

The Evolution of Social Constructs: A Proposal for the Re-Conceptualization of Sociobiology for Understanding Interdependent Social Networks as Evolving “Organisms” Using Norbert Elias’s, *The Court Society*

Anthony Nairn
University of Toronto

Abstract

Evolution by natural selection applied by sociologists has been met with great resistance since Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), marked by dark notions of power and authority associated with an uncritical and enthusiastic application of natural selection to fashionable notions of race and privilege. E.O. Wilson’s (1929-) Sociobiology (1975) attempted to reignite the possibilities of evolutionary discourse using modern genetics to social systems but was stymied by the racialized legacy and liberal notions of “genetic determinism.” Here, the sociobiological framework is re-imagined by extending it from individual gene mechanisms and behavior, into social figurations of large-scale actor networks. Using the conceptual tools and historical analysis of Norbert Elias’s, *The Court Society* (1983), detailing Louis XVI’s court and the interdependencies between its members, I will be suggesting that these networks of interdependence composed of individual actors are facilitated and constrained by the processes of natural selection, and therefore can be analyzed as such. The entanglement

of dependencies created by actors within a network formulates “massing” points that identify the networks form and function as a “social organism”. The value gained in understanding the organic fluidity of social networks, how they are formed, shaped, evolve, and come into conflict with competing social figurations, may provide a new and naturally derived way of interpreting interdependent social actor networks, and provide greater depth into the conceptualization of human social relations. Finally, such a view of history and sociology would align with the principles of Big History by understanding the human subject as bound to the same processes of development that have been occurring to all forms of matter in the Universe over the last 13.8 billion years.

Key Words

Evolution; Sociobiology; Sociology; History; King Louis; France; French Revolution; Norbert Elias; Court Society; Social Networks; History; Interdependency; Natural Selection

Correspondence | Anthony Nairn, anthony_nairn@hotmail.com

Citation | Nairn, A. (2018) The Evolution of Social Constructs: A Proposal for the Re-Conceptualization of Sociobiology for Understanding Interdependent Social Networks as Evolving “Organisms” Using Norbert Elias’s, *The Court Society*. *Journal of Big History*, III(1); 61- 76.

DOI | <http://dx.doi.org/10.22339/jbh.v3i1.3140>

Introduction

The social scientist, specifically the sociologist, has a peculiar role to play as an academic within the contemporary academy. Bound by the genesis of the discipline and its traditions, the sociologist continually orbits around the notions of scientific, objective, and empirical based study. This is easily observable,

as many contemporary sociological papers will be fashioned in a manner similar to scientific inquiry, citing regression models, mean scores, and a myriad of other analytical tools adopted and adapted for sociological purposes. These methods, and the continual development of scientific based social research, are founded upon the works of thinkers, such

as Auguste Comte (1798-1857) and Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), who called for the study of the social with the tools of the natural philosopher in order to better understand and, the hope was, model the human experience.

Since Comte and Durkheim, works have emerged that have been profoundly impactful, not only for the development of critical social thought and assessing the human condition so as to better understand it, but also for the global consequences some such sociological works have had. Karl Marx (1818-1883), Max Weber (1864-1920), and Thomas Kuhn (1922-1996) for example, have reshaped human understanding of social class, power, and scientific advancement through sociologically themed frameworks, fundamentally changing how academia and the popular mind accounts for such subjects. The example of Marx, for example, exemplifies how the social sciences have reshaped entire human collectives into new political and social forms. The discipline of sociology, therefore, has had powerful effects on the globe, and the possibility of future effects is nearly certain as currently incomprehensible social opportunities and conflicts have yet to arise.

That the genesis of sociology was from the natural sciences has resulted in an intimate, yet strained, relationship. Examples of negative outcomes from sociological endeavors are scattered across history's continuum, but none were more destructive than the application of a particular natural scientific principle to the human condition, specifically Charles R. Darwin's¹ 1859 publication (1809-1882) titled, *On the Origins of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life* (1859). The consequences of this book were further modified in 1864 when Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) published, *Principles of Biology*, an influential text which includes the now famous (or infamous) phrase, "survival of the fittest" – an interpretation of Darwin's work that has

¹ Darwin was spurred into publication by a letter he received from Alfred R. Wallace (1823-1913) which included a very similar theory to Darwin's.

been deeply engrained within the popular mind's understanding of natural selection.

Darwin's work, followed by Spencer's, metaphorically represent the first strand in what would become a complex web that continued to be spun well after the release *Origins*, ensnaring learned and layperson alike. Social Darwinism emerged in the wake of the newfound popularity and insight that natural selection had provided. This radically reformulated the perception of, for example, social class, race, and the possibilities of human perfectibility. In the twentieth century, with the advancements of science and technology and the psychological impact of World War One, it wouldn't be the bullet or the bomb that had the most deeply impacting and transformative effects on the globe in World War Two, but eugenics programs. The consequences of the sociological adoption of natural selection principles has never been forgotten, and to this day there remains a complicated entanglement of resistance against the social sciences using evolutionary processes (Barkow 2006).

Evolutionary sociology has since become a taboo topic for academics and their institutions, as sociobiology, for example, is a marginally and skeptically considered, often heavily criticized, academic pursuit. This is the result of a combination of factors, including the collective living memory of the eugenics era and the tradition of studying the social through the social (Barkow 2006). Scholars such as E. O. Wilson² and Jerome Barkow, as well as advocates in the natural sciences too, such as Carl Sagan and Richard Dawkins, have, or are advocating for evolutionary social sciences, pleading for the possibilities it would allow.

My hope here then is to propose a reintroduction of evolutionary thinking into sociology, one that avoids claims of determinism by being a historical "science." I believe this is necessary and overdue given the intimate relationships that much of the natural world has revealed through the methods of science, and as a prominent aim of Big History. But more than this

² The founder of sociobiology.

because it becomes logically incoherent to maintain that human beings, products of natural selection, would not outwardly project through their creations products that would themselves be bound to a naturally influenced systems of development.

The first thing I shall do is provide an elementary introduction to evolution through Darwin's natural selection, followed by an introduction to evolutionary social science (sociobiology) using the contemporary conceptualization from Jerome Barkow to provide the basic definitions and conceptual tools needed to reconfigure this knowledge for a case study using the work of Norbert Elias's (1897-1990), *The Court Society* (2006). Elias's work provides a detailed analysis of the royal court of King Louis XIV (1638-1715) of France during the seventeenth century. In it, Elias provides a richly detailed account of the interrelated network (figuration) that demonstrates the evolution of the court society by modeling the complex web that existed using socio-historical methodologies.

In using Elias's, *The Court Society*, I will show how a particular social structure and its actors, specifically the royal court of King Louis XIV, formulates its own uniquely identifiable network that all its members contribute to sustaining, in effect becoming its own unique social "organism". This will show that the processes of social evolution cannot be understood by specific moments or specific individuals as Big History claims. This folly leads one to err in understanding the interdependent complexities of social relations and the environment to which they belong. In adopting this proposed Big History social framework and testing it against historical work, the complex webs of human relations through the medium of spacetime³ can finally be understood in similar fashion to the laws of nature already established by the natural sciences, allowing a

³ I use spacetime in a manner applied to the social. It, like its natural science-based counterpart, is used to identify the way in which occurrences in space and time are not static and separate entities. Events that occur within the human experience have rippling, wave life effects that transcend through generations in identities, institutions, etc. Spacetime defines a more dynamic and fluid movement of social history through the human experience.

deeper and more holistic view of the temporal dynamics of social patterns. In short, using the proposed tools of an evolutionary social science by building upon and updating the framework and evidence Elias provides, it will be shown that adopting evolutionary principles into sociological studies opens the possibility of social evolution as a real avenue of study, a prospect that can enrich research by more fully realizing the complexity of our interrelated, naturally bound, social existence.

Evolution by Natural Selection

In this paper, I shall only be discussing natural selection with a soft touch on genetics, as it is what relates directly to the type of investigation that this socio-historical project allows for. While the prospects of implementing the modern synthesis into this work can be enticing, I focus my attention on applying the basics of what Darwin discovered and suggested (genes) to the social structures of history. Being that historical work is an intellectual construction made in the present but of the past, there are bound to be errors of human subjectivity and misinformation. The precision to which contemporary evolutionary biological science would, for my purposes in proving an introductory example of societal evolution, only get in the way by adding unnecessary complexity. I ask that the reader take this as a small contribution into the understanding of history through a specific sociological framework, and I encourage the reader to refine and expand what I have done here.

For our purposes, this introduction will focus on three key concepts: time, variation, and environment. Time, the meaning and breadth of time, underwent radical changes during the nineteenth century, being influenced from fields such as paleontology and archeology by discoveries of dinosaur fossils and lost ancient civilizations (Stewart 2011). Given the newly emerging fossil and archeological evidence, it was becoming increasingly clear that species long dead had striking similarities to contemporary species populating the earth. The mechanical and physical features of fossil plant, land, and aquatic species shared

striking resemblances with contemporary species, leading both Darwin and Wallace to conclude that current species must be related to such ancient species; core similarities masked by obvious differences as a result of time.

Variation was, and still is, most popularized by Darwin's reference to the finch of the Galápagos Islands. Finch on multiple islands of the Galápagos each had slight variations, most commonly noticed in their beaks. Some were substantial while others less so. Though structurally the same bird, the beak, along with variations in colour and size, were consistently isolated per island, a finding unanimously shared across other species (Darwin 1959). Darwin concluded that the only way such patterned dispersion of variation could occur would be from a hereditary inheritance through generations of time (Darwin 1959).⁴ The process of heredity dictates that specific traits of the parents are transferred to the offspring of said parents. Hence, the variations of the finch which Darwin observed on each island were traits carried forward through the reproduction process (Darwin 2003).

Why would finch vary from island to island though? Why would they become seemingly different birds? Darwin, and Wallace in his own studies, found inspiration in a paper by Thomas Malthus (1766-1834) called, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (1797). This economics piece detailed the struggle of population growth predicated upon resource sustainability, specifically food production. Malthus concluded that populations will grow at an exponential rate while food resources only develop at a uniform rate. This meant an inevitable struggle of human survival based on resources, where populations, and ultimately civilizations, would collapse should population growth outpace its capacity to support itself given the available resources. Both Darwin and Wallace believed that Malthus's work, intended

⁴ A natural process, giving reason to the similarity of a child to its parents. This led to an early concept of the gene that pre-dated current understanding of genetics, which was first introduced by Gregor Mendel (1822-1884).

for economic and political discourse, had actual application to the natural environment (Darwin 2003). Noticing that common and abundant species such as worms and beetles had not overtaken the earth, the totality of the environment must be affecting the ability of such species to repopulate, creating systems of both necessity and chance. Darwin had noticed that food resources were different depending on which island he was on. The distinct variation in beaks was not random but necessary to survive on specific islands given their environment (Darwin 2003). Where food was softer and required less pecking, finches had lesser beaks; where food was hard and required force, beaks were more substantial.

Since *Origin*, much has become clearer regarding the mechanisms behind and involving natural selection,⁵ specifically genes. The human being contains about 24,000 genes,⁶ each is a piece of information in a sequence of nucleotides,⁷ and each being a possible unit of heredity (Barkow 1989). Together, these nucleotides form a molecule strand of deoxyribonucleic acid, or DNA, the double helix. A single gene does not provide information for a specific body part; instead, multiple proteins work together to provide information for certain traits or parts. Half of the genes within the helix are not directly responsible for any particular piece of information, but instead communicate in tandem with other genes, functioning as a 'switch' in order to turn on and off certain information.⁸

⁵ A testament to the work of Darwin and Wallace, much of their core work was correct and is still used in modern biology.

⁶ Of which 98.8% of is shared with the common Chimpanzee, 88% with a common mouse, and 24% with a wine grape. This was discovered after the revolutionary work of the Human Genome Project which not only sequenced the human genetic code but paved the way for the sequencing of thousands of living species, and tools that in the future will enable genetic modification at an unprecedented level.

⁷ The proteins thymine, guanine, adenine, and cytosine. Together creating the alphabetic code of the genetic sequences that make up all living things.

⁸ A process necessary for the development of any species given the phenotype. An example would be human beings developing as an embryo with a tail but losing it as development continues within the womb, or the shape of hands, even though all mammal hands have more-or-less the

The phenotype, or an organism's described, inherit traits, are both a product of the information of genes and the environment to which the genes belong. Critically, the information of genes is affected by the physical external and internal environments through a highly complex process of exchange. For example, factors such as light, sound, heat, hormones, and foreign chemicals, can all contribute to the alteration of genes or genotypes (a gene sequence), changing the transmitted information and consequently altering the phenotype as a whole (Lobo, 2008). This is a more technical description of what Darwin and Wallace discovered and suggested,⁹ but the core concept is the same. The transmission of information depending on the gene sequence and the physical environment leads to evolution through slow adaptation and hereditary transfer.

In understanding genes and the influences that the environment has, the process of mutation as one of the prime components of allowing for evolution by natural selection to function becomes clear, and will be shown to important later on. The double helix, DNA, is constantly split in half and copied by a complex molecule called the replisome; but the copy is not always perfect, and gene information can pass through re-sequencing altered compared to the original code. As a result, this can change either one protein or large sections of the sequence – this is the basis of a mutation. Within the germ line,¹⁰ a mutation could result from hereditary mutation (having been passed on for a generation or more), or somatic mutation (a mutation that can occur at any point in an organism's lifetime). Sometimes a mutation occurs that provides an advantage to the species, such as more substantial beaks; as a result of natural selection through the function of environmental advantage, such a mutation would become a successful trait.

same shape in embryo form.

9 I am using discovery here because their work on natural selection and hereditary transmission was foundational to modern evolutionary biology which is scientific fact.

10 For reproduction, DNA is copied by RNA for the purpose of fertilization and impregnation.

The result of such a success would allow that organism to have what is called a genetic fitness, the advantageous position that a particular genotype provides the species. Thus, the newly mutated species would become reproductively more prosperous by having a survival advantage. The new advantage, and the greater success in reproduction leads to the survivability of the new gene sequence to exceed that of the pre-mutation gene sequence. Through the process of natural selection, this new, successful gene sequence will overtake the old sequence, called genetic drift.

Sociobiology, Evolutionary Social Science, and Compatible Integration

A single gene does not determine an individual's outcomes, instead a gene exchanges information with other genes that is affected by a multitude of internal and external factors. This process is very similar to a human beings' navigation of social experience (Elias 1991). Barkow suggests it is the mechanisms of gene expression, the in-between of genes and their respective behaviours, which have evolved over time in response to adaptation, and where evolutionary social sciences should be focused (2006). Expressions of these mechanisms could range from gender roles to the organization of identities. The study of these mechanisms, Barkow claims, breakdown simple cause and effect arguments, allowing the social scientist to study the depths of what connects cause x to effect y (2006). In short, such a study would analyze the complexity of the interconnected relationships that internal circumstances have with external ones. For example, our ability to navigate a variety of cultures, or to control ourselves in social environments are, according to sociobiology, the product of evolutionary processes allowing us to adapt to cultural environments, an advantage for a cultural species like *homo sapiens*. Our central nervous system, a product of evolution itself, has developed the mechanisms required to navigate through different cultures. This is our evolved psychology (Barkow 1989). Or more

simply, our human nature.

For sociobiology, human nature is a dynamic construct, as varied and complex as the multitude of cultures. Each culture will have developed its own evolutionary psychology, its own human nature, in a completely different way than any other culture. The differences between cultures has nothing to do with a hierarchy of development. Technology and science, for example, do not equate to a more highly developed culture, all they do is change the unique environment which one must navigate through.

Navigation through culture is only possible by learning, occurring either individually or collectively. When individual learning becomes efficient enough that others would benefit, social learning occurs, and through generational information exchange, the creation of culture (Barkow 2006). Culture, Barkow writes, is the total pool of available knowledge resources from which the individual can navigate and draw from (Barkow 2006).

Cultures are not static, and therefore are constantly adapting. An individual can draw from multiple pools, and globalization is an example of multiple information pools being accessed, and by consequence, changing cultures. As a species, we are inherently dependent on these information pools, for *Homo sapiens* are the only species that requires learning for so long and to such an intimate extent throughout its lifetime. We continually shape our identities and institutions, our very realities, from non-radical social constructionism from the available information pools (Barkow 2006). Cultures not only shape individuals but are also shaped *by* individuals and their adaptation to changing environments. The ability to 'edit' culture is only possible given the nature of this relationship between individual and the environment. Cultural editing comes from the desire to achieve a different social reality, such as changing class statuses (Barkow 2006).

In adopting evolution into the social sciences, Barkow writes we will adopt what he calls vertical or

compatible integration (Barkow 2006).¹¹ Compatible integration is the ability for disciplines to share in a consensus of acknowledged research and theory. For example, within the natural sciences the theories of chemistry work with both physics and biology. Adopting a similar position would allow the social sciences a more holistic study, with each social science contributing uniquely as a discipline and yet towards a greater whole. Barkow identifies three distinct advantages in adopting compatible integration. First, culling theories across disciplines would allow social scientists to be trained in a more topical format, learning themes and theories from across disciplines (Barkow 2006). This would allow the social scientist to observe the problem more robustly, while also allowing critical analysis in areas that are currently incompatible across disciplines. Second, a more grounded and compatible relationship with the natural sciences (Barkow 2006). Lastly, in training social scientists with compatible integration, social scientists would be more interdisciplinary, such as a biologist requiring chemistry and physics (Barkow 2006). Like the natural sciences, mastery of all is not required, but comprehension is essential.

In introducing both evolutionary biology and evolutionary social science here, my aim is to demonstrate that such tools of thinking are not deterministic or inherently malevolent in revealing the superiority of one culture or ethnicity over the other. But in fact understands that each species, each culture, as a unique expression of what evolution allows, must be understood and studied as a unique expression of the possibilities of the evolutionarily developed mechanisms to which our species has been granted. It provides new understanding to the way that the evolution of the human species is not strictly bound internally by genetics, but is also externally shaped, allowing modification to our social realities. Like

¹¹ I use compatible integration because I find the use of the word vertical to have too much implication in some kind of hierarchical order. Compatible is more applicable to what Barkow outlines as a shared interdisciplinary compatibility anyway.

biological evolution, social evolution is constantly adapting to new circumstances as new information pools inform new networks of interrelations, mirroring the environments effects on genes. The human being becomes the microorganism that forms a single point of bonding in the network of interrelations (many points), forming a whole “organism” of the social reality. In this way, it can be understood how individuals interrelate with institutions, creating complex networks that develop their own unique “phenotype.” This shall be expanded upon below.

The Court Society

The Court Society, published in 1969, represents an excellent introduction into the thought processes that Elias had on structure and agency and the relationships they share. In the particular case of *The Court Society*, Elias uses the royal court of King Louis XIV as the central point within his figuration model of study, but the selection of this topic is itself important for a few reasons. The simplest reason is that the reign of Louis XIV is generally marked as the beginning of the end for both the reign of kings in France and what is known as absolute monarchy,¹² which was most notable in France. A second reason is that the reign of kings from Louis XIV to Louis XVI is notorious for great indulgences and lavish spending. The *Château de Versailles* is a product of this era, the largest and most elegant royal residence ever built – a testament to such times. Louis XIV’s need for power and material wealth led him to bankrupt France through continual wars and indulgences, perpetuated by the new money economy. Last, and most importantly for my purposes, this particular moment of spacetime represents the importance of Big History, in that the failure of traditional historical research methods tend to focus on individual people and their actions instead of the wider influences of the community and environment, something Big History is uniquely

¹² An absolute monarchy is described by the rulers control of the entirety of state operation, such as the judiciary, administrative, and internal/external affairs, under the blessing of divine right, or God’s will to rule.

situated to do. Louis XIV may have been an important figure in France, but he is by no means the fixed centre of gravity, as shall be shown.

This is the foundation of, *The Court Society*, that not one particular moment, not one particular individual, is the cause of history. This is an overly common fallacy and is a product of the discipline of history lacking a sociological (or Big History) perspective. Elias writes:

Without a sociological analysis of the specific strategy by means of which a ruler like Louis XIV maintained the constantly threatened elbowroom and manoeuvrability of the royal position, and without elaborating a model of the specific social structure which made this strategy both possible and necessary for the individual ruler’s survival, the behaviour of such rulers would remain incomprehensible and inexplicable. This makes the relationship between the sociologist’s and historian’s standpoints somewhat clearer (2006:5).

The historian, in pursuit of chronology, has consistently forgone the framework of the sociologist, and instead has focused on “unique and unrepeated sequences of events” (Elias 2006:6). This, according to Elias, has resulted in a “failure to undertake a systematic study of social positions...and therefore the strategies and scope... [This] leads to a peculiar narrowing of the historical perspective” (2006:6). Essentially, the historian does not use models of study, instead, “connections between particular phenomena are often left to arbitrary interpretation and speculation. This is why history...provides no real continuity of research” (Elias 2006:6).

Conversely, sociology is also in a position of “narrowed perspective” because works of sociology often lack historical depth and focus almost primarily on systems, leaving behind the individual. Elias writes, “[t]he self-image of many sociologists makes it appear as if they are concerned exclusively with figurations without individuals” (2006:30). A simple

analogy to visualize this can be made with a spider's web. When looking at the spider's web, if all one sees is the web itself – the strands of adhesive silk forming the structure – then the invisibility of the spider or the flies caught, perhaps even the tree branches it was cast between, devalues the study greatly, possibly even entirely, reducing the total visibility which the sociologist can “see” the whole figuration in which the environment, the web, the spider, and its victims interrelate.

What is required then is an approach via Big History – a combination of the history, sociology, and in this case, the natural sciences. The study of history, with its focus on particulars, such as individuals and the ‘unique and unrepeated’, is used as the evidence for the testing of sociological frameworks with its focus on figurations. The resulting socio-historical survey would create the tools necessary to see the ways in which individuals are shaped by figurations and also how individuals shape figurations. In this way, the field is no longer a two-dimensional plane of simple cause and effect, as history operates, nor is it a stage void of actors, as sociology operates. It becomes a multi-dimensional model of interdependent threads creating a vast and complex web.¹³ The ways in which interdependent actors are bound to one another will result from a massing of connections depending on the information available, particular influences, the environment, and the structure one is studying. The concentration of connections will be uniquely shaped depending on the figuration (which structure is being observed), becoming the critical point of study for the researcher, and informing the way in which the structure is shaped and flows, while also illuminating the relationships shared by the actors within it.

Elias begins his study with the physical structures that the nobility occupied, their residences, or *hôtel*. The architecture had two critical functions. First is

13 The best analogy to think of this would be to imagine the galaxy filaments of the cosmos at the largest scales known. They exist in three dimensions, and so to do the social figurations being proposed here. The cluster of gravity in the galaxy filaments would be where the strongest massing of single points (actors) converge in the figuration.

the statement that the display of a residence had for a family.¹⁴ The material wealth on show was critical in the maintenance of one's social position for status-consumption and its display directly reinforced one's rank and title, capable of boosting the house's status.¹⁵ The second function is that it was a physical representation of the court society of the king, just in smaller form. This was an attempt to not only copy the elegance of the kingly estate, but to also become, in a sense, to embody the power of the king himself. The primary and largest room was the great hall where the nobles of that particular house would host parties, such as *salons*, and manage their affairs. These were critically important for the family, for such social functions were displays of wealth and instances to gain status.

The bedrooms of the lord and lady would be separated, representing the great social distance that was customary in the court society. The lady and lord of a house could spend days without ever seeing each other because social circles were so wide and various, and the maintenance of said social circles was of the utmost importance. Such separation was informed by the strict aim of bettering the social status of the house. This social distance was important both for the noble in their home and the king in his. It allowed the master of the house control of the immediate environment by conducting the noble guests for the master's social benefit.

For the king in his home of *Versailles*, this control was a larger and more extravagant version of what the nobles had imitated. The king's court:

Represented for him...his primary and

14 The family, or house as it is sometimes called, is critical in understanding the nobility. Before King Henri IV opened up the sale of administrative roles to the ever-richer bourgeois, the lineage of a family line was the most important component of noble status. Old families with close ties to the royal family would be in a much more powerful position than that of new or landed noble. The maintenance of one's family position and personal influence becomes the most critical function of the court society.

15 The house used in this way identifies the importance of a family's name and its genealogical significance.

most direct sphere of activity, the country being only a secondary and indirect one. Everything...had to pass through the filter of the court before it could reach him... everything from the king had to pass [through the court] before it reached the country. Even the most absolute monarch could exert an influence on his country only through the mediation of the people living at court... Thus the sociology of the court is at the same time a sociology of the monarch (Elias 2006:46).

The king's position in court as master of the house is essential in beginning to understand the way in which the king's position is ensured only by those who live and act around him. Louis XIV was not capable of running France without the mediation of the court people, nor were the court people in a position to be nobility, and therefore court people, without the king.

The dependency of the nobility on the king and the king on the nobility¹⁶ is the result of a "specific figuration formed by these individuals and the specific interdependencies binding them together" (Elias 2006:73). The courts figuration¹⁷ ensured that status-consumption was necessary in maintaining one's social position as the nobility vied for status over each other. What appeared as indulgent to anyone outside of the court figuration¹⁸ was in fact similar in every respect

16 And also, the dependency of them on the "people" and vice-versa. Servants, for example, were critical for the operation and stability of the royal and noble families.

17 Elias uses figuration instead of system, which I strongly agree with, because system identifies a more rigid and structured relationship, that hints to a more manufactured organization of processes. Figuration is more open, more fluid, and more malleable.

18 The court "rationality" that existed for the court nobles could not be understood by anyone outside their network, just as in turn the "rationality" of the "common people" could not be understood by the nobles. This is made particularly clear during the French Industrial Revolution when the capitalists believed the working classes to be losing all their money to drinking and petty wastes, while the working classes believed the capitalists to be indulging in unchecked lavish spending. This dynamic is evident, though in the workers favour, in the period novel, *Germinal*, by Émile Zola.

to a bourgeois accumulating capital and saving it for future investment or the working class needing a wage (Elias 2006). The means of maintaining one's status, their survivability, was different but the objective the same (Elias 2006). For the court noble, their rationality and the necessity of status-consumption to maintain or improve their social position, was critical in gaining status over their rivals. The opinion of the court peoples was a, "formative and controlling instrument" which, "no member could escape...without putting at risk [their] membership, [their] identity as part of an elite, which was central to [their] pride and honour" (Elias 2006:104). Families were constantly rising and falling in this highly competitive figuration. To ensure one's position and that over others, opinion was the currency of the highest importance, thus status-consumption was essential in maintaining a well-positioned opinion in the struggle for status. In turn, this forced a closer dependency on the king, for being in close proximity with, and in the good graces of, the king was the most advantageous and prestigious social position. It granted the highest in purchasing power and reputation Acting in accordance with the practices of the court was essential to achieving this.

Etiquette and ceremony were the most important social practices in court, and nowhere was it more prominent than in the *Château de Versailles*. The kings *revée*, the king's wakeup, was an exceedingly complex manoeuvre of six different social groups, ranging from high lords to invited guests, even the bastard children, each having a particular order and a particular function in this complex ritual of status. Each of the six groups had a different level of prestige, which the nobles continually struggled in achieving. The king's recognition would ensure, for the time being, a more prominent and stable position for the noble and his family. The king intimately knew this and maintained a distance to ensure the nobility never became complacent and continued their struggle.

Social distance was a product of the etiquette and ceremony of court society itself by the requirement of distinction. Elias writes that practicing distance led court people to hone the skills of observing and dealing

with other court people, as well as personal restraint within court rationality (2006). Social distance required the formulation of strategies for advancement, whether by forming or destroying alliances, manipulation, or countless other tactics. However, like *Versailles* and the *hôtel*, the king's social distance was magnified to a far greater extent. It was the social distance of the king from his nobility that drove them against each other in an effort to become closer to the king. As master of the house and the court, the king observed and manipulated the members of his court to further his glory and power,¹⁹ using etiquette and ceremony as his chief instruments.

It was the tradition of the court that made distance and etiquette and ceremony so essential. The constant rise and fall of court families meant that tradition is what ensured such practices existed and were maintained regardless of who resided in court; becoming a kind of dance where only the new members that best and most quickly learned the moves would survive. However, tradition is not static, and it evolved with each new king and court. Elias suggests that the aristocratic nature of France of Louis XIV began in the Middle Ages with a history marked by conflicts between the monarch and the growing nobility (2006). The form of rule so extravagant under Louis XIV began to flourish under the reign of Henri IV. Henri IV was what Elias calls the last "knightly king" due to the tighter relationship that Henri IV and his nobles shared, meaning there was far less social distance in court maneuvering (2006).

The shift to Louis XIV's more court-aristocratic based kingship lay in the money economy that had been developing since Henri IV. Before absolutism it was the feudal system (the time of Henri IV), where high lords were charges of their own armies and massive sections of the state. Swearing fealty to the king, they promised the king their armies when called upon, and such an arrangement meant a far closer and intimate relationship. This is partly the reason for the history of tensions between the royal and high families in France, a tension known well by Louis XIV in his

¹⁹ This acts identically to the honour and pride of the noble, but it has much wider reaching consequences.

youth. With trade rising, and the inflow of gold, silver, and other precious materials, the economy began to drastically increase. For the first time in history, the king had the wealth to purchase a full army of his own. The industrialization of the firearm made the knight irrelevant.²⁰ Inexpensive, easy to train weaponry and no shortage of able bodied men in need of a wage became the new standard. The word *soldier*, from the French *la solde*, meaning money, clearly eludes to this history.

The increasing amount of money pouring into France and to the king reduced the ability of the nobles to gain profits from shared burdens such as war and agriculture. The king could now own and supply independently, and so the nobility began to decline. Having been for centuries responsible for armies and land, the new money economy put the nobility in a position of having to choose between resisting their decline, potentially greatly lowering their social position relative to the king (as a result of no money coming in from the king's use of their armies) or adapting by moving into a more centralized and dependent relationship with the king in his court. This is where pensions, money gifts, and other rewards from the king came from, beginning with Henri IV and becoming so vital in Louis XIV's time. The inability of the nobles to economically sustain their privileged position meant these gifts were necessary for their survival, becoming symbols of good standing with the king, tightening the interdependence of the court figuration. Consequently, the reliance of the nobility on the king for status and wealth made the king equally as reliant on the nobility as their needs perpetuated his absolute power.

The most important change of the new money economy was the rapidly growing wealthy bourgeois. Their new wealth, from trade and services, flowed in from across France, Europe, and the increasingly global economy. Under Henri IV, in need of this new classes wealth, he opened the purchase of offices in power positions to the bourgeois, which greatly threatened the already distraught nobility. During the rule of

²⁰ His armour and sword alone was an incredible expense.

Louis XIV, the king became indebted to the nobility by his absolute rule, the nobility indebted to the king by status and wealth, while the bourgeois rapidly grew in wealth, power, and influence, outside of the court societies figuration. The nobility, in constant contest with each other, were soon to be in contest with the high bourgeois. The combined struggle of the court peoples and the king created a delicate equilibrium in the struggle for status and power. Thus, “it is the balance and distribution of dependence that gave the institution that we call the court its specific character” (Elias 2006:223).

As the bourgeois continued to grow in wealth in power, the decline of the noble’s prominence, given that human beings are reflective, led to a romanticization for the nobles more powerful past. The feudal lords of the past were, in the eyes of their court descendants, from a place of “nature,” closer to food production, trees, mountains, and rivers. Elias writes:

The past took on the character of a dream image. Country life became a symbol of lost innocence, of spontaneous simplicity and naturalness. It became an opposite image to court life with its greater constraints, its more complex hierarchical pressures, and its heavier demands on individual self-control (2006:231).²¹

As the nobility evolved over generations, certain functions they were accustomed to, which gave their lives meaning and value, were lost. Those of the nobility that could adapt to their evolving positions became “part of a tighter and more comprehensive network of interdependence” (Elias 2006:236). This required more self-control, more discipline, and less freedom. Elias uses memoirs of court members from France, Germany, and Britain, to show the same attitudes of longing for a simpler and freer past existed across aristocratic societies (2006). Elias concludes that the continual civilizing process of societies, which led to more structure, more urbanization and

industrialization, and more self-control, led people to dream of a simple, free, and more natural existence, one, “less affected by the constraints and emotional constrictions” (Elias 2006: 241).²²

The Evolution of the Court Society

At the beginning of *The Court Society*, Elias addresses that biological evolution and social development must share a relationship, writing:

There were no doubt biological, evolutionary changes in the social relationships and structures of our forebears. We know little about this side of the evolution of hominids, possibly because bio-sociological problems of this kind receive very little attention from specialists in human pre-history” (2006:14).

Elias remarks further that, “the sequences denoted by terms such as ‘biological evolution’, ‘social development’, and ‘history’ form three distinct but inseparable layers in a process encompassing the whole of [humanity], the speed of change being different at each level” (2006:15). From the beginning of his book, Elias identified that evolution *is* a factor in his work, though never explicitly applies it. I will be applying evolution more intimately to *The Court Society* to demonstrate the strong relationship that Elias’s framework and natural selection share, using the concepts and systems written on in the previous sections.

The process of hereditary transfer through genetics, as I have shown, is a biological process, but heredity is not bound to biology, the process occurs across spectrums of existence. Examining the physical structures of the court people’s residences, their size and layout, the functionality they have, are a literal physical mapping of their social figuration. The court

²² It is important to note that Elias writes that this romanticization only projects the aspects of the past that seem best given that particular societies present desires and ignores any of the less desirable characteristics. This is a testament to the framework developed by Elias, as this is clearly observable today and has been since the 1970s with environmentalism and the romanticization of the “noble savage”.

²¹ One must remember that this work was done before the environmental movement in the 1970s.

society, through the interrelated figuration of their reality, provided the total possibility of what the *hôtel* and *Versailles* could be. The status-consumption and the continual drive for recognition informed the complete rationality of the court peoples figuration, it created the worldview within which they all acted and existed. Therefore, the buildings they inhabited, as Elias demonstrated, reflected their total identities. The evolutionary social sciences identify that biological processes are only one dimension of multi-dimensional processes. The court society's residences are literally offspring of the figuration of the court society itself, occupying, as hereditary transfer allows, the phenotypical traits of its parents. The great hall for the social events, the intimate distance between the Lord and Lady, and the display of wealth in the accessories and furnishings that filled the house are all expressions of the physical practices of the court society itself.

This does not apply only to the residences, but equally to custom and etiquette, tradition, romanticism, and the money economy, just to name some of what was examined. Each of these figurations have by necessity a process of heredity that ensures it can be adopted and learned in each individual that makes contact with them. This is the only way that social figurations can survive. That is, the individual (actor, or, think microorganism) attaches to a social figuration (structure, or, think organism) by consequence of their birth, environment, etc. which informs the identity of the actor, and being reproduced over generations through heredity, becomes the tradition which new actor's practice. However, this occurs in a nearly infinite degree of representational possibilities depending on the individuals use of information from the available pools and the affecting environment.

The information pools, or culture, the totality of shared and individual learning, contains the complete possibility of social figurations adoptable with which to construct identities and realities from. The court people pulled from their available pools given their respective figurations which informed their identities and realities by necessity of their positions, essential

for their social and physical survival. Should the court noble not have had the ability to adapt to changing environments, then the equilibrium of power struggles that existed within the court society would have not been possible and the nobility would have perished entirely long before the French Revolution. Our biological evolution, as Barkow has suggested, has created the mechanisms required to constantly adapt to new social environments, and our social evolution is inherently tied to our biological evolution as a result of hereditary transfer of systemic principles. Critically, however, as figurations become increasingly complex and gain more connections (more actors), the ability for it to adapt slows, becoming more difficult to adapt as more actors have to individually adapt themselves within the figuration before the entire figuration reflects such a "mutation".

The primary difference between social and biological evolution is, as Elias describes, a variation in the speed of change. The reason for this is quite simple and it relates to the human being's requirement of information. Information is *the* single most important survival tool that *Homo sapiens* possess, for without it, the human species would have died out long ago. Our biological evolution is, by human perceptions, very slow, taking hundreds to thousands of years for very small changes, and hundreds of thousands to millions of years for more substantial changes. This is due to the fact that the environment, for most of life's existence, has been relatively stable. The environment is one of the most important components of evolution, so if the environment is influencing species in relative equilibrium, then evolution will continue in a biological way. However, with the introduction of the human brain, and its highly adaptive plasticity, something unique occurred: the ability to alter the environment reflectively.

Consciousness affected by reflection allows learning and the manipulation of the environment, and thus, the creation of culture. Culture, as a hereditary product of evolution, changes the environment in which the human species now develops. Information undeniably increases the ability to alter the physical environment

for human advantage, thus greatly increasing human survivability. The amount of information and the speed with which it can be obtained has exponentially increased continually since the emergence of the *Homo* genus. Through culture, humans are continually creating socially constructed identities and realities, adding new environmental dimensions to human existence each time. Through reflection, learning has continually become more refined by conscious reflection given environmental stimulus, evolving culture through such processes.

Within the court society, the continually shifting environment forced the nobility and king to adapt to new situations. They had to adapt their identities in order to stay environmentally advantageous in precarious times. In resisting, as Elias identifies, they would have essentially gone extinct, as did the knights and the feudal system. This is where interrelatedness is essential. The extinction of the feudal system occurred because the figuration of interrelations, the “organism” that was the feudal figuration, no longer had actors (microorganisms) that were capable of reproducing, adapting, and stabilizing the whole of the connections within the figuration. Like a virus in the body, it exists only when copies continue to reproduce, should the copies be wiped out, suppressed, or insufficient, the virus no longer functions. The feudal system and the knight suffered the same fate, individuals could no longer adapt and reproduce as the environment became unsuitable for such a figuration, and therefore failed in the struggle for existence.

Social figurations then, are something like organisms based off of the laws of nature, and are thus equally capable of existence and extinction. Evolution by natural selection only works with the products available, the connections that a social figuration has can be influenced and reshaped, evolving into new social figurations depending on the information pools and the way in which individuals interrelate. Elias made this clear with the *sociogenesis* of the court society. Absolutism is the descendant of feudalism, the court society from the knight society. Social birthing is the result of the ability of the individual actor to

manoeuvre within the social figurations that they are entwined in. This is possible because the individual draws and formulates their identities and realities from the multitude of available information pools in their respective society, creating the possibility of modifying their most immediate environment (in this case the court). In doing so, along with environmental influences, slight variations of information are brought into social figurations and reshape its connections, making variations in the practices (think mutation) of the figuration. Depending on the individual actors interpretation of the information, influences such as a king, a high ranking noble, or a charismatic bourgeoisie, and the potentiality they have for bonding, the social figuration begins to reshape, coalescing the interrelated connections upon a new “gravitational point” (like the analogy of galactic filaments above) as more connections are reshaped to account for the change. Over long periods of time, this mutation may eventually become strong enough, the information accumulated sufficient enough, and the connections plentiful enough that a new figuration (a new “species”) is “birthed” from the old figuration. This process is exemplified by the feudal and knight figurations in Elias’s work. It is during this process that social conflicts arise, this is seen with the noble having to choose irrelevance as a landed feudal based noble or the absolutist-based court noble.

Since humans are a reflective species, the social conflicts that do arise out of competing social figurations can, interestingly, lead to a romanticism of previously successful figurations.²³ In evolution, since nothing is ever completely eradicated, aspects of genetic information survive and are carried forward because all life shares a common source that has evolved over the last 4.1 billion years.²⁴ In other words, evolution does not rebuild from scratch, it continues adapting with what has already been developed. It is therefore the same for social evolution since social

23 This could be the source of an interesting research project, one that uses the figurational model to identify if the Romantics are a process of figurational change presented here.

24 This date is current as of October 22, 2015.

possibility shares one common source that has been evolving for about 1.8 million years.²⁵ The information pools we draw from and our interrelated webs of social figurations are bound by the same principles, so our reflexivity is capable of great distance, though usually vicariously skewed. Romanticism can be understood as evolutionary maladaptation on two fronts. The first is what is called “mismatch theory”, which states that biological evolution, being slow, is always so behind current environments so that the organism is in a continual state of evolutionary crisis and is constantly having to adapt itself to the present. By the time the adaptations actually occur though, new circumstances have long replaced previous circumstances that affected the adaptation in the first place. This can be seen in the way human beings are very slowly losing their wisdom teeth. Useful for larger mouths and rawer diets, they are completely useless today. Since our social evolution follows the same principles, romantic notions of the past could be categorized as mismatch theory manifested by conscious reflection because our information pools, with the remnant information from past figurations, will no doubt be skewed due to present information conflicts, creating a more romantic image than what really was.

The second cause of romantic maladaptation could be the result that information in the pools are consistently chaotic, so individuals are continually working through information conflicts. Some information in the pools become old, irrelevant, or is simply wrong, while some information becomes so successful that social figurations affected by that information develops healthy and lasting connections.²⁶ Romanticism not only conflicts with information pools, creating conflict with present environments, it also contains wrong information such as the particular focus that

25 This date is significant for two reasons. First, it is believed this is when the *Homo* genus begins to populate at an expanding rate. Second, because of the population growth, they begin to migrate out of Africa and divide into never before established groupings.

26 Richard Dawkins believes this is what religion has done.

nobles paid towards nature and a free life, leaving out the less desirable aspects such as increased disease and war. Romanticism has, according to Elias’s study, and quite visible today, been a continual aspect of social consciousness throughout much of what Elias calls the “civilizing process” (2006). Civilization has no doubt brought an exponential increase in social developments, causing information pools and their networks to be born, adapt, conflict, and die, at ever increasing rates.

By way of summary, the processes described in this section will be applied with Elias’s last chapter on the *sociogenesis* of the French Revolution. Elias writes:

Quite often such violent outburst can be understood only by paying attention to the long-term shifts in the centre of gravity of the society concerned, which proceed slowly, over long periods in very small steps – so that both the people concerned and later generations looking back usually see only isolated symptoms but not the long-term change in the distribution of power as such (2006:286).

The court nobles, living in the last decades of the eighteenth century under the rule of King Louis XVI had, through the continual struggle for survival, become stagnant and began to decline. The struggle for survival amongst the nobility was being overshadowed by the continually successful bourgeoisie. From Henri IV, the birth of the bourgeois figuration had continually grown in power as their wealth, liberal mindedness and socially conscious figurations adapted and evolved. The gravity of connections in the social figurations of the court society had slowly begun to shift, as the nobility, even though of a higher social class, had never been able to successfully restore their power positions from the increasingly present bourgeois positions, thus these two figurations became in conflict in the struggle for survival.

By the time of Louis XVI’s rule, the once monitored equilibrium had become self-regulating (Elias 2006). As a result, the king was no longer needed to the extent

that maintained the equilibrium of the interrelated network of the court society. The king's distance was no longer capable of manipulating the court in his favour and this created frequent fluctuations in the balance of power. The nobility's and the king's figuration, so bound by traditions of etiquette and ceremony, was growing disadvantageous in adapting against the fitness of the new bourgeois figuration that was matching the wealth and power of even the highest-ranking nobles. The elites and royal family were imprisoned by the bonds of their interdependence, unable to adapt as the external environment altered faster than they could adapt. The "people", being in the same social figuration of the "Third Estate" as the bourgeois, attached on mass to the rapidly growing bourgeois figuration on promises of "*liberté, égalité, fraternité*". This drastically increased the strength and fitness of the bourgeois figuration that had been developing since Henri IV. The powerful bourgeois figuration was beginning to overtake the figuration of the court society –social drift was beginning. Like an antibody on a virus, the bourgeois figuration attacked the competing court figuration and thus began the French Revolution.

Conclusion

My hope here is to have provided a unique take on how to think about social figurations using the laws of nature established by the natural sciences. Elias writes,

A figuration of interdependent people, can be determined with almost the same rigour as that of a specific molecule by a scientist... Any field of rule can be represented as a network of interdependent people and groups acting with or against each other in certain directions (2006:129).

Expanding on Elias's thought, a molecule is a network of atoms that form only if the atoms are bondable. Should a particular atom not attract properly to the forming molecule, it will be repelled.

The information pools that inform social figurations act in a similar way – humans pull from information pools, informing identities and realities through social construction, informing how one latches onto specific networks of interrelatedness. This is why one does not see a Marxist rallying for neo-liberal market freedoms, there is no possible way for a bond to form because that particular information pool informs the way particular networks are shaped, thus informing the individuals figuration shape, what they bond with, and what they repel against.

This study has introduced natural selection at an elementary level in hopes of inspiring further study in the field to better integrate the works of the social and natural sciences, while also demonstrating the folly of deterministic or reductionist arguments – evolution is constantly adapting and reshaping, nothing is set or determined. Evolutionary social science was presented in an introductory format to provide a framework which evolutionary biology works through, furthering the understanding of the shape and flow that evolution allows the social. This demonstrated the way in which each culture, each pool of information, though originally from one source, will develop like a great tree with its own unique evolutionary branch. Norbert Elias's *The Court Society* was examined through introduction of the key components that highlight the structure of Elias's proposed framework of interrelated figuration networks. Finally, in applying Elias's framework to the processes of social evolution by natural selection, a more holistic and multi-dimensional model was proposed. This new model provides greater definition to the way that the networks of interrelated figurations of peoples and ideas evolve over time and act and function like a living organism, affected by wide range of inputs by extension of the fact they are hereditary products of living organisms themselves. This work is not meant to be definitive, but it is meant to inspire inquiry on the validity of evolutionary accounts of socio-historical processes and whether such as study, as presented here, can enrich our understanding of the social as I believe it does.

In thinking of the shape of networks in such a way, along with the maneuverability that an individual brings to the network through conscious reflection, one can understand the complexity of the model that Elias was suggesting, and I have put expanded upon and forward. The field becomes a multi-dimensional network that the big historian or historical sociologist can study, considering the interconnected web that is formed by social phenomena. Though sociologists still resist the application of evolutionary biological processes, I think it is made clear through the example of Elias's, *The Court Society*, how evolution can enrich social science and humanities research. In opening up the social sciences to the processes of nature a new understanding of interrelatedness emerges. A connection to not only the grander scale of the cosmos as a whole, but a more intimate connection with the realities and experiences we as human beings share with the natural world.

Bibliography

- Barkow, Jerome H. 1989. *Darwin, Sex, and Status: Biological Approaches to Mind and Culture*. Toronto: Toronto University Press.
- Barkow, Jerome H. 2006. *Missing the Revolution: Darwinism for Social Scientists*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Costa, James T. 2014. *Wallace, Darwin, and the Origin of Species*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Darwin, Charles. 1959. *The Voyage of the Beagle*. New York: Everyman's Library.
- Darwin, Charles. 2003. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection*. Peterborough: Broadview Texts.
- Elias, Norbert. 1978. *What is Sociology?* New York: Columbia University Press.
- Elias, Norbert. 2006. *The Court Society*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.
- Lobo, I. (2008) Environmental influences on gene expression. *Nature Education* 1(1):39.
- Numbers, Ronald L. 2000. "The Most Important Biblical Discovery of Our Time': William Henry Green and the Demise of Ussher's Chronology." *Church History* 69, no. 2.
- Stewart, Iain. 2011. "Commandeering Time: The Ideological Status of Time in the Social Darwinism of Herbert Spencer." *Australian Journal of Politics & History* 57, no. 3. 389-402.