

“Interwoven Histories: Expanding the Horizons of Long-Term Processes in Social Figurations” – Reflections on the Conference *Social Figurations: Long-Term Processes, Present Concerns, and Future Directions* 4th–7th December 2024, Prague

The 2024 conference *Social Figurations*, held in Prague, represented a significant and intellectually stimulating convergence of historical sociologists and interdisciplinary scholars. Emerging from a collaborative effort between the Norbert Elias Foundation, Charles University’s Faculty of Humanities, the University of York, the ISA’s RC56, and the University of Warsaw’s Centre of Figurational Research, this event engaged directly with a pivotal question in contemporary sociology: the relevance of historical sociology in understanding and addressing social issues across past, present, and future contexts.

The conference represents the latest undertaking in a series of fruitful engagements between historical sociologists at Charles University and the Norbert Elias Foundation. Significant previous events have included a tribute to Johan Goudsblom in the form of a conference in Amsterdam (2022) focused on long-term processes and the conference *The Fantasy-Reality Continuum: Science, Religion, Politics and Culture* which took place in Warsaw that same year. Our conference *Social Figurations* also marked the continuation of a fruitful collaboration between Charles University’s Faculty of Humanities and the Sociology Department at the University of York, which began with the 2023 symposium *Perspectives in Historical Sociology*. In response to the increasingly solitary nature of historical sociology research, both the symposium and the subsequent conference aimed to bring together an international community of scholars whose work aligns broadly with the paradigms of processual and figurational sociology.

At its heart, historical sociology offers an unparalleled framework for exploring the interplay between individual agency and structural dynamics over extended temporal spans. This perspective contrasts sharply with the presentist tendencies that dominate much contemporary social analysis, where immediate issues are often examined in isolation from their historical underpinnings. As Marta Bucholc highlighted in her plenary session, figurational sociology provides a dynamic and relational approach to such challenges, enabling researchers to discern continuities and ruptures across historical epochs and diverse cultural contexts. By situating present concerns within broader temporal and spatial interdependencies, the conference reaffirmed historical sociology as an indispensable discipline for probing the origins of contemporary crises and envisioning potential resolutions.

Spanning four days and multiple venues across Prague, the structure of *Social Figurations* reflected the scale and depth of contemporary historical-sociological inquiry. The conference not only showcased pioneering research but also sought to reinvigorate historical sociology as a collaborative and interdisciplinary endeavour. Through its wide-ranging thematic focus and methodological diversity, the event provided participants with an invaluable platform to address the central question: How might long-term historical

perspectives illuminate and address the pressing challenges of our time? Over the course of these intellectually rich sessions, distinguished by rigorous theoretical debate and empirical depth, the conference achieved its aim of advancing historical sociology while charting a course for its future development.

Opening Plenary and Thematic Highlights

The opening plenary, delivered by Helmut Kuzmics, established a robust theoretical framework for the conference by examining the interrelations of emotions, state formation, and habitus through a long-term historical perspective. Kuzmics drew on his extensive scholarship in historical sociology, civilisation theory, and the sociology of emotions to illustrate how historical trajectories of emotional development and state formation remain essential to understanding contemporary societal processes. His analysis of emotional habitus and its interplay with state structures provided a nuanced framework for addressing current sociopolitical developments, thereby situating the conference firmly within broader debates about the utility of historical sociology in contemporary theory.

Over the subsequent three days, a wide array of topics was explored, reflecting the breadth and depth of the processual perspective. The sessions ranged from analyses of colonial legacies to inquiries into mental health, each uniting around a commitment to long-term sociological insights.

Gender, Power, and Social Change

The exploration of gender emerged as a recurring theme, with discussions centred on the historical evolution of gender relations and their enduring significance. Notable contributions included Dominique Memmi's examination of individuation and domination, Lucy Císař Brown's reimagining of the civilising process as it relates to church, witchcraft, and gender, and Miklós Hadas's investigation into the global transformation of gender orders. Emilia Sieczka's study on the historical evolution of legal frameworks addressing sexual violence was particularly innovative, illustrating how historical perspectives can inform contemporary policy debates. Mariana Montagnini's research on the production of behavioural norms in teacher training, alongside Tatiana Savoia Landini's longitudinal study on laws related to the exploitation of minors, further underscored the enduring relevance of historical analysis in addressing gender-based violence and child protection policies.

Global and Colonial Processes

The thematic stream on colonial and global processes showcased the discipline's capacity to critique Eurocentric narratives. André Saramago's advocacy for non-Eurocentric grand narratives and Gordon Hughes's analysis of colonialism within the framework of the Western civilising process demonstrated how historical sociology deconstructs persistent colonial legacies. These theoretical contributions were complemented by Christian Ramirez's empirical case study of Afro-Indigenous relations in colonial Veracruz, which offered valuable insights into ongoing racial and ethnic dynamics in the Americas. In his plenary session, chaired by Stephen Mennell, John Hobson addressed inter-civilisational

relations and Eurocentrism, providing a critical interrogation of the historical processes that continue to shape global power dynamics.

National Identity and Authoritarianism

Several sessions focused on the *longue durée* of nationalism and authoritarianism, offering valuable frameworks for analysing these phenomena. Simina Dragoş's analysis of nationalism as a persistent historical process and Borys Cymbrowski's Eliasian interpretation of dictatorships contributed significantly to these discussions. Waldemar Rapior and Tomasz Detlaf's exploration of Polish-Ukrainian interdependence during the Russo-Ukrainian War offered a timely case study of how historical sociology can illuminate contemporary geopolitical tensions. Dane Erlo Matorres's investigation into the role of intellectuals in legitimising authoritarian regimes, through an analysis of the Marcos dictatorship, underscored the importance of examining the intellectual foundations of political power.

Marta Bucholc's plenary brought together several of these threads, particularly through her work on gender figurations and illiberal constitutionalism. Bucholc highlighted how historical sociology provides critical insights into the ongoing challenges to democratic institutions and social rights in Eastern Europe, demonstrating the applicability of figurational approaches to urgent political and social transformations.

Mental Health and Emotions

The conference also delved into mental health through processual perspectives, offering groundbreaking interpretations. Baptiste Brossard's historical analysis of war trauma and Eva-Maria Griesbacher's concept of "neurofigurations" reframed mental health challenges as products of evolving societal interdependencies. Keith Goldstein's exploration of trauma through the twin lenses of the Holocaust and Nakba, coupled with Eva Kalousová's study of generational trauma, revealed how historical traumas reverberate through time, shaping contemporary social relations.

Environmental Concerns and Sustainability

The exploration of environmental crises through figurational sociology was another highlight. Gilles Verpraet's work on the interplay between social history and environmental challenges, alongside Carsten Kaven's analysis of survival units amidst ecological crises, revealed the long-term interdependencies shaping environmental issues. John Lever's investigation of barriers to sustainable food system transformations provided actionable insights into how historical sociology can inform contemporary sustainability debates.

Methodological Innovations and Future Directions

The conference consistently demonstrated the methodological vitality of historical sociology. Presentations such as Benjamin Etzold and Katja Mielke's figurational analysis of refugee displacement and Robert Van Krieken's work on digital technologies highlighted

how figurational sociology adapts to contemporary phenomena. Jiří Šubrt's reflections on the concept of "figuration" itself served as a capstone to these discussions, underscoring the field's theoretical evolution.

The final day's sessions on emerging research areas, including changes to the concept of stigma (Hannah Farrimond and Mike Michael) and analyses of psychedelic microdosing (Michael Dunning and Jason Hughes), highlighted the ongoing expansion of historical sociology into new domains. Professor Gerda Reith's closing plenary on addictive consumption encapsulated the conference's thematic breadth, using Eliasian frameworks to interrogate the interrelations of capitalism, modernity, and consumption excess.

Concluding Reflections

The *Social Figurations* conference underscored the pivotal role of historical sociology in disentangling the complexities of contemporary social life. By situating present-day challenges within the broader context of long-term historical processes, the conference offered a compelling alternative to the fragmented and often narrow approaches that dominate contemporary social science.

A central theme that emerged from the proceedings was the reaffirmation of Norbert Elias's vision of sociology as a relational and process-oriented discipline. The diverse contributions demonstrated the robustness of figurational sociology in addressing the challenges of modernity, whether through analyses of the historical roots of authoritarian regimes, the persistence of gender inequalities, or the colonial structures underpinning global power relations. Jiří Šubrt's incisive reflections on the evolution and adaptability of the concept of "figuration" illustrated its enduring methodological relevance, offering new avenues for sociological inquiry that bridge theoretical innovation with empirical investigation.

The conference also highlighted the practical applicability of historical sociology. Contributions such as John Lever's exploration of the systemic barriers to sustainable food systems and Waldemar Rapior and Tomasz Detlaf's examination of Polish-Ukrainian interdependencies demonstrated how insights from long-term historical perspectives can inform responses to pressing global challenges. These works underscored that historical sociology is not merely an academic endeavour but a critical tool for envisioning and fostering sustainable and equitable futures.

As the conference drew to a close, a clear consensus emerged: historical sociology must resist the pull towards academic insularity and instead embrace its potential as a discipline that bridges empirical research, theoretical development, and practical application. By fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and employing a historical lens to address urgent social concerns, the field can illuminate the intricate interdependencies that define human societies across time and space. The *Social Figurations* conference provided a compelling testament to this vision, serving as both a celebration of the field's current achievements and a blueprint for its future trajectory as a vital scholarly and practical endeavour.

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