

# Foucault Studies

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Special Section: Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias**

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This special section of the current issue of *Foucault Studies* comprises two articles and a roundtable discussion, centered on the works of Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias. The critical thrust of this effort originated at a conference devoted to the works of these two authors, held at the University of Hamburg in July of 2008. Titled *Care or Control of the Self: The Sociology of the Subject in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, the conference was organized by Professor Stefanie Ernst of the University of Hamburg and Professor Andrea D. Bührmann of the University of Münster, and drew together eighty-one participants from a wide network of mostly Eliasian scholars based in Germany, Ireland, Great Britain, The Netherlands and the United States. Authors and discussants featured in this section spent an immersive three days engaging a range of theoretical, critical and empirical perspectives on the contrasting legacies of these two figures, whose broad influence in contemporary social theory seemed not to have received the measure of systematic comparison it deserved. While it was an Eliasian agenda that prevailed over this discussion (one that is perhaps still evident in the works included here), it was nonetheless in a spirit of interdisciplinarity and synthesis, and toward a penetration of the sometimes insular devotional circles that social theorists tend to build around their field's progenitors (particularly the dead ones), that participants came together.

On the one hand, the coupling of these two figures seems an odd one, if only for the scale of their reception and the size of their audiences. While Foucault's presence on the global stage is unmistakable, Elias was a marginal figure during his life, and his influence today remains modest by comparison. Moreover, the unique outsidership that defined Elias's presence and influence has translated into a scholarly following that is both intensively integrated, while marginal to many centers of power and influence in the social sciences. Today a large network of figurational or process-sociological scientists extends from Europe to Latin America, Australia, Asia and the United States. At the same time, Eliasian sociology has accomplished some degree of institutionalization in its own right, beginning with the establishment in 1983 of the Norbert Elias Foundation ([www.norberteliasfoundation.nl](http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl)), and the Norbert Elias Chair at Erasmus University. The Foundation supports the interdisciplinary Figurational Research Network, and its newsletter *Figurations*, as well as the Norbert Elias Prize for new books in the social sciences. These developments expand on the works of a generation of scholars in Germany (Hermann Korte and Peter Gleichmann), in The Netherlands (Joop Goudsblom

and Cas Wouters), and in Great Britain (Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell), whose works have expanded Elias's contributions from a the legacy of a single author to a small subfield of theory and research.

Thus, it is in the hope of sparking still further dialogue between the near ubiquitous presence of Foucauldian scholarship and lesser-known (though, we argue, equally compelling) assets of Eliasian scholarship, that the editors of this special section present these works. The selection was conceived and ordered in such a way as to provide insight into the contrasting works of Foucault and Elias, for those with both more or less familiarity with their works. While these articles have already been discussed in the editorial introduction to this issue, I will mention them again here to better elaborate the context and thematic focus of these works. We begin with *Space, Time and the Constitution of Subjectivity: Comparing Elias and Foucault*, by Paddy Dolan, Professor of Sociology at Dublin Institute of Technology. This text exposes the reader to a range of problematics the two traditions share by considering their relative emphases on the temporal and spatial dimensions of social practice and the formation of selfhood. Dolan thus clears the terrain for a wider consideration of the theoretical assets of each, relative to the analysis of the historical emergence of modern subjectivities. More precisely, Dolan's discussion of the Eliasian developmental perspective on historical processes is presented here in a way that specifically addresses the frequent characterization of his work as evolutionary — or worse, Malthusian — by his critics. The temporal emphasis we discover in this approach is reconciled with Foucault's deeply held hostility toward process arguments in general, which he equates with teleological historiography, and dispenses with in favour of his emphasis on historical discontinuities, rupture and events, which he arrives at through his spatial account of the production of subjectivity. Jason Hughes, Senior Lecturer in Sociology and Communications, Brunel University, offers a similar comparative analysis of Foucauldian and Eliasian approaches with his article *Emotional Intelligence: Elias, Foucault and the Reflexive Emotional Self*, this time shifting the focus to the methodological issues raised in the empirical study of the contemporary practices of emotional management in professional life, as exemplified by the contemporary discourse on "Emotional Intelligence." While it is possible to read EI discourse as a featured case of governmentality, in which institutional control takes the form of an emancipatory injunction to expressive autonomy, it is also possible to adopt the Eliasian (and indeed Woutersian, referring to the work of Cas Wouters, introduced below) view of EI as a case of informalization, or the controlled de-control of emotions.

Third in this section is a roundtable discussion featuring the two editors, Dolan and Professor Cas Wouters of the University of Amsterdam, presented here as *The Planned and the Unplanned: A Roundtable Discussion on the Legacies of Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias*. Wouters's influence on Eliasian studies dates to the 1970s, where, as a student of Elias, Wouters took up and expanded key Eliasian concepts with his study of "informalization" as a social process of controlled de-control — a term that is now accepted as a key analytical concept in social theory. The polemical defence of Eliasian approaches, and the robust challenges to core Foucauldian assumptions presented by Wouters, makes for an intellectually invigorating exchange. Indeed, the discussion (necessarily a

rather “informalized” series of critical vignettes with the two traditions that ranges from the sexuality of children to women’s labor under flexible capitalism to the history of science) centers on what the participants believe to be the underlying dichotomy characterizing Foucauldian and Eliasian accounts of the historical and social production of subjectivity: where the former stresses prescriptive and reflexive practices shaped within institutional contexts and a set of power relations that operate normatively and in advance of embodied social relations, in the case of the latter it is the pre-reflexive, social practices originating in embodied face to face encounters between members of social groups that subjectivities are negotiated and produced. The many surprising turns of this conversation demonstrate the breadth and possibility — and perhaps irreconcilability — of the debate between Foucauldian and Eliasian social theory.

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