


An Evaluation of Norbert Elias's Criticism of Talcott Parsons: Process Sociology versus Situational Sociology

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Abstract

Norbert Elias's contribution to the social sciences literature is primarily due to his analyses on the processes of civilization. These analyses, though recognized late, have made his name known within the discipline of sociology, drawing attention to the theoretical and methodological innovations he offered. Elias opposed mainstream sociology based on the individual-society dichotomy with his conception of "process sociology" based on "figurations". Process sociology is the analysis of social phenomena in their processual and relational nature, outside the individual-society dichotomy, without reducing them to forms of "entity". Talcott Parsons stands as the most natural counterpoint to this analysis. According to Elias, Parsons, in his focus on social action and systems theory, deals with social phenomena by reducing them to certain static states. In this way, these phenomena are fragmented, simplified, and evaluated as essential. For Elias, this also means that the subject of "social development" or "social transformation" is staticized or even eliminated. In Parsons's social system theory, although this system is built intertwined with other systems, based on processes, and through mutual interaction, everything becomes fixed by the "actor-situation system". Ultimately, Parsons conceives what he calls a process by referencing specific situationalities. Accordingly, this study evaluates the critical line Elias constructs towards Parsons through the lens of process sociology and reveals the points of tension between situational sociology and process sociology via these two figures.

Keywords

Norbert Elias, Talcott Parsons, Situational Sociology, Process Sociology, Actor-Situation System

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