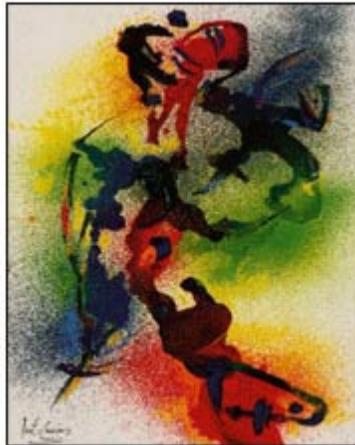


6th ESA CONFERENCE  
MURCIA



2 0 0 3

RESEARCH NETWORKS 15  
**Sociology of Professions**



*Norbert Elias and the Genesis of the Naval Profession*

**René Moelker**

**Norbert Elias and the Genesis of the Naval Profession**  
**René Moelker**

Paper presented at the 6th conference of the European Sociological Association, Research network Sociology of Professions, Murcia, Spain, 2326 September, 2003.

Royal Netherlands Military Academy  
Postbox 90.002, 4800 PA Breda  
The Netherlands  
0031 76 5273245  
[r.moelker@mindef.nl](mailto:r.moelker@mindef.nl)

2

René Moelker

**Norbert Elias and the Genesis of the Naval Profession:**  
**ABSTRACT**

In 1950 Norbert Elias published the first of three studies in 'The Genesis of the Naval Profession' in the British Journal of Sociology. At the time Elias was not the established scholar that he was to become in later days. In the 1950s his work on the 'Naval Profession' was not well received by the audience, even though all the major themes of the 'civilizing process' were interwoven in the article. The other two studies were never published in English journals (only one was published in a Dutch journal but received no international attention). A perusal of the Norbert Elias Archive in Marbach am Neckar in Germany - shows that the 'Naval Profession' project is larger than the intended three part series of articles for the BJS. From an outline to the project found in the archive it can be concluded that Elias intended to write a book with six to seven chapters. The key to the studies is a sketchy theory of institutions, which states that conflict promotes institutional development. Through the conflict between two occupational groups, sailors and soldiers, the naval officer becomes institutionalized as a new profession. During the period this process takes place England acquires maritime supremacy, secures the passages to the colonies and becomes an empire.

KEYWORDS: Naval profession; axis of tensions; gentlemen and tarpaulins; midshipman; royal mechanism; maritime supremacy

3

**Norbert Elias and the Genesis of the Naval Profession**

1. INTRODUCTION

Footnotes normally do not receive much attention from readers. But it happens that the

project reported here started with a peculiar footnote at the beginning of Elias' article 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession', an article that was published in 1950 in the *British Journal of Sociology*. The note reads This is the first of three studies in the origins and the early development of the career of naval officers in England. ... (Elias 1950: 291) The note continues with a description of all the three studies that were to be published in the *BJS*. What is peculiar about the footnote is not its presence but the fact that the other two studies were never published in later issues of the *BJS*. This interesting fact aroused the curiosity of the author of this article. Whatever happened to the unpublished studies in the genesis of the naval profession? Were they never written? Were they published somewhere else? Were they gathering dust in the Norbert Elias Archive in Marbach am Neckar in Germany? And why did the *BJS* decide not to publish the other two studies? More and more questions were added to the research project. It became somewhat of a quest. In this article the first findings are revealed.

<sup>4</sup>The unpublished articles form a coherent whole. The subject of inquiry - in a nutshell - deals with the social origins of one of the key institutions in British society, the Navy and its officers' corps. In general the work is built on the strife between nobility and bourgeoisie and in this sense the studies are a continuation of Elias' earlier researches in civilizing processes. The rivalry between these two groups forms the dynamic factor causing change. The rivalries and conflicts contribute to the institutionalization of a new occupation, the naval officer. Comparisons with Spain and France demonstrate that the rivalry was essential both for England's gaining a competitive edge and for its dominance of the world's seas. These rivalries and conflicts were subdued in Spain and in France with detrimental results to nautical skills and military competence. The latter quality, following Elias, stems from values and norms of noblemen (courage, fighting spirit, collaboration, hierarchical command structures). Nautical skills originate from seamen or 'tarpaulin commanders' who have learned the tricks of the trade as young apprentices to the sea. Only the rivalry between the two socially divergent groups could result in a

fusion of military and nautical skills, or in other words, in the genesis of the naval officer.

Though often the subject of dispute, the need for officers to acquire nautical skills became more and more evident. But the noblemen resented being forced to do what they regarded as the lowly work of the seamen, whose manual labour, an inherent part of a mariner's job, was deemed dishonourable for gentlemen. Therefore, Elias formulated the

following leading question (NE-archive: cover 505, see appendix)

**How could a gentleman become a tarpaulin without losing caste, without**

**lowering his social status?**

5

Even though Elias goes on to answer this himself, he deals with much more. His

analysis encompasses empire building, professionalization, conflicts between nobility and bourgeoisie and the royal mechanism. But he also discusses the changing standards of behaviour and English culture that are central to the question of how the occupation of seaman gained respectability: 'It was thus that the occupation of a naval officer became

gradually a gentleman's profession ...' (NE-archive: cover 510: 6).

This article deals with the work of Elias on the naval

profession. The research question

is aimed at gaining insight into the 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession'

project to ascertain the relevance of this project for sociology in general, and, more

specifically, for the sociology of professions and military sociology. It will be

demonstrated that the 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession' project is

connected to the main body of Elias' work. Subsidiary questions will then deal with how

the work on the naval profession fits in with the work on the civilizing processes and why

it was never published in full.

The paper begins with a review of some biographical notes related to the reception of

the studies on the naval profession in general sociology and military sociology. The next

section briefly examines the methodology Elias used in analysing the naval profession.

From this section it can be concluded that Elias wanted to demonstrate something big (the

emergence of the British empire and civilization) by analysing something that is much

smaller (the history of a profession). Three subsequent sections summarize the three

articles intended for publication as a series in the *BJS* which cover 'tarpaulins and gentlemen', 'the formative conflict (amongst others Drake and Doughty)' and 'the

6

development of the role of midshipman'. Research at the Norbert Elias Archive in Marbach am Neckar showed that the design for the studies in the genesis of the naval profession was larger than only that for the three articles for the *BJS*. In the archive an outline was found (NE-archive 503) with a plan for a publication comprising six to seven chapters. Elias had clearly intended to publish a volume or small book on the topic. The number of pages of archived work in fact appears sufficient for a small book of approximately 120 pages. Part of this master plan was a chapter on maritime supremacy where developments in England were compared with those in Spain and France. This topic will be discussed in section seven followed by the last section in which conclusions relating Elias' work to contemporary sociology are presented.

## 2. BIOGRAPHY: RECEPTION OF THE STUDIES IN THE GENESIS OF THE NAVAL PROFESSION

The studies in the genesis of the naval profession were written during a difficult time in Elias' personal life. A Jewish refugee in the UK since 1935, Elias obtained a Senior Research Fellowship at the London School of Economics in 1940, shortly after the publication of *The Civilising Process* (1939). Work for the LSE was interrupted by internment in 1940 (Mennell 1989). During this same period he lost his mother as a result of the brutalities of the Nazi regime (Korte 1997). After the war Elias made a living by teaching extra-mural classes and giving psychotherapeutic sessions. He also went into psychoanalysis himself.

7

When asked why, he said it was because he wrote so slowly, although he also wrote to Cas Wouters that the analysis helped him get beyond "an ineradicable guilt feeling that I was unable to get my mother out of the concentration camp before she died in a gas chamber" (Wouters 1993: 10; Heerma van Voss and Van Stolk 1989; Krieken 1998). Elias acquired a permanent position in the academic world (Leicester) in 1954 at the age of 57. In short, Elias was experiencing hard times.

Recognition-wise, these years were also difficult. In a most unique way *The Civilising Process* connected structural societal changes, and especially processes of state formation, to changes in behaviour and psychological make up. Tensions and conflicts between royalty, nobles and commoners are constitutive of the dynamic of the processes. *The Civilising Process* was received positively by a limited group of reviewers (especially in the Netherlands), but the work was hardly known in the UK. It was translated into English about thirty years later. Recognition did come late in his life, in the 1970s, after he had retired. During this difficult period Elias worked on, amongst others, the naval profession project. In 1950 a first part of the work was published in the *BJS*. Goudsblom (1987: 86) rightly observed that if the public had known the work of Elias they would have recognized the general sociological importance of the article. It is undeniably a study based on the theoretical foundation that was laid down in *The Civilising Process*. The impact the article made was, however, negligible. Probably most readers will have

8

thought that the article was a 'historical contribution of limited importance' (Goudsblom 1987: 86). One of the reasons why the other studies were not published must have been that the first one did not provoke any response. Goudsblom tracked references to the article by later sociologists. In footnote 18 he states that, 'the only references to the article on the genesis of the naval profession I know are found in Lammers (1969) and Teitler (1972; 1974; 1977)'. These references belong to the field of military sociology. But even in military sociology Elias' work has scarcely been used. The 'studies in the genesis of the naval profession' are not mentioned in recent reviews and studies on the military profession (Caforio, 1994; 1998; Kuhlmann, 1996). A small but interesting reference to Elias is made in Morris Janowitz' classic 'The professional soldier' (1960: 23, the bibliographic reference to Elias is on page 37) Most fundamentally, the professional soldier is conservative, since his social origin is grounded in the history of the post-feudal nobility in Europe and its social

equivalents in the United States. ... Interestingly, in the origins of the naval profession, as represented by the British Navy, there was greater reliance on middle and even lower-class personnel in the officer corps, because men were needed to perform the arduous and skilled tasks of managing a vessel and its crew.

As mentioned earlier, more references are found in studies by Lammers (1969) and Teitler (1972; 1974). For purposes of comparison with Elias' work the latter is the most interesting. Teitler's thesis (1974) was translated and published in 1977 by the most important institution in military sociology, 'The Inter-University Seminar on Armed

9

Forces and Society'. Significantly, the book was called *The Genesis of the Professional Officers' Corps*.

Teitler had studied sociology at the University of Amsterdam. Jacques van Doorn (1956; 1965; van Doorn and Janowitz 1968), during Morris Janowitz' time one of the most renowned military sociologists, was Teitler's promoter. Van Doorn collaborated with Janowitz and Lammers on many occasions and must have been familiar with Elias' most prominent Dutch advocate Johan Goudsblom. As the work of Elias first became popular in Amsterdam these biographical facts concerning Teitler explain why he was aware of works like *The Civilising Process*, *The Court Society* and the *BJS* 1950 article.

Teitler did not know Elias' unpublished work but the similarities between the two authors are striking. Totally in line with *The Civilising Process* Teitler elaborates the history and the socio-genesis of the naval profession. Like Elias, Teitler follows the logic of the royal mechanism (1976: 31). He arrives, more or less, at the same conclusion as Elias: the professionalization of the military occupation was first completed in England because of the openness of social strata and because of the amalgamation of military and civilian skills due to the creative aspects of non-subdued conflicts between the different social groups. But there are also many differences between the two scholars. The line of reasoning and the data collection and analysis differ completely. One of the differences is that Teitler elaborates more profoundly on the role of battle technique, technology and

tactics. The manner of fighting is more central in his argumentation, whereas Elias concentrates on the conflicts between people on board ship. As data, Teitler uses Dutch maritime history and contrasts it with France and England. Elias only mentions the Dutch

10

case twice, but only to point his readers to the exceptional character of Dutch maritime development.

When Elias received recognition in the 1970s, a translation of the study 'Drake and Doughty' (1977), that had formed part of the unpublished second article for the *BJS*, was published in a Dutch literary magazine called *De Gids*. Though the story told in this translation is wonderful, it made no sense publishing it out of its context. As will become evident from subsequent sections, the powerful meaning of the story vanishes, for it depends on the totality of the argumentation. In fact, this was also the weak point for the first study published in *BJS*, but the effect of isolation proved to be more detrimental to this second piece published in Dutch. When read in context, the story stands out as an illustration strengthening the central argument - one of the jewels in the crown, sparkling and shining brightly. As a stand alone article it is merely an anecdotal story about a conflict between two long dead privateers.

The impact of the *BJS* article is partly indirect through his colleagues and students at Leicester. Elias' ideas in the article on 'gentlemen and tarpaulins' influenced the authors of a chapter on 'the professions' in *Human Societies, An Introduction to Sociology* (Hurd 1973). One of the students from the Leicester period, Dandeker, who also published on the naval officers' profession in the *BJS* (1978), introduced Eliasian ideas in military sociology.

In 1998 Goudsblom and Mennell published a small part of the *BJS* article in *The Norbert Elias Reader*, a reader that is intended as a 'biographical selection'.

11

Elias must have been disappointed by being so badly received by the public. The 1940s and 50s were a difficult time for Elias personally. He clearly postponed publication. But Elias never abandoned the project. In 1983 he presented the study into the naval

profession to a French-German audience in Paris where he spoke in German. He said:

'das was ich zu sagen habe, ist ein Ausschnitt aus einem Project, das wie ich glaube, jedenfalls in meiner Lebenszeit nicht mehr zustande kommen wird.' [What I have to say, is part of a larger project, which, I believe, will not be finished during my lifetime]. He also apologized 'ich veröffentliche sehr langsam' [I publish very slowly]. After these words he gave a resume of the project (the typescript of this speech comprises twenty-one pages, which Elias had translated/re-worked into German, NE-archive: MISC-D X = Paris 3: 2). Elias knew that his time was running out, but the apology that he was so slow in publishing and the quote 'the project will not be finished during my lifetime' appear to be indicators that he would have liked to have had the project published.

### 3. METHOD

The 'scrap notes' in the Norbert Elias Archive follow the method Elias used for the major part of his work. Moreover, the fact that there are over 100 pages in the covers dedicated to methodology indicates that the naval study was not just a pastime but a major project. Some notes and remarks are in German. One note bears the title 'Die Eliassche Methode' and contains the key phrase '*Makrostrukturen durch die Untersuchung von Mikrostrukturen sichtbar zu machen*' [to reveal macro structures by researching micro structures] (appendix: NE-archive 518).

12

Another note is also illuminating. It states: 'The history of a profession is part of the social and economic history of its country' (NE-archive 517). When this note is contrasted with the leading question Elias himself formulated in the NE-archive cover 505 'How could a gentleman become a tarpaulin without losing caste, without lowering his social status?' a remarkable conclusion can be drawn. The main object of the project on the naval profession is more far-reaching than Elias' leading question suggests. The methodological notes give the key to the underlying goal of the studies in the genesis of the naval profession. The studies are in fact studies into England's culture, national and international politics, social structure and economy. By studying the roots of a part of English culture - i.e. the genesis of a profession - Elias

tries to gain an insight in the specific civilizing processes that made Britain into an empire.

#### 4. STUDY 1: ON TARPAULINS AND GENTLEMEN

The first study in the genesis of the naval profession (Elias 1950) is on the social origins of tarpaulins and gentlemen, the seamen from bourgeois descent and the noble members of the court society. In the Middle Ages there was not much difference between ships used for sea battles - sea battles were a rare phenomenon - and those of the commercial or fishing fleet. Ships were mostly used as a means of transport and when it came to a sea battle the fighting techniques were similar to those used in land battles. The technique of boarding was simple and did not require special nautical skills or knowledge. There was

13

an absolute differentiation between sailors and soldiers, between the master of the ship and the military commander. Training took a long time, as the skills needed to navigate and handle a ship were those of a craftsman. *'Only people apprenticed to the sea early in life could hope to master it. "To catch 'em young" was a well known slogan of the old Navy'* (Elias 1950: 293). Military commanders/officers did not want to lower themselves by doing the manual labour that came with learning the tricks of the trade. Book learning was of little avail. The officers regarded themselves as gentlemen whose main task was commanding men and leading them into battle, getting them to board hostile ships and leading them in man-to-man combat. Whereas seamen commanders would eat and sleep with the sailors - only protected from the weather by a piece of canvas washed over with tar (hence the nickname 'tarpaulin' or 'tar') - the gentlemen officers would eat their meals in private or with their peers. The men on board cultivated the social distinction of the sailors 'before the mast' and the officers 'behind the mast': a seaman captain 'might, as Sir William Booth did, sleep for years on deck with nothing over him but a tarpaulin that his seamen be the better contented' (Elias, 1950: 301). In the late sixteenth century ships proved to be useful platforms for guns. This enabled ships to fight at a distance. Nautical skills - trying to gain the advantage of the wind and keeping in line so that ships would not get hit by 'friendly' fire - became more important

in sea battle. Military commanders needed to acquire more knowledge of sailing in order to lead in battle. Some privateers - like the noblemen Monson and Mainwaring - learned the craft by sharing the hard and rough life of professional seamen. But in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries there was no real training for those of noble birth: 'many

14

gentlemen went to sea with little sea-experience, procuring appointments by favour or purchase'. (Elias, 1950: 299) Though of course, the social distinction between the two groups led to tensions and conflicts (seamen were better skilled nautically, gentlemen had better military skills and better breeding/manners), it was possible for both seamen commanders and gentlemen commanders to rise in the hierarchy. Members from both groups could be commissioned as admirals.

After sketching the problems the early naval profession in the sixteenth and seventeenth century was faced with, Elias then continues his argument with an inquiry (circa 9 pages) into the social origins of admirals. He finds that many tarpaulin commanders originated from craftsmen and artisans, people who worked with their hands. 'In the majority of cases the seamen commanders came probably neither from the richest nor from the poorest section of the common people' (Elias 1950: 303) and he points to the fact that money barriers were not insuperable. Quite a number of commanders came from what we would now call the 'lower classes'. Among the gentlemen commanders social origins were equally diverse. Some of the gentlemen commanders were noblemen, courtiers and military officers of higher rank. Others were impoverished noblemen who tried their luck at sea, hoping to preserve their family estates by privateering. Still others came from the landed gentry.

The cliff-hanger that closes the first study is at the same time the point Elias wants to make. The naval profession was only able to develop when the profession was gradually

15

institutionalized by the fusion of both the skills of seamen (navigation, nautical skills) and the military (diplomacy, knowledge of languages, knowing how to work as a team,

norms and values that fit a courtier). In order to emerge the profession needed an amalgamation of the two groups, but this amalgamation could only be brought about gradually and after many conflict-ridden confrontations which led to an institutionalized compromise. Elias cites the Marquis of Halifax who, in 1694, discussed the question 'out of what sort of Men the Officers of the Fleet are to be chosen ...', and gave it as his opinion that "there must be a mixture in the Navy of Gentlemen and Tarpaulins"'. (Elias 1950: 309). Here we have arrived at one of the topics that is common to Elias' other work on civilizing processes: pressures from above (the societal elite) and from below (civilians, commoners). And as in *The Court Society* (1969) and in *The Civilising Process* (1939) the nobility - in a desperate effort to preserve old privileges - tried to hold back the commoners who were on the rise.

5. STUDY 2: THE FORMATIVE CONFLICT (A.O. DRAKE AND DOUGHTY)  
The argument continues in the second study where the statement on conflictful relations is formulated more sharply: the conflicts between nobles and commoners are seen to be causing the changes in the profession. In this study, the conflicts are the social tissue, the figuration, from which a new institution develops. The second study should be reconstructed by combining texts that were put in archive in two different covers: 'the formative conflict' (NE-archive: cover 507; also Elias 1977) and 'Growth Henry VIII t. Charles I' (NE-archive: cover 508).

16

One of the first major conflicts between a tarpaulin commander and a gentleman commander was between two former friends, the privateer, Francis Drake and the soldier, Thomas Doughty. The incident occurred in 1577/8 during Drake's journey round the world. Drake himself was confident that Queen Elizabeth had installed him as supreme commander over his small fleet, a great honour for a tarpaulin officer. Doughty and about a dozen officers did not contest Drake's leadership at first but being nobles they did not regard themselves as Drake's subordinates. They expected to be treated as equals and be consulted in Drake's council. In fact, this was normal; in Elizabethan times even an admiral could not decide on his own. The rank did not have the same meaning as today

where an admiral is the sole commander. The nobles considered Drake to be a *primus inter pares*. One of the first disagreements arose after the capture of a Portuguese ship. The sailors were dissatisfied as, in their opinion, the gentlemen had done little towards this, which caused Doughty and Drake's brother to argue over the division of the spoils. Later, further conflicts arose between Drake and Doughty on the matter of command. At one point Drake charged Doughty with using witchcraft and with planning to murder him. Not surprisingly, the sailors took Drake's side. The conflict escalated when Drake and Doughty argued over the destination of the expedition. Doughty apparently wished to confine the enterprise to the Atlantic. Drake wanted to sail on to the Pacific in accordance with his original plan. In the end Drake, knocked Doughty down and had him tied to the mainmast. (NE-archive: cover 507: 9) 17

After a mock court-martial in the harbour of Port St. Julian in Patagonia, Doughty was convicted and beheaded. 'From now on Drake's voice alone counted on this journey. He had established his "absolute command"' (NE-archive: cover 507: 11).

Elias discusses the anecdotal events that befell Drake and Doughty in rich detail for over 11 typed pages before proceeding with a comparison of naval warfare under Henry VIII and Charles I. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries - with the exception of the period of the Commonwealth when only professional seamen were appointed as commanders - many conflicts occurred between the two socially distinct groups. Elias deals with two questions. The first is how military commanders solved a dispute with the master of the ship. In the beginning, the two treated each other respectfully, 'the captain, however superior in social status, was greatly dependent on the master and his team ... they ran the ship together' (NE-archive: cover 508: 18). Later, under Charles I, the power balance had shifted. The officers began to regard themselves not only as soldiers but also as 'sea-men' and treated the master as inferior and a subordinate person, in that way increasing the frictions between the two men. Finally, during the first half of the 18th century the professional skills of

captains, too, increased. It was during this period that they were able to assume

... complete control of both nautical as well as military operations (NE-archive: cover 508: 18-19).

18

Conflicts between masters and lieutenants (with lesser skill and experience) were more intense but they were also resolved at the first half of the eighteenth century as a result of different training methods which improved the lieutenants' proficiency in seamanship.

In fact, lieutenants and other commissioned officers took over, in course of time, one after the other of the master's functions until in the end the office of the master disappeared. The uneasy partnership between master and lieutenant ended with the victory of the latter. (NE-archive: cover 508: 20)

The second question is on the matter of recruitment: 'from which of the two groups of officers (seamen or gentlemen) should be recruited?' The answer to this question depends

on political and societal power balances in the broader society. Under Henry VIII, and to some extent also under Elizabeth, the seamen, gained a

fairly strong position. Under the early Stuarts, the gentlemen were in the ascendant. They disappeared from the Navy with a few exceptions under the

Commonwealth... under Charles II and James II the gentlemen again gained the ascendancy over the seamen... as in terms of influence and power, they were the

favourites of the court'. (NE-archive: cover 508: 20)

The logic that determined which group was in a favourable position was described by

Elias in *The Civilising Process* (1939) as the royal mechanism. In this book the royal

mechanism is one of the driving forces of social change. In the naval profession studies

Elias elaborates on this concept. It bears a resemblance to Georg Simmel's concept of

'tertius gaudens' and works as follows: the King favours whatever group is in the lesser

political and societal position in order to manipulate the power balances in the kingdom.

19

The group that is on the rise is counterbalanced by the commissioning policy of the King.

By this system of creating a balance, the King manages to ensure his own position as the

sovereign. In Henry VIII's time, the old nobility was already on the decline but was still

the most powerful group. To counterbalance the influence of the old nobility the King frequently appointed men from inferior status as commanders. During the reign of Charles I the balance of forces in the country had changed and the urban bourgeoisie was definitely on the rise. The King persisted in appointing courtiers, in spite of their professional shortcomings, as lieutenants, captains and flag officers in preference to professional seamen not only because he himself was by upbringing a courtier, but because he knew that in the country's internal struggle they were on his side while the seamen, ... had close links with the groups which, as he saw it, denied him his right as King. In fact, he was so confident of the success of this policy that, at the beginning of the civil war when Parliament tried to gain control of the Navy, he himself, for months, did very little to counter their activities... And it was not the fault of these gentlemen officers themselves that this policy failed'.  
(NE-archive: cover 508: 25)

#### 6.STUDY 3: DEVELOPMENT OF THE ROLE OF MIDSHIPMAN

In the third study, the answer to the leading question 'How could a gentleman become a tarpaulin without losing caste, without lowering his social status?' is formulated. The tensions and conflicts all originate from status battles (which in turn are connected to the  
20 status battles in the larger society). The two groups tend to be conservative - the status quo offers advantages to members of both groups - but at the same time policy makers in the admiralty are aware that change is necessary (see the text above where Elias quotes Lord Halifax).  
The answer reached was to create a position for the training of young recruits not before the mast, not behind the mast, but mid-ships. Young people from both groups could be trained there. Working with their hands would in this manner not be below the station of a young gentleman. Hence at the beginning of the eighteenth century, the institution of the 'midshipman' evolved.  
... the place of a midshipman definitely became during the 18th century the most important stepping stone for a young gentleman who wished to

become a naval officer. In fact it became the lynchpin of the whole system which enabled naval officers to fulfil their double function as seamen and military gentlemen. (NE-archive: cover 513: 9)

This training system gave the English a competitive advantage. It was possible for people from both groups to acquire nautical skills, become seamen and at the same time learn to behave as gentlemen. Boys between the age of 11 and 14 could serve as volunteers. If they had enough money they could hire a servant. On the larger ships the volunteers received lessons from a schoolmaster, chaplain or from the captain himself. They had to learn all the things a gentleman needed to know including fencing and dancing. Nautical knowledge and skills were learned from experienced seamen who not only taught the boys the tricks of the trade but who also took care of their clothes,

21  
catering, etcetera. At the age of 14 or 15 the volunteers were promoted to midshipmen. As midshipmen they completed their training as seamen and military gentlemen. And, of course they all hoped to procure for themselves after two years as midshipmen and after passing an often rather perfunctory examination by the captain, a commission as naval lieutenant'. (NE-archive: cover 513: 9)

The evolution of the institution of the midshipman was a slow process, characterized by ups and downs. It was also dominated by traditions, the only thing officially regulated being the required time on board His Majesty's ships. An apprentice to the sea had to serve two out of six years of training as midshipman before being promoted to lieutenant. The institution of the midshipman not only resulted in a fusion of seamen and gentlemen but also it ended the conflicts between the two social groups. In France, the bureaucratic rules laid down in Colberts' *Code des Armées Navales* in 1689 and the attitude of the nobles made it impossible for such a training system to develop. Officers stuck rigidly to the customs and manners associated with their position as noblemen. Seamen were mostly excluded from commanding naval war vessels. Manual labour was taboo, making a practical nautical training impossible. Officers

remained officers and did not acquire sufficient nautical skills. The results were not favourable to the fighting power the French were able to develop. At the end of the Napoleonic wars, French officers complained ' "Les marins anglais nous sont supérieurs, non par leur courage ni par leur patriotisme, mais par leur expérience qui es la pratique de la théorie ...Un capitaine anglais est presque toujours le meilleur matelot de son bord..." French observers, over a long period of time, noted again and again the same differences

22

between French and English naval officers. In practical seamanship the latter were far superior to the former. There can be little doubt that this superiority was one of the principal and one of the permanent factors which helped to decide the long struggle between the two countries for naval supremacy and the control of North America and India in favour of England.' (NE-archive: cover 513: 16)

#### 7.COMPARISON WITH SPAIN AND FRANCE: THE QUEST FOR MARITIME SUPREMACY

Elias not only provides insights into the institutionalization of a profession, but also describes the political and societal processes of change in England leading to maritime supremacy. He went on to compare these processes with continental developments. When the political structure, by using what Elias terms royal mechanism, enables a healthy antagonism between nobility and commoners, processes of change (leading to new institutional arrangements such as the fusion of noblemen and seamen into the profession of naval officers) are put in motion. Bringing conflicts out into the open is the first condition for change to happen. A second condition for social change is fulfilled when the social structure allows men from lower stations to climb the societal ladder and, in turn, this social structure should also permit a certain degree of openness. Spain and France faced the same problem as England. Their officers lacked nautical skills and their seamen were not trained to be military leaders. However, in Spain and France the societal structure was not open and conflicts between commoners and nobility were suppressed

23

The greater superiority and exclusiveness of the military class was reflected in the barrier between gentlemen officers and craftsmen officers on board the ships ... Generally speaking one could say these barriers were higher and more rigid in France than in England and higher in Spain than in France' (NE-archive: cover 505: 15).

Spain, in the late mediaeval period up to 1600, is described by Elias as a racist society. The presence of a different racial group, the Moors, served to influence developments in Spain negatively. None of the 'whites' were willing to do manual labour Spaniards did not want to lose "caste" regarding to a race problem of the 'poor whites'. Spain was confronted with people of other races. Doing manual labour would lower the status of lower Spanish men in their position towards the Moors. This prevented Spain from becoming a manufacturing country and to become a great commercial power and a great sea power. ...The profession of a seaman ranked among those low class occupations not fit for a pure Spaniard, whether rich or poor, noble or non-noble... the gulf between the two groups was unbridgeable.

(NE-archive: cover 505: 18-20).

In France the situation was, in a way, comparable - there were few contacts between commoners and noblemen - but the system and rules introduced by Colbert also had advantages because the French could order the changes from above (by bureaucratic rule) they could reorganize their naval forces in the most consistent way... as a result the French naval force became, for a time a most efficient weapon and a formidable threat to its competitors... In 1690 France was able to beat in the same year at

24

Beachy Head the united fleets of the Confederates, England and Holland. ... However, the triumph of the French Navy was fairly short-lived.' (NE-archive: cover 510: 28).

The French Navy proved inferior to the English naval forces. Bureaucracy was one of the reasons for the 'inferiority' of the French naval forces because it caused the French

officers to be overcautious. Whenever an action went wrong, officers had to give a full account of events for which they were held fully responsible. This caused them to avoid risk-taking and to resort to fighting using guns only. The French preferred not to fight using the old boarding techniques and kept their distance, forcing the English to do the same. The English preferred to rely on their nautical skill for they were far more skilful sailors than the French. Another, no less important factor in the decline of the French Navy and its more or less constant inferiority to the naval force of England was the social distance between sailors and commanding nobles that was reinforced by Louis XIV's constitution for his naval forces. This constitution assured supreme control for the nobles. The position of the other rival power at sea, the United Dutch provinces, was very different. Compared to England, the rivalry in the Navy between nobility and seamen was much milder. The nobility, as in many other continental countries, was more oriented towards the army, causing the sailors to be the dominant group on board. Also, merchant interests prevailed over military interests. The Dutch Navy, lagging behind in gunnery technology and the development of bigger ships, specialized in the older techniques of boarding ships and, in these techniques, they became equally or even more skilled than the English. In conflicts with the Dutch, the English gained the upper hand - not because of nautical skills - but because of military skills such as the use of their superior

25

firepower. To deploy the firepower of the guns to the full, the English had to fight in line, avoiding the old techniques of boarding (Teitler 1977). So, this led to the situation that in conflicts with the French nautical skills were most important to the English, whereas military skills had to prevail in their conflicts with the Dutch. Figure I summarizes the developments in the four maritime countries.

HERE FIGURE I

England's political system proved to be a most successful stimulus for the development of the Navy. Its Navy acquired an unchallenged position of dominance on the seas (Padfield 2000). In the end, England's supremacy was due both to this political structure

and the rivalries between rising commoners and the nobility trying to hold on to old privileges  
Although the initial antagonism between the two groups was essentially a social and professional antagonism, it was in its ups and downs and finally in its outcome closely connected with the great struggle between court nobility and middle class England and more especially, between their social standards... On the continent (with exception of the Netherlands) there was a matching rivalry between nobility and civilians but separation in Naval forces. Continental forces copied the more successful British pattern (but with difficulty because social structures resisted and had to be changed). (NE-archive: cover 510: 34)

26

The need for change was apparent and stemmed from international competition. Elias concludes: 'England had to become a great maritime power or else, as an island-nation, she would have suffered a fate worse than that of Spain' (NE-archive: cover 510: 8-9).

#### 8. CONCLUSIONS

Returning to the question why his studies on the genesis of the naval profession were never properly published, the answer now seems obvious. In the 1950s Elias' work was not well-known. When he proposed a series of articles to the BJS, the readers were unable to see the importance and the connection to the larger theoretical framework as described in *The Civilising Process*. The relevance of the studies on the naval profession would have been more easily recognizable if they had been published as a whole, preferably in book format. The translation and publication of 'Drake and Doughty' in *De Gids* (Elias 1977) also proved to be an unsuccessful publication strategy. When published in isolation, the wider meaning of this magnificent story vanishes. Had it been published as originally intended, as the second part of three studies, the story of the conflict between Drake and Doughty would have built up the suspense. It would have been the pepper to spice up the meal. The studies contribute to the sociological understanding of both processes of social change and of figurations. They focus on a period when, on the one hand, the nobility

was losing its dominant position in society and was becoming more and more tied to the court, whilst, on the other hand, commoners were on the rise in the mercantile professions

27

and in cities. The king's position, based on the monopolies of taxation and violence, remained vulnerable. Therefore he had to try to keep the societal powers in balance. In

*The Civilising Process* this mechanism is called the royal mechanism. This mechanism stimulates the development of the British Navy. The dynamism that comes from the royal mechanism, the rivalries and conflicts between nobility and commoners, between

gentlemen and tarpaulin commanders, is creative in the end, for it causes the institution of the midshipman to arise and leads to England's supremacy over the seas. This supremacy, as a consequence, then contributed to the empire building efforts of the British.

The studies in the genesis of the naval profession also add to our understanding of conflict sociology for 'if one attempted to work out a general theory of institutions one would probably have to say that the initial conflict is one of the basic features of a nascent institution.' (Elias 1950, 308). Elias was well aware of this contribution, for he sharply attacked the 'consensus' sociology of Durkheim in the opening of the third study.

He criticized the Durkheimian assumption that increasing interdependence would lead to solidarity. In a way, this criticism is comparable to his later attack on Parsonian functionalism (Smith 2001). Elias proposes a form of conflict sociology as a way to better understand social change. The manner in which this sociology of tensions is constructed resembles Marx's dialectical method. In particular, the concept of an 'axis of tensions' is an example of this dialectical approach. From tensions between nobility and bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century to the eighteenth and nineteenth century, 'the main axis of tensions, shifted more definitely to the commercial and industrial section of the population, dividing it into two camps, the working classes and the middle classes.' (Elias 1950: 301). Taken together with the remark quoted above that the history of a profession

28

is part of the social and economic history of a country, Elias - in these studies - proves to

be very close to a Marxist perspective. In his Parisian lecture in 1983 Elias himself pointed to the resemblance with Marx, but he also stated the Marxist schema to be too rough

Das Marxsche Schema ... ist gewiss nicht falsch, aber es ist grob! ...Was bei der Marxschen Klassenteilung fehlt, ist die Tatsache, dass der König und der Adel einen Machtbrennpunkt eigener Art darstellte, der nicht schlechterdings mit dem Adel gleichzusetzen ist'. (NE-archive: MISC-D X = Paris 3: 13)

Elias criticizes Marx's two-party dialectics and advocates a three-party kind of dialectics that is embedded in the royal mechanism. With the studies on the naval profession Elias introduced a sophisticated version of Marxist conflict sociology. In contrast to most postmodern sociology or the sociology of globalization where the military factor is played down or neglected, Elias is sensitive to the role of war and the military in the formation of empires. Tilly (1992) formulated the correlation between state formation and the military factor very well when he stated: 'the state made war, and war made the state!' Change, civilizing processes and empire building are, in Elias' work, closely connected to the study on the military. The studies in the genesis of the naval profession are excellent examples of military sociology. However, the studies are more than military sociology or sociology of the professions. Elias aimed at a higher goal. They are about civilization, empire building and changing standards of behaviour all at the same time. In the studies England is not yet a class society, but at the same time it is no longer a feudal society: hence the worry is about

29

'losing caste'. Noblemen felt their status threatened if forced to do the manual labour that came with the mariners' occupation. How can this occupation be made respectable and befitting a gentleman? This question gives rise to an analysis of status, position and distinction through the use of cultural capital. Finally, the institution of midshipman furthers the professionalization of the naval officer by making the occupation befitting a gentleman.

If they had been published in 1950, the three articles in the *BJS* would, in time, have been recognized as a seminal study not only on the genesis of a profession but also as a

study of the naval and maritime roots of England's culture and England's claim to empire. This study of culture sheds light not only on the development of standards of behaviour but also demonstrates the interrelations between social structure, economy and culture. In short: it should be considered the classic that it really is!

René Moelker

*Department of Social- and Behavioural Sciences and Philosophy  
Royal Netherlands Military Academy*

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY

**Caforio, G.** (ed) 1994 'The Military Profession in Europe', *Current Sociology* 42 (3).

**Caforio, G.** (ed) 1998 *The Sociology of the Military*, Cheltenham: An Elgar Reference Collection.

30

**Dandeker, C.** 1978 'From Patronage to Bureaucratic Control: the case of the naval officer in English Society 1780-1850' *British Journal of Sociology*. 29 (3) 300-320.

**Doorn, J.A.A. van** 1956 *Sociologie van de organisatie*, Leiden: Stenfert Kroese.

**Doorn, J.A.A. van** 1965 'The Officer Corps: A Fusion of Profession and Organization', *Archives Européennes de Sociologie*, VI (2) 262-282.

**Doorn, J.A.A. van and Janowitz, M.** 1968 *Armed Forces and Society. Sociological essays*. The Hague: Mouton.

**Elias, N.** 1939 *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation. Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*, Basel: Haus zum Falken.

**Elias, N.** 1950 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession, I Gentlemen and Tarpaulins', *British Journal of Sociology*, 1: 291-309.

**Elias, N.** 1969 *Die höfische Gesellschaft. Untersuchungen zur Soziologie des Königtums und der höfischen Aristokratie, mit einer Einleitung: Soziologie und Geschichtswissenschaft*, Neuwied: Luchterhand.

**Elias, N.** 1977 'Drake en Doughty. De ontwikkeling van een conflict', Translation by Nelleke Fuchs-van Maaren of the unpublished 'Drake and Doughty, A Paradigmatic Case Study', *De Gids* 140 (5-6): 223-37.

**Elias, N. and Dunning, E.** (1966) 'Dynamics of Sport Groups with Special Reference to Football', *British Journal of Sociology*, 17: 388-402.

**Goudsblom, J.** 1987 *De sociologie van Norbert Elias*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.

**Goudsblom, J. and Mennell, S.J.** (eds) 1998 *The Norbert Elias reader: a biographical selection*, Oxford: Blackwell.

**Heerma van Voss, A.J. and Stolk, A. van** (eds) 1989 *De geschiedenis van Norbert Elias*, Amsterdam: Meulenhoff.

31

**Hurd, G.** 1973 *Human Societies: an introduction to sociology*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

**Janowitz, M.** 1960 *The professional soldier, A social and political portrait*, Illinois: The Free Press.

**Korte, H.** 1997 *Über Norbert Elias. Das Werden eines Menschenwissenschaftlers*, Opladen: Leske und Budrich.

**Krieken, R. van** 1998 *Norbert Elias, Key Sociologist*, London: Routledge. [See also: [www.usyd.edu.au/~robertvk/elias/book/content.html](http://www.usyd.edu.au/~robertvk/elias/book/content.html)].

**Kuhlmann, J.** 1996 'The present and future of the military profession - views of European Officers', *Forum International* 18, Strausberg: Sowi.

**Lammers, C.J.** 1969 'Strikes and Mutinies: A Comparative Study of Organizational Conflicts between Rulers and Ruled', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 14: 558-72.

**Mennell, S.** 1989 *Norbert Elias. Civilization and the Human Self-Image*, Oxford: Blackwell.

**Padfield, P.** 2000 *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind*, London: Pimlico.

**Smith, D.** 2001 *Norbert Elias & Modern Social Theory*, London: Sage Publications.

**Teitler, G.** 1972 *Toepassing van geweld*, Meppel: Boom.

**Teitler, G.** 1974 *De wording van het professionele officierscorps*, Rotterdam: Universitaire Pers Rotterdam.

**Teitler, G.** 1977 *The Genesis of the Professional Officers' Corps*. London: Sage Publications.

**Tilly, Ch.** (1992) *Coercion, Capital, and European States, AD 990-1990*, Cambridge: Basil Blackwell.

32

**Wouters, C.** 1993 'Ja, ja, ik was nog niet zoo 'n beroerde kerel, die zoo 'n vriend had' (Nescio)', in Israëls, H., Komen, M. and De Swaan, A. (eds), *Over Elias*, Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis.

**Appendix: cited sources (covers) from the Inventory of the Norbert Elias archive, part 1**

503. Text of outline of 'The genesis of the naval profession'.

505. Manuscript with note with heading 'Copies of development in France and Spain and beginnings in England', p. 13-62, incomplete, carbon copy.

507. Manuscript of 'Studies in the genesis of the naval profession. 2. The formative conflict', p. 1-13, unfinished.

508. Manuscript with note with heading 'Growth Henry VIII t. Charles I', p. 14-25. 1955.

510. Manuscript of 'The genesis of the naval profession. Gentlemen into seamen', p. 1-22, incomplete, carbon copy with handwritten corrections.

513. Manuscript with note with heading 'Development of midshipman with French comparison', p. 7-17, version with mark A, incomplete

517. File concerning "Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession", with numbered pages belonging to several manuscripts.

518. File concerning manuscripts of 'Studies in the Genesis of the Naval Profession', with notes, unnumbered pages and newspaper clippings.

MISC-D X = Paris 3: Transcription de l'exposé présenté par Norbert Elias au Colloque Historique Franco-allemand, en date du 17 mars '83.

33  
 Yes No  
 Almagamation  
 / openness of  
 classes  
 Holland  
 (regents  
 dominant)  
 England  
 Rivalries subdued  
 Spain, France  
 Yes  
 No  
 Military skills  
 Spain  
 France  
 Fusion in  
 England  
 Civilian skills  
 Holland

+

-

- +

**Figure 1: societal conditions favourable to the rise of England as a maritime power**

34

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The author would like to thank Harry Kirkels and Stephen Mennell, who not only commented on earlier versions of this article but who also brushed up the English. The author also thanks the Elias Foundation and the Deutsches Literaturarchiv for their support. This paper is first published in the *British Journal of Sociology* by Routledge

*LTD. on behalf of the London School of Economics © The London School of Economics and Political Science, 2003 Vol 54, Issue No. 3 pp 373-390.*

<sup>2</sup>As a scientific explanation the analysis by Elias complies more to the principle of

parsimony than Teitler's. But this topic will be dealt with in another publication.

<sup>3</sup> A note from the BJS-article (Elias 1950: 307) refers to the position of the clergy and lawyers and generalised the statements on the genesis of the naval profession to the genesis of professions in general. This note, 'The higher clergy, especially the bishops, ranked as gentlemen...The poorer clergy ranked with craftsmen, tradesmen and workmen...And other occupations which we call professions, for instance that of lawyers, were equally divided...' can be traced back to Hurd (1973: 124)

<sup>4</sup> These objectives of the study show a remarkable parallel with the studies which Elias published together with Dunning on sports (fox hunting, boxing, soccer) and leisure time (Elias & Dunning 1966). In the studies of sports, the object is also the psycho- and sociogenesis of English culture.

<sup>5</sup> The literal text has been corrected for English grammar and spelling. Given that Elias was a German scholar the original typescripts contain some small language errors.

<sup>35</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Teitler describes the position of the Dutch navy in a most elaborate manner. Elias, in fact, merely notes that the position of the Dutch is different from the French. He states that in many ways the Dutch are comparable to the English.

While all professions enjoy high social status, primary professions have the highest status, regard and esteem conferred upon them by society at large. This high esteem arises primarily from the wider, deeper and higher social function of their work as compared with other lower ranking professions. Their work is regarded as more vital to society as a whole and thus of having a special and very valuable nature. Recent papers in *Sociology of the Professions*. Papers. People. Theoretically, some of the bases of the sociology of the professions are dealt with, as well as the thought of Vicente Faleiros, Marilda Iamamoto and Jos  Paulo Netto over the social worker. Finishing, from these names, some notes on the nature of professions in modern society are outlined. Save to Library. Download. Professions -- Great Britain -- Sociological aspects, Professions -- United States -- Sociological aspects, Professions. Publisher. [London] : Macmillan. Collection. inlibrary; printdisabled; trent\_university; internetarchivebooks. Digitizing sponsor. Kahle/Austin Foundation. The understanding sociology method helps in finding the distinctive features of the professions and creates on their basis an ideal type of profession. Using this method, the neo-Weberian approach defines the profession as a status professional group (collective), united by cultural characteristics, - a style of life, a common moral system and even religion. The *Sociology of the Professions*. The early influential thinkers on the professions included Durkheim (1957), Parsons (1951), and Tawney (1921). British sociologist Terry Johnson (1972) analyzed professions from a neo Marxist perspective, seeing them as mechanisms of control where a profession is able to control its own members. For Johnson, the state had an important role to play in upholding the power of professions.