, strictly speaking, strategies in their own right, but rather tactic measures. Nevertheless, as proxemic aspect of intersex

relations combines the symbolic and the physical space of interaction, it is vitally important in any figurational setting in which physical violence underlies the initial distribution of power. A truth well known to any person working with domestic violence cases: it is very difficult to handle the situation as long as the proxemic relation between the perpetrator and the victim continues. The same applies to other, less drastic manifestations of oppression. A reference is frequently made to Virginia Woolf's famous "room of one's own," thereby making it clear that specific organization of physical space and the household proxemics may have a bearing on the relationship between men and women and the latter's life chances. Recalling the famous case of "separate bedrooms" in bourgeois marriage (an apt example to be found in Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*), we may get a hint of yet another aspect of this "reserved space" issue. Women, by gaining their own spaces and imposing on men the feeling of being unwanted, of intruding a sanctuary of some kind ("What are you doing in my bedroom/kitchen/nursery"?), also scored importantly in the struggle for domination. This is, of course, also a double-edged method: by increasing female power in a limited sphere, women stepped down from the fight over other areas, thus leaving them to men altogether. Again, there is nothing but the structure and the balance of power behind the division of spheres: kitchen might easily become men's thing. The figure of garage as a man's sanctum clearly shows that female domination originates second-order coping strategies.

All the aforementioned strategies have one common feature: their goal is to change the rules implied in the structure of figuration in the limited field in which women are able to achieve a certain degree of self-standing. This would not be possible without the flexibility offered by the figuration, which also explains why female emancipation does not necessarily lead to a turn-over in social life, although it may require overturning a few symbolic golden calves. One of the best candidates is the modern family, in Elias's view a historically contingent social formation. The fate of modern marriage in Elias's view provides the best illustration of his thesis about the civilization process as shifting the figurational balance.

### **Shifting the Balance: Civilization as a Matter of Form**

In his introduction to Michael Schröter's book *Wo zwei zusammenkommen in rechter Ehe* Elias writes: "marriage and family are human figurations which are multiform and structured just as the societies themselves" (Elias 2006a: 95). Two important points are being made here. One is the contention that no reductionist reasoning (e.g. sociobiological or economical) could lead to a satisfactory explanation of women's position in the family and in the society as a whole. The only legitimate procedure is to analyze the correspondence between the social structure and the form and function of the family within it. It is not true, according to Elias, that the family is a basic social cell: by saying so we absolutize the state of affairs of a certain stage in our civilization's history (and, it should be added, this stage was neither

the longest nor the most recent) (Elias 2006a: 97–98). Social control over human relations (including sexual ones) may take many other shapes, but in any case (and this would be the second point) it cannot be claimed that it is less restrictive or more liberate in our times than in any other. In the West the struggle between the sexes is nowadays largely fought with symbolic means, but the pressures on both sexes to protect or attack their or the other party's respective strongholds (kitchens, garages, military service and the right to keep the care of children after divorce) is hardly diminished.

Shifting the balance between the sexes is, therefore, largely a matter of form—of hiding the overt and veiling the ostentatious. This is not a conclusion Elias would be willing to agree with: in his opinion the struggle for power gave women certain important advantages and lead to significant improvement in their position. As he writes in his text on gender relationships in the Roman antiquity, women managed to gain themselves certain legal independence (which was a tool of great significance in the lawyers' society which Rome became in the last decades of the Republic, only perhaps comparable to that of eighteenth century pre-revolutionary France or contemporary United States). The women's right to hold personal possessions, decline in the number of traditional marriages giving full legal control over the wife's person and property to the husband, growing number of divorces—all this resulted in strengthening women's standing in the society. Concurrent cultural changes and proxemic movements also contributed to that result (e.g. it became customary for society men and women to dine together reclining next to one another, which was unthinkable in the old days of republican severity [Elias 2006b: 157]). The legal gains listed by Elias are comparable to the right to vote or to obtain a university degree, the systemic trophies of power struggle in the more recent days. However, their meaning in the long perspective could easily be questioned.

The civilization being a matter of form and a mere epiphenomenon of the figuration, it may be assumed that as long as the figuration itself remains largely unchanged, all civilizational (cultural and proxemic) developments are just disguises for real balance of social forces. This is, on the one hand, a Marxist reasoning. If we perceive the figuration as the base, than legal, cultural and all other changes are just superficial, superstructural shifts with no impact on the mechanism of oppression. They are merely an ideology legitimizing male domination. On the other hand, this is a Bourdesian analysis of the distribution of symbolic capital in various fields of social life. Women have in the course of centuries been allowed access to many fields which were closed to them beforehand and it would in all probability lead to great power gains on their part provided that the overall distribution of symbolic capital remained unchanged. This, however, was not the case. It may be argued that women are only let into the spheres losing their value in the course of social development. Women had been allowed to vote—but in a few decades afterwards the power of a single vote fell down rapidly and the voting right in old democracies today is sadly disregarded by their populations. The right (the systemic gain) is worth so much less than at the time when it was earned, because the conditions of its execution have changed.

### Conclusion

Whatever the balance of scores of men and women in their eternal struggle, the overall pattern of domination does not change, because the pattern is inscribed in the very logic of the figuration. When women make an important progress, the situation changes and the fruits of it are suddenly not so precious. It was the case with the right to pursue a professional career: social control lessened on the point of getting paid work out of the household, but it remained as strict as it used to be on the point of childcare. Now, as the state in the West is taking over many functions of the family (and of the mother) in the domain of the childcare, thus making it easier for women to effectively enjoy the labor market, many traditional parents' rights, including for example the parental right to control the educational content, becomes limited. Many such examples could be given, showing that the social system is always one step ahead of the struggle of sexes.

It is possible that in our thinking about gender relations throughout the history we frequently mistake the increasing individualism for increasing freedom of women. As Elias puts it, in the Western world since the beginning of the new modern era there is a general tendency towards individualization which benefits women in general (Elias 2006a: 98). Although the allegations as to the rise of individualism in contemporary societies (even in the West) are frequently disputed, it is difficult to convincingly argue that there is no process of individualization at all, even though certain evidence to the contrary may be pointed out<sup>3</sup>. It seems more accurate to follow Elias's view according to which the basic figuration in the West did in fact only change twice during the last two thousand years. One was the fall of the Roman empire and the resulting medieval dispersal of social life, in which physical force embodied by the figure of a knight-in-armor was again raised to a principle of social relations. This state of affairs was slowly overcome by the leading European dynasties fastidiously centralizing their dominions and reconstructing imperial Roman state in a nutshell. It led to the second systemic change, which was the emergence of a fully-fledged modern nation-state with its bureaucratic organization gradually monopolizing physical violence and fiscal prerogatives. To these two structural processes the fate of women was closely connected. State, statutory laws, formalized central power and its monopoly over violence was always an ally of women; social dispersal, family and tribe domination and informal decentralized power seemed to serve them bad. Elias did not express any elaborate views on the place of European Union in his civilization theory, but there are no reasons to believe its emergence would change a lot in his scheme—it was rather the next stage of centralization and unification of civilizational standard on an even higher level of social integration.

In both the historically evidenced figurations—the centralized and the dispersed one—men are dominating sex, which can only be attributed to two factors: the remnants of the physical force as status determinant or the inertia of previous social forms.

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<sup>3</sup> See for example Michel Maffesoli's concept of neotribalism in: *The Time of Tribes: The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*, translated by Rob Shields (London: Sage Publications 1996).

The first one seems tempting, although it would be difficult to construe a clear argument for it. The second one is to an extent supported by Elias himself. He indicated in the *Wandlungen der Machtbalance zwischen den Geschlechtern* that the relatively strong position of women at the end of the Roman empire survived the state itself (and the civilization level to which it corresponded) by many centuries, despite the system change (Elias 2006: 172) (Elias 2006b: 172). By the same token we may perceive the surprisingly weak position of women in contemporary societies cherishing equality as one of their basic values as a relic of the previous figuration persistently dwelling on for centuries.

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