

More-Than-Human Figurations

Gastherausgeber*innen:

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Editorial

Bernd Sommer / Debbie Kasper / André Saramago

In recent years, sociological research has been increasingly dedicated to human/non-human relations. These endeavours include research from the fields of human-animal studies, so-called new materialism, as well as analyses that apply posthumanist perspectives (for an overview see, for instance, Hoppe/Lemke 2023 and Malm 2018). This special issue engages with these debates. By publishing contributions that also relate to Eliasian process and figurational sociology, it has a relatively unique scope: In human-animal studies, figurational sociological perspectives remain underdeveloped; apart from rather superficial references to Elias' civilising theory. In posthumanist approaches and studies from the field of new materialism, such references are almost completely absent. This lack of engagement is regrettable, as Elias was one of the few sociologists who maintained a close dialogue with the natural sciences throughout his life, actively seeking to develop a sociological approach that encompassed the social and biological dimensions of human development within a single framework.

Elias' process sociology, for example, draws heavily on the long tradition of organicist biology, whose epistemological framework of 'integrative levels' and 'emergent dynamics' provides the conceptual apparatus for his theory of *The Great Evolution* (see Quilley 2010, Elias 2007 [1993]). This is a model of the history of the universe that sees the evolution of life on Earth as the process of emergence of various integrative levels, encompassing the spectrum ranging from subatomic particles, to chemistry and biological life, up to human figurations, with each of these levels characterised by the emergence of non-reducible characteristics, such as life or symbolic communication. This model permits us to conceptualise what is distinguishable between levels (e.g. the greater plasticity

of human culturally-oriented behaviour vis-à-vis biologically-oriented behaviour) while maintaining an awareness of the integration of all life within a single process of cosmic evolution (Elias 2007 [1993]). Elias thus consistently referred to the ecosphere as *extra-human nature*, seeking to make it conceptually clear that humans are an integral part of the *Verflechtungszusammenhang* (network of interdependencies) that is usually labelled as 'nature'. This theory has been argued to provide a way of overcoming the epistemological impasse between the ontological dualism that anthropological approaches establish between humans and nature and the flat ontology that occasionally plagues ecocentric perspectives (see Saramago 2023). Process sociology thus offers some promising *Denkwerkzeuge* (thinking tools) for overcoming nature-culture and human-nature dichotomies.

Conversely, other concepts of figurational sociology can be developed further, in order to incorporate insights from contemporary more-than-human sociology (Pyyhtinen 2016) and thereby gain analytical precision. This is particularly true for the concept of figuration itself. According to Elias, human figurations consist of interdependent individuals (Elias 2012 [1978]: 9). Individuals are mutually dependent on one another: 'People need each other, are directed towards and bonded to each other as a result of the division of labour, of occupational specialisation, of integration into tribes or states, of common sense of identity, and of their shared antagonism for others etc.' (Elias 2012 [1978]: 9). The most elementary forms of people's needs for one another are their affective valencies, their emotional ties, including love, sexual desires, feelings of friendship, but also fear and hatred. Taking this perspective seriously, fundamental bonds and ties cannot be reduced to humans alone

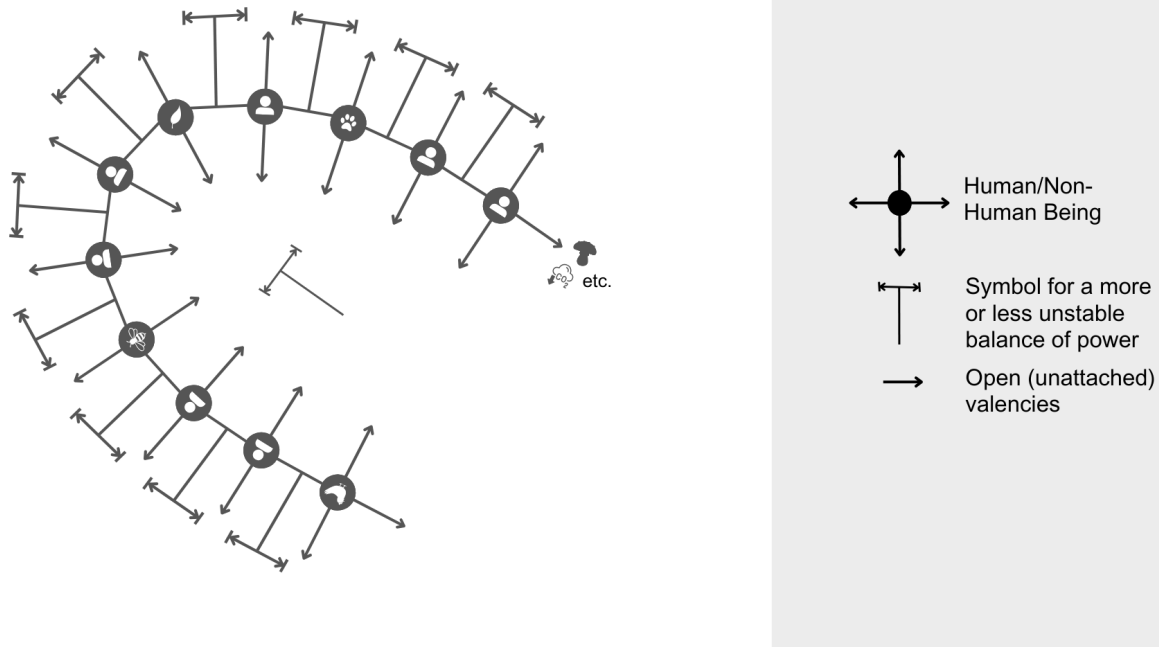


Figure 1: More-than-Human Figuration (source: own figure, based on Elias 2012 [1978]: 9)

but need to be extended to beings of the non-human world, also.

An obvious example are the emotional ties that many people have with their dogs and other pets. In addition, there are also functional dependencies, for instance, on guide dogs, police dogs, and, in a broader sense, on farm animals that provide humans with food. The same holds true for plants that serve as food and produce oxygen. Further examples are insects and fungi that are essential for so many ecosystems and play a vital role in the circle of life. Some of these ties are symbolised in Figure 1. For instance, the icon of the chicken stands for farm animals (since chickens are the most numerous farm animals on Earth), the paw represents pets, or the bee pollinating insects. Finally, certain chemical compounds need to be included, here symbolised by CO₂. Carbon dioxide not only contributes to global warming; a certain concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere also makes life on Earth possible as it is necessary to prevent the planet from freezing over completely. In recent years, CO₂ has also been commodified for the sake of climate change mitigation and turned into an emotional symbol or even a fetish

(Swyngedouw 2010: 216 ff.). Such an extension of the concept of figuration is not only necessary in the field of human-animal studies or environmental sociology. It is fundamental for all figurations. In other words, every figuration is a more-than-human figuration.

All contributions of this special issue engage with sociological debates on humans in their relations to non-human beings. In particular, the first four papers apply a process-sociological perspective. *Marcel Sebastian's* contribution historically reconstructs the simultaneous developments of increasing personalisation and objectification of non-human species in the course of the Western civilising process: While some animals (particularly pets) have become largely protected from violence and even take on the role of friends or family members, others (especially farm animals) are objectified, commodified and subjected to extreme violence in institutionalised patterns. In the course of the civilisation process, this violence is largely made invisible and removed from people's everyday lives.

Abiodun Paul Afolabi examines the farmer-herder conflict in Nigeria through the lens of Norbert

Elias' figurational theory. In contrast to conventional approaches that explain the violent conflict through factors such as resource scarcity, ethnicity, or security challenges, Afolabi refers to historical socialisation processes and shifting interdependencies – also in relation to the non-human world.

Waldemar Rapior deals with the transformation of the Polish national habitus in regard to violence in human–animal figurations. By analysing debates on hunting, he shows that violence against animals has increasingly become a contested site of national identity in Poland. As a result of a drag effect, hunting – a former privilege of the nobility – is charged with notions of power and masculinity. At the same time, in recent years hunting practices have faced mounting criticism from social groups that show a growing empathy toward animals. Over the years, the justifications for hunting and the killing of animals have changed and now build on notions of stewardship and the necessary management of 'nature'.

The contribution by *Renske van der Maten*, *Eira C. Carballo-Cárdenas*, and *Jan P. M. van Tatenhove* shifts the research focus from Poland to the Netherlands. By analysing data spanning 90 years from a Dutch women's magazine, the authors reconstruct the change of norms surrounding animal-based food consumption in the Netherlands. Meals and recipes portraying eating meat or fish as the norm increased after World War II, but decreased significantly in recent years. However, plant-based meals still diverge from the norm – especially for festive occasions such as Christmas or Easter. Therefore, the authors argue, a more sustainable food system is still a long way off from being in place.

The topic of a more sustainable future lies also at the centre of *Gláucio Campos Gomes de Matos'* contribution on human and non-human inhabitants of the Amazon. Gláucio Matos applies a figurational sociological perspective to the experiences he gathered during his extensive field visits in the Amazon rainforest. He shows that the Amazon is a complex figuration of human and non-human inhabitants that suffers from local overexploitations and climate change. According to Matos, protecting this ecosystem, which is

vital for the global climate, requires an expansion of institutions of climate governance – particularly carbon trading – to the people who live in and from the forest.

In the final two contributions of this special issue, the application of figurational sociology is less pronounced, while perspectives from posthumanist theories are more strongly integrated. *Jessica Croteau* reflects on the ambivalent function of practices of repair, which can also contribute to the stabilisation and legitimisation of existing violent relations. Applying a perspective that goes beyond productionist and anthropogenetic paradigms, her contribution reconstructs decay as an active, generative, and more-than-human process that enables multispecies flourishing. Finally, based on participatory research in forests occupied by activists, *Alissa Starodub* and *Sebastian Garbe* assess the possibilities of interspecies solidarity within environmental conflicts.

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Imprint

Soziologie und Nachhaltigkeit
Beiträge zur sozial-ökologischen Transformationsforschung

ISSN 2364-1282
Volume 02/2026 No. 12, DOI: 10.17879/sun-2026-9961

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Editors: Matthias Grundmann, Anna Henkel, Melanie Jaeger-Erben, Bernd Sommer, Björn Wendt

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Website: www.sun-journal.org

Funded by the German Research Foundation
(DFG) – project number 490954504