

# The Strange Place of the Work of Norbert Elias in the Sociology of French Sport

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**Abstract:** This article examines the place of Norbert Elias' work in the French sociology of sport. It is a question of a place qualified as strange because of an insufficiently democratized use whereas the contribution of Norbert Elias accumulates the assets (taking into account of the long time of the social facts, inscription in a broad process of civilization of the conducts, integrations of identified variations and clearly expressed conditions, theorization of the concept of controlled releases of the emotions facilitating the comprehension of the violences in the sport). After having specified in what way Norbert Elias is undoubtedly under-exploited in the scientific literature, a synthesis of his contribution is proposed. We then objectively determine the scientific influence of Norbert Elias' research by analyzing its relegation over the last 20 years. For this purpose, several national conference programs were observed, several selected publications and important university textbooks were discussed. A scientometric research was also used in order to compare the place of Norbert Elias' research in the French sociology of sport. If the results of this approach show that Norbert Elias is used by researchers, they confirm a limited use and especially very inferior to the use of Pierre Bourdieu's concepts (although not specialized to sports facts). Finally, the article presents explanations for a problematic under-use, which is possibly being improved.

**Keywords:** Elias, Sociology, Sport, France, Explanation

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## 1. Introduction

What place does the work of Norbert Elias occupy in the sociology of sport? By "place" we can understand influence or lack of influence, omnipresence or absence, forgetfulness, late or early recognition, long-term success and immediate success, abandonment and abandonment on the diachronic level. We will answer this question by observing a situated context - France - and by integrating both sport as practices and performance practices<sup>1</sup>. So we will try to understand this strange place given the scope and heuristic potential of the research of Elias, the initiator with Eric Dunning of the "School of Leicester": a potential clearly under-exploited even though *Sport and civilization* [1] - a major text dedicated to

sport also discussed by Bonny and collaborators [2] or Bodin and Robène [3] - can be considered as the only one produced by a great sociologist if we look at Harvey and Ohl [4]<sup>2</sup>. Partially written with Éric Dunning, Patrick Murphy and John Williams, *Sport et civilization* theorizes sport by considering both practices and performance practices.

This never-renewed singularity is also based on the consideration of the long term, and the inclusion of sports in a broader process of civilization of conduct. Such a procedural approach, which also integrates identified variations accompanied by conditions (and situated as in the cases studied in England and France), has modified the understanding of the development and evolution of sports. It is first of all *Sport and Civilization* which demonstrates the extent to which modern sports do not all have identically repeated histories, a common origin, followers who are ultimately very similar and isolated from each other. Finally,

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<sup>1</sup>The practices designate the sports disciplines (we list more than 350 in France) in which we find the licensees of the federations (12 million in number), the sportsmen practicing outside the associations. The practices of sports shows correspond, on the other hand, to sports spectators, supporters, fans, hooligans and *casuals* (violent supporters adopting no sign of belonging to a group, drowning in the mass of anonymous people).

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<sup>2</sup>Jean Harvey and Fabien Ohl specify on this point that Pierre Bourdieu or Anthony Giddens were interested in it in a more punctual way.

the book has clearly amended the conventional interpretations of sports violence, by fighting against essentializations that are erased by the concept of controlled release of emotions: a driving force behind the emergence of modern sports and their social functions, an illustration and a feeding of the process of pacification of behaviors. This work has in a way consecrated sports as sociological objects in their own right, revealing profound social transformations.

We will begin by presenting the ways in which we have determined the place of the work of Norbert Elias in the sociology of sport in France. We will then present results which confirm the under-exploitation of a major work. Finally, several perspectives will allow us to understand that the work of Norbert Elias, although very present outside the French-speaking world, will sooner or later obtain the recognition it deserves in the work of sociologists of French sport.

## 2. Method

The objective determination of the influence of a scientific work is not easy. However, we must measure what we study, otherwise we risk falling into speculation, arbitrariness and sometimes even ideology. But can we effectively measure the place of a diverse work in the social sciences? We believe that this is possible provided that we combine a quantified measure and a more qualitative measure. So we will follow the advice of Henri Volken [5] inviting us to combine the representational and pragmatic aspects of measurement. In concrete terms, we asked for a librarian from our university who specializes in serving researchers. Several requests were made to bibliometric tools to quantify the uses of references to the scientific work of Norbert Elias, over a period of 20 years, in the productions of sociology of sport<sup>3</sup>. These queries included the keywords "sociology" and "sociology of sport" coupled with the author Norbert Elias. We have also decided to put this point into perspective by comparing it to two other renowned sociologists: Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon. But this did not give satisfactory results at first, in particular because these tools remain more oriented towards the hard sciences than towards the social sciences. This is why this research led to the use of a different measurement tool that was more suited to both our query and our disciplinary field (the Publish -or- Perish software). This approach highlights the relatively limited use of Norbert Elias in the community of sports sociologists in general.

However, we have added to this quantification a more qualitative and strictly French consideration, precisely because scientometrics apprehends a lexical level but does not manage to evaluate a meaning as Duprat indicates [6]. This complementary approach is based on the evaluation of the place of Elias' work in the major French conferences on the sociology of sport over the past 20 years, and in a few bibliographical references considered to be exemplary in

order to situate the use of a scientific work. These are references in which logically the theses of Norbert Elias apply (works on the sociology of football fans, ultras, hooligans, boxers) or must be mentioned and discussed (important textbooks summarizing sociology Sport).

## 3. Results

Allow me to begin with a personal example: that of my concrete relationship to the work of Elias who, along with those of the second Chicago School and of Raymond Boudon, notably shaped my way of doing sociology. The use of part of the work of Norbert Elias imposed itself on me from my thesis on the sociology of football spectators integrating an attempt to understand hooliganism under the direction of Professor Jean-Pierre Lavaud [7]. I then conducted for several years investigations devoted this time to violence committed on amateur sports grounds, systematized during an habilitation thesis directed by Didier Demazière [8]. Marked by the unavoidable *Sport and civilization*, these research experiments were oriented by the concepts of controlled release of emotions such as aggressive impulses, control of violence, contextualized determinations: we therefore find here what is adroitly called "polarized axes" structuring the thought of Norbert Elias [9], notably identified in another important concept linking identities of the We and the I [10]. I am therefore not a specialist in the thought of Elias, but rather a regular and faithful user of one of his fractions. We needed these details to understand what will follow.

Let's now begin our measurement by turning to some of the tools used today to measure the impact of a researcher and their work. However, is it really relevant in the field of social sciences and with regard to an author like Elias? If the framework of bibliometric evaluations has a certain meaning in disciplines relating to the life sciences in particular, if it is based on an apparently elaborate apparatus<sup>4</sup>, its use here remains limited: the citation of a work does not reveal the nature of the use that is made of it or its influence (think for example of *name-dropping practices*). However, it is necessary to use the measuring instruments of scientometrics to ascertain the facts. As a reminder, we used the Publish or Perish software from simple queries consisting in knowing the number of citations of the works of Norbert Elias in sports sociology works. We renewed this request about two canonical authors in France: Pierre Bourdieu and Raymond Boudon. The first is unquestionably the most famous and renowned French sociologist, bearer of a constructivist sociology integrating the weight of social dispositions in the explanation of social facts, anchored in social determinism. The second, perhaps less known, carries the opposite current

3 Acknowledgement: heartfelt thanks to Virginie Justin-Labonne (Artois University, Common Service of Documentation) for her assistance in the bibliometric research work.

4But not devoid of criticism because whether it is the h-index or the citation databases (Web of Science Core Collection, Scopus, IEEE Xplore, Google Scholar), these tools and impact indicators of the publications of an author like Norbert Elias is of limited interest because of the nature of the supports of his thought. However, one could perhaps find meaning in doing so based on requests different from those used in this article.

in France and abroad in a certain way. With methodological individualism, Boudon explained social facts for decades on the basis of rationalities, however integrating the weight of values. Note that these two authors are not identified as being “great authors” who have worked on sport, unlike Norbert Elias. At the international level, by considering sociology without specialty and by retaining only the 5 most cited works, the use of Bourdieu stands far from the uses of Elias and Boudon over 20 years:

- 1) Elias: 13,500 citations and an average of 920 citations per year;
- 2) Boudon: 6800 citations and an average of 350 citations per year;
- 3) Bourdieu: 265,000 citations and an average of 6,700 citations per year.

These measures will not surprise specialists since the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, - including powerful paradigms and concepts such as male domination, habitus or capitals - represents perhaps the privileged identity marker of sociology. The figures relating to the work of Norbert Elias will not surprise specialists either, since this author represents an essential reference at the international level, which reflects the French singularity. These trends are found when we observe the uses of the 5 most cited references with the use of the query “sociology and sociology of sport”:

- 1) Elias: 8250 quotes and an average of 700 quotes per year;
- 2) Boudon: 90 quotes and an average of 6 quotes per year;
- 3) Bourdieu: 152,000 citations and an average of 7,100 citations per year.

These measures seem to relativize the limited use of the work of Norbert Elias at the international level, especially if one examines the almost confidential place of references to the work of sociologist Raymond Boudon. However, the place occupied by the uses of the work of Pierre Bourdieu mechanically modifies the representation that one can have of the uses of other sociologists: how to exist alongside an author who is not a specialist in the sociology of sport 10 times more cited on average per year? Certainly Elias cannot be considered as a second-rate and second-rate author, especially if we compare him to what represents the use that sociologists make of Boudon's research (not a specialist in the sociology of sport, it must be remembered). However, these measurements, undoubtedly imperfect, illustrate practices at the international level. And given what follows, they seem to me to reinforce the impression that Elias occupies a secondary place in the case of the sociology of sport in France.

Elias's work seems to me to occupy too little a place in the sociology of sport. First of all, we can point out the modest influence of Elias' work during the main conferences on the sociology of sport <sup>5</sup>over the past twenty years, whether in terms of the main themes discussed, the plenary speakers

invited or the communications. Since 2002 in Toulouse, sports sociologists from France and beyond have organized around ten conferences; yet, strangely, Norbert Elias does not appear, far from it, among the main authors quoted or even debated. Whether in Montpellier, Strasbourg, Nantes or Nanterre or Lyon (that is to say important places of work in the sociology of sport, past or present), French sociologists of sport have little mobilized the German sociologist. Such an indicator does not constitute an indisputable illustration but it nevertheless suggests a certain situation.

We can therefore also have recourse to the very short list of important research in the sociology of sport, sufficiently elaborated to detect in a less arbitrary way the influence of Elias, whose objects could give rise to his use. Let's start with three exemplary researches about the pugilistic world [11-13]. Here the researchers exploited the work of Elias, but it was not a decisive influence in their ways of looking at boxing, the *gym* or the boxers. Admittedly, each of the authors considered the individual figures studied, their places, as being the product of several levels of relations [14] between people of different statuses [15]. Moreover, but not in all cases, it was foreseeable to find traces of *Sport and civilisation*, but that too did not constitute a matrix reference.

By extending this list to several other works of sociology of French sport noticed, it seems that we would come to the same conclusion (I will however have the opportunity to qualify later this point of view delivered here from works and not from 'items'). On the other hand, most of the research that has examined spectacle practices, and in particular football supporters, makes part of Elias's thought an important reference for their sociological view: The work of Dominique Bodin and Patrick Mignon for example constitute essential references in this respect but are not the only ones [16, 17]. But here again it is not a question of a central influence, but rather of a practice of referencing globally contextualizing the behavior of supporters (especially the most violent ones): this is what explains for example that it remains improbable to find a refutation of the hypothesis of the police apparatus as the cause of clashes between ultras or hooligan groups - a hypothesis that is nevertheless perfectly Eliasian in that it thinks of the social as the product of situated determinations. I therefore think that I am not betraying my colleagues by affirming that the influence of part of the thought of Norbert Elias in the works of sociology of sport in France remains limited, except to consider those devoted to football supporters or combat sports. Perhaps it would also be necessary to initiate a survey to assess what this thought represents in the lessons given in sociology of the Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sporting Activities <sup>6</sup>, during doctoral seminars? But let us confine ourselves here to the observation of a limited influence among the sociologists of sport.

<sup>5</sup>It is reasonable to assume that these are scientific events organized by the main association of sports sociologists, the Société des Sociologues du Sport de Langue Française (3SLF).

<sup>6</sup>The Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sporting Activities constitute a section of the National Council of Universities in France, the 74th <sup>precisely</sup> in which we find many disciplines taught and giving rise to research (biomechanics, physiology, psychology, economics, sociology, education, history, etc.). This Council represents a regulatory institution for scientific disciplines in France.

Let us observe the treatment reserved for Elias in the two most important works of synthesis about the sociology of sport. In the first [18], Jacques Defrance<sup>7</sup> devotes pride of place to the work of Norbert Elias, particularly with regard to the development and transformation of sports (and obviously violence). Here Elias is expounded in a widely distributed work, in a way that leaves no doubt about the heuristic character of the thought of Norbert Elias. But that was not enough to initiate a less confidential use of Elias. In the second, directed by Fabien Ohl<sup>8</sup>, Elias occupies even more space, no doubt because the work of synthesis adopts an international approach. Here, the sociology of configurations is part of the “main currents of thought in the sociology of sport” with functionalist and comprehensive, critical and Freudo-Marxist approaches, for example. But this is not enough, despite the references proving that Elias' thought has been widely used and debated, in Anglo-Saxon countries in particular. So the works turned towards the globalization of sport, a perimeter sought after in English and American journals, have allowed the dissemination of Elias's thought, making his research on “sportivization” a sum of major influences [19]. Hence the qualifier “strange” in the title of this article because Elias remains little used in research on the sociology of sport in France despite the indisputable relays from which the German sociologist was able to benefit, whether through surveys carried out among the groups spectators of football or through knowledge brokers represented by important synthesis works. Yet beyond France and more generally the French-speaking world, the thought of Elias benefits from an obvious influence. Such a discrepancy must be explained to appear less strange. And so: why don't we find more indisputable illustrations of a strong influence in France?

## 4. Discussion

A first reason may be due to the state of the discipline of Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sporting Activities, and to the history of their institutionalization. Indeed, many works of sociology of sport are part of the influence of Pierre Bourdieu in France. Domination, distinction, reproduction have thus become concepts of agreed use alongside borrowings made from texts dedicated to sport [20]. Of course, this is due to the effectiveness of such tools, but also to the presence of a few key figures who contributed to their dissemination [21]. This influence allowed the publication of remarkable works, but it also contained the emergence of other theoretical benchmarks, preventing Elias's thought from expanding with regard to works relating to sports practices - and research on supporters would probably have met the same fate if Pierre Bourdieu had produced their subjects. No doubt this is due to the fact that, even if the conceptions of

the two authors diverge on certain points, they are very similar as regards the theorization of relations and structures: we owe it to Jean-Hugues Déchaux [22] to have demonstrated, by distinguishing the differentiated uses of the notion of habitus, and by showing how it accords with the evolutions of structures in “a logic of influence of distinction” [23].

But the author also made an interesting point for us when he indicates that historians probably know Elias's work better than sociologists. This is understandable because of the place occupied by the historical process in the explanatory work of the German sociologist, and it is likely that this represents a characteristic limiting its use for those who carry out investigations of contemporary time. Indeed, such an option weighs down the work, complicates it, since it obliges us to examine the genesis of habitus. Yet Elias is particularly attached to the historicity of social phenomena: his procedural thought, his consideration of the dynamics of society have made him a specialist in historical sociology, sometimes called “social history” [24]. And when Nathalie Heinrich asks whether Elias is a historian or a sociologist<sup>9</sup>, she helps to understand the extent to which some researchers are afraid to engage in what looks like disciplinary uncertainty: in Sciences and Techniques of Physical and Sporting Activities more than elsewhere, and as paradoxical as it may seem, multi-disciplinarity does not have the wind in its sails and weighs down reputations. So why run the risk of following, when one is a sociologist of sport, a thought that is difficult to work on and which, moreover, hampers your identification?

On a more theoretical level, Elias did not facilitate his position within sociology by refusing “the alternative between Weberian individualism and Durkheimian holism, a dominant or even founding alternative for the human sciences in general and for sociology in particular” [25]. Finally, what relates in his work to the process of civilization has undergone strong criticism to the point of being qualified as an evolutionary approach [26]. Moreover, a fashion effect is unlikely to concern his work. Its general project seems too complex, too encompassing, while current empirical research struggles to generalize, even if it gains in certifications and precisions.

## 5. Conclusion

Sociologists of sport have found and will still find something to feed their reflections during field surveys, phases of interpretations and discussions of results, provided that they do not remain solely in the present of their objects. In this regard, there are several cases of application of this view whose contribution seems decisive, precisely because they call into question certain conventional interpretations of the social phenomena linked to sport while discussing the theory of “sportivization”<sup>10</sup>: thus, with regard to the

<sup>7</sup>Jacques Defrance, a key figure in the sociology of French sport, also translated a contribution by Norbert Elias in the journal *Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales* at the end of the 1970s.

<sup>8</sup> *sociology of sport. International Perspectives and Globalizations*, already quoted.

<sup>9</sup>Already quoted, p69-72.

<sup>10</sup>Described and clarified throughout *Sport et civilisation* “sportization” or

practice of sport, the research of Jean-François Loudcher [27] relativizes the agreed schema of a strictly English origin of modern sport (here boxing and combat sports), as well as that of transformations (techniques, regulations) linear [28], when others even evoke an inversion of such a scheme [29, 30]. Of course, these examples remain few in number but perhaps illustrate, along with others, a changing French situation with regard to the scientific research of Elias. Thus the place of this thought in the sociology of sport is strange because of the scope of his work, their potential influence, the discrepancy between what he represents in certain media and outside the French-speaking world. This strangeness, others have called it a curse or rather late recognition. So, for Marc Joly [31], Elias represents a case of non-reception and late recognition, a great intellectual who could not enjoy a national welcome at the start of his career. One might think that his fate will be of this order in the sociology of sport in France: sooner or later elements of his thought will spread – and not necessarily the most predictable ones [32]. It is still necessary for this that the sociology of French sport continues its development by including a diversity of conceptions, reference authors and finally a structuring allowing a user of Elias not to pass for an original [33].

Finally, what can this article be used for? First of all, it could improve the uses of very precise, specialized concepts. For example, the sociological theorization of violent behavior in sports, among practitioners and spectators, should integrate the multiple dimensions proposed by Norbert Elias. Indeed, the violence observed must be explained by taking into account the long time of the phenomena, but also parameters that are much more situated and integrated into the contexts of the actions: the work of Norbert Elias makes it possible to explain in this way and consequently to eliminate understandings that are too general or too empirically irreducible. Secondly, Norbert Elias' research considers the variety of sports, so the particularities between sports disciplines and between their contexts of realization: Norbert Elias' research thus confirms that the sociology of sport represents a scientific discipline in its own right, including the necessary specializations. By accepting this, researchers can benefit from the progress of their work, and of the sociology of sport: it will no longer be necessary to always use references from general sociology, which are useful, but on condition that they do not relegate references from the sociology of sport. This is what still happens in the sociology of sport in France in many cases, in the laboratories and in the faculties in front of the students: one avoids using specialized research which nevertheless offers many advantages because one believes that they are symbolically less strong. This is the sign of a discipline that is still young who needs recognition. The relevance of Norbert Elias' research deserves better than this resentment.

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“sportivization” designates the genesis of traditional, folkloric and recreational practices in sports: that is to say in codified, regulated activities where the permitted degree of behavioral violence is lowered and controlled.

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