Figurational Sociology and the Study of Economic Processes*

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1. Introduction

The central questions this paper purports to deal with are: How are economic processes to be viewed from the standpoint of figurational sociology? And what is the potential contribution of figurational sociology to the clarification of problems commonly defined as belonging to the field of economics?

These questions are highly abstract; and so, inevitably, will be the answers. The questions imply that figurational sociology actually exists as a distinctive sociological perspective. It is needless to say that this is only true in a special sense, as it depends on social definitions. Throughout this paper, however, I will speak of "figurational sociology" as a unitary whole, and in a somewhat reifying way (contrary to the canons of figurational sociology itself), ignoring the intellectual differences between those who wish to be counted among its representatives.

"Figurational sociology" is the term coined by Gleichmann et. al. (1977) to refer to the group of sociologists who take the empirical studies and theoretical essays by Norbert Elias, above all, as the model for their own work (esp. Elias 1939, 1970; see also Goudsblom 1977a, 1977b). The term expresses the claim that a new perspective has been formed or is in the making which has paradigmatic significance for sociology as a whole (1).

Can this claim be justified? The decisive answer can only come from the development of substantial theory based on empirical research. The question then is, however, how to do research, - how it may be guided by our general perspective. This paper is devoted to social processes called economic
precisely because these have hardly been investi-
gated from the viewpoint of figurational sociolog
Therefore, they are a good test case for the
assessment of its general paradigmatic significan

The argument in this paper will be mainly develop-
through a comparison of the central assumptions of
figurational sociology with those commonly made in
economics. Also, I will compare figurational
sociology with fields of study especially devoted
to the interconnections of economic and other
social processes: economic sociology and Marxism.
Both of these disciplines have attempted to show
the limitations of economic theory, and their
criticisms of economics have been or will have to
be taken up, to a large extent, by figurational
sociology. At the same time however, figurational
sociology's perspective is distinct from and even
contradictory to some of the basic ideas of both
conventional economic sociology and Marxism. In
section 5, some significant similarities and
differences will be pointed out.

Through these comparisons I am both "testing" the
paradigmatic significance of figurational sociolo
gy and trying to contribute to its formation as a
paradigm (2). In other words, the testing is not
"interest-free". But so it seldom is.

2. "The economy" in figurational sociology

Figurational sociology does not provide a neat
conceptual scheme in which the economy is given a
specific place as one "sector" or "aspect" of
society. It considers such general schemes as
confusing rather than illuminating. Figurational
sociology insists that words like "economy" and
"economic" have changing meanings which are part
of and reflect changing social reality (Blok
1976). Indeed, the economy as a distinctive
"sector" of society, in this perspective, is the
product of a long process of social differentiati

Nevertheless, in the empirical work done by
figurational sociologists on different societies,
ranging from mediaeval rural society to modern
Western state societies (e.g. Verrips 1977),
"economic" processes may be distinguished from other social processes. They refer to such activities as the production of goods, particularly production for a market, and exchange of goods, particularly monetary trade.

What is the significance accorded to these economic activities? If we take Norbert Elias's *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939) as figurational sociology's most exemplary study, the answer is clear: economic processes are regarded as highly important, even essential for the explanation of social developments. In particular, according to Elias, the economic development in Western Europe from the eleventh century, characterised by a growing division of labour, expansion of trade and transport, and increasing use of money, formed necessary conditions to the development of state formation - the political integration of larger and larger regions leading to the emergence of national states. However, Elias rejects any kind of economic determinism. First, state formation processes, although conditioned by economic processes, have their own dynamics and are to that extent relatively autonomous. Secondly, economic processes are not an unexplainable, ultimate "base", but are in turn conditioned by other social processes, particularly those of state formation.

In sum, economic and political processes are, in this analysis, strongly interrelated, both being just as important in the explanation of social development, in which civilising processes and processes of knowledge formation also play a part. Economic and political processes, according to Elias, are two sides of the same social development, as is apparent in the gradual transition from *Naturalwirtschaft* (i.e. "natural economy", largely functioning without the use of money) to *Geldwirtschaft* (i.e. money economy) during the Western European Middle Ages. To quote his own words:

"Im konkreten, gesellschaftlichen Prozess verlagern und differenzieren sich die Ketten zwischen Erzeugung und Verbrauch sehr allmählich (...). Ganz allmählich vergrößert sich also auch in der abendländischen Gesellschaft der geldwirtschaftliche Sektor, die Differenzierung der gesellschaftlichen Funktionen, die Verflechtung der
verschiedene Gebiete, die Abhängigkeit größerer Menschenmengen voneinander; alles das sind verschiedene Aspekte des gleichen, gesellschaftlichen Prozesses. Und nichts anderes als eine Seite dieses Prozesses ist auch die Veränderung der Herrschaftsform und der Herrschaftsapparatur (...)" (Elias 1969, II, pp. 34-5).

However, Elias pays much more attention to state formation than to the economic development. His theory focuses on state formation and civilisation and their interconnections. The process of civilisation is largely explained by referring to the monopolisation of the means and the use of violence by the state, which in turn is partly explained by referring to economic development. Thus, the influence of economic on civilising processes is largely indirect in this theory. Moreover, the "other side of the causal chain", the possible influence of relatively autonomous civilising processes on economic development, is not investigated (3).

All this is typical of the empirical work from the perspective of figurational sociology until now. In this respect, too, *Ueber den Prozess der Zivilisation* has remained the model for later research. Although economic processes are considered highly important in theory, they have received scant attention. Thus, they appear as a massive, slowly moving background, indispensable for understanding what is going on in the foreground, but itself hardly investigated nor explained. In this way, paradoxically, the Marxist assumption that the economy is the conditioning base may receive unintended support (4).

On the other hand, figurational sociology's focus on the political and affective aspects of social figurations has been an important correction of Marxist one-sidedness, and that of much sociology thereafter. One of the drawbacks of the dichotomy of "base" and "superstructure" is that it suggests that societies are composed of "economic activities" and "ideas" respectively. By pointing out the interconnections of political interdependencies - ultimately based on violence - and affective interdependencies, figurational sociology poten-
tially provides a more comprehensive view of society. However, it still has to substantiate that view by investigating economic processes not only as an explanatory background, but as being important in itself and in turn explainable.

3. Economic and other interdependencies

This section will deal briefly with a question figurational sociology has not answered, or answered rather implicitly until now: the meaning of the concept of "economy" (or "economic") and its interrelations to other concepts. Most figurational sociologists are more interested in the varying social meanings of words than in their supposedly universal or strictly scientific meaning; they feel no enthusiasm for complex conceptual constructions such as those of Weber (1922) or Parsons. Nevertheless, some clarification of general concepts and their interrelations might be useful from the standpoint of figurational sociology, as long as it is kept in mind that the specific meanings of words vary, depending on their context, and that scientific and non-scientific meanings cannot be separated.

Although words like "economy" en "economic" have different meanings in different historical contexts, we may find a common core in these meanings relevant to all kinds of societies. "Economy" in this general sense refers to activities of production and exchange of goods for the satisfaction of "material" needs (food, shelter, clothes). These activities involve interdependecies between human beings, as they need each other for cooperative productive efforts and the acquisition of produced goods. In other words, "economy" refers to one of the basic ways in which people are interdependent. We may distinguish four types (or aspects) of interdependencies: 1) economic interdependencies, referring to production, exchange, and possession of goods; 2) political interdependencies, arising from the use and the threat of violence, and the need for protection against it; 3) affective interdependencies, referring to needs of sex and sociability, to emotions of love and hate, pride and degradation; and 4) cognitive interdependen-
cies, referring to the need for orientation through communication of knowledge (5).

These categories overlap; they do not form a precise conceptual system. Their main function is heuristic: they direct the attention to different kinds of social processes, which, while being highly interconnected, may be relatively autonomous: 1) economic processes like the division of labour and the extension of trade; 2) political processes like the monopolisation of violence and the formation of national states; 3) affective processes like civilisation; and 4) cognitive processes like the growth of relatively adequate knowledge.

The extent to which the four types of interdependencies can be related to different social institutions, or "spheres" or "sectors" of society, varies historically. The economy as a more or less distinct "sector" of society emerged in a long process of social differentiation - division of labour, differentiation between occupational and family roles, specialisation of production organisations - and concomitant integration. Through this process, words like "economy" took a specific meaning. In modern societies the economy is largely identified with activities involving the use of money, and economic institutions with the rules and roles, the organisations and authorities, the politics and powers directly related to these activities. Thus, since "services" performed in exchange for money are also included, the economy of modern societies comprises more than the production and exchange of material goods; these activities, however, may still be regarded as the "hard core" of the economy (6).

4. Figurational sociology and economics

In this section I will compare the central tenets of figurational sociology (Elias 1970; Goudsblom 1977b) with some of the most important assumptions and styles of thought that are characteristic of economics (7). To what extent are these to be criticized, and modified accordingly, from the standpoint of figurational sociology?
Figurations of human beings

Figurational sociology makes the simple observation that social life consists of "figurations" of interrelated human beings. In stressing this seemingly trivial point figurational sociology criticizes other sociological perspectives, which tend to conceive social life in terms of variables, structures, systems, in which human beings do not seem to play a part.

In economics, this tendency toward reification is even stronger than in sociology. Economists are inclined to identify the formation of theories with the construction of models which start from highly simplifying assumptions about human behaviour. The market as conceived in economic theory is such an as if model: instead of describing the behaviour or real human beings, it posits certain consequences of the activities of fictitious individuals (or organisations), who are rational (in a specific sense), mobile, motivated only by strictly "economic" considerations, completely informed about the market situation, conforming to the law and the rules of contract, not deceiving one another, and so on. These simplifications are recognized now by economists themselves and typically defended by stating that this is the way science works: it is only by simplifications that systematic theories can be constructed and predictions made.

The question is, indeed, if and to what extent this "works"; the answer depends on the extent to which the assumptions approximate reality. To investigate this for different societies and historical periods might be regarded as a proper sociological task. More importantly, sociologists should try to assess the ideological functions of these models, their use in public discussions. For even if the assumptions in these models are meant to be made only for the sake of science, they can easily become political convictions which blind believers to aspects of social reality. The market models of classical economics, as is widely recognized now, had such ideological functions; they implied a justification of class inequality and a defense of laissez-faire (8).
Modern economics, to a large extent, is even further removed from living human beings. Several theories make no reference at all to the behaviour of individuals; they simply advance a certain relationship between quantitative variables (9). Likewise, much effort is devoted to the construction of empirical models based on short-term trends, which specify the interrelations between selected quantitative variables for a national economy, e.g. wage level, investment level, government expenditures, national income, and unemployment (10).

Figurational sociology has criticised other sociological perspectives for their tendency to split up the social world into abstract, reified variables. Although this tendency is even stronger in economics, the criticism is less relevant here: I think it is much more realistic to conceive the processes studied by economics - like total production of a national state, terms of exchange or numbers of workers in different branches - as isolable and quantitative variables than other social processes. This quality of economic processes is not universal. It is the product of a long process of social differentiation, part of which was the monetarisation of exchange relations. By the increasing specialisation of specifically economic institutions and organisations and by the increasing use of money for the assessment of the values of goods and services, economic facts were perceived increasingly as quantitatively varying traits. In other words, when social figurations have developed in such a way that people orientate part of their behaviour to one another in terms of quantitative variables, social science, c.q. economics, is able to develop useful theories in terms of these variables.

If the analysis of economic processes in terms of quantitative (i.e. measurable on at least an interval scale) variables is not unacceptable, it has its limits and drawbacks. It isolates the variables from a social "context", taken as given and unchanging. Hence most of these theories or models are either highly abstract (although even then bound to specific societies, as in classical
economics) or only valid for a specific (usually national) society in a rather short period of time. In particular, theories which purport to explain shifts over several decades run into difficulties: they take as constant a "context" which is changing conspicuously; they neglect non-quantifiable, e.g. political and organisational, processes which are highly relevant to the explanation. For example, market theories on changes in the distribution of income in national state societies during this century give no weight to such processes as the organisation of workers and other occupational groups (cf. IJsbrandy 1979), nor to the growing welfare functions and regulatory role of the state (cf. Huppes 1977), and leave, therefore, too many questions open.

Another risk of the one-sided orientation to quantitative variables is that it may lead not only to the neglect of non-quantitative processes, but also to efforts to quantify the non-quantifiable. Thus, in some economic models "welfare" or "ability" is represented as a numerically varying trait (e.g. Tinbergen 1975). This is not only premature, it is also naive: concepts like welfare or ability are too complex and too dependent on social definitions to be represented as unidimensional and objectively measurable traits, like height or physical weight.

Even if the economist's preference for variables reflects some characteristics of modern societies, this is no excuse for the fallacy of reification, the representation of social life as thing-like entities instead of interdependent human beings (11). One might say that reifying language is often meant metaphorically rather than literally, as a shorthand way of expressing complex relationships. Still, the attempt to "dereify" or "humanize" lawlike economic statements - i.e. translate them in terms of actions of interdependent human beings - would be most interesting. The content of the statements would be clarified, and hidden psychological or sociological assumptions might be discovered.
Interdependence

The concept of interdependence is central to figurational sociology. It refers to the basic insight that human beings are always dependent on each other, for their food, shelter and other "material" needs, for their safety, their sociability and sexuality, their orientation in the world. As stated before, economic interdependencies may be regarded as one type, referring to "material" needs or, more concretely, to activities like the exchange of goods and the cooperation in work. In reality interdependencies are never purely economic. The relative "pureness" of economic interdependencies in market relations is the result of a specific process of social differentiation and integration (state formation), in which a particular market rationality emerged. Even then, economic and other interdependencies remain strongly intertwined.

The idea of basic and continuous interdependence between human beings is not the starting-point of economics. In so far as economists refer to human beings, they still maintain the image of free individuals entering markets and thereby establishing relations of exchange and contract. Interdependence does have a place here, as it results from the basic fact of scarcity, the division of labour, and the unequal distribution of "factors of production", but it is not really encompassing or coercive; the individuals maintain their fundamental autonomy. In the prevailing market model the interdependence is of two kinds. First, there are contractual obligations, which are typically chosen by individuals from a range of alternatives. Secondly, any one individual is dependent on all others for the terms of exchange, the prices of goods and services.

It has become commonplace to assert that the mode of a free market with "perfect competition" never was a literal description of social reality; that it approximated most of all the historically specific situation of national societies in nineteenth century Western Europe, although even then the ideal of laissez-faire was never put into
practice. The image of the homo economicus, the freely competing and rationally choosing individual, reflected to some extent the values, experiences and actions of capitalist entrepreneurs, who indeed faced the necessity of rational decision-making in a competitive market. For the mass of the workers on the other hand, the range of possible choices was only very limited. Other groups, too, did not conform to the economic model: members of the aristocracy who did not invest their capital in the most profitable way; and the economically dependent members of households, who were not included in the economic model at all, although they were by no means irrelevant for the functioning of the economy.

The social specificity of conditions approximating - more or less - the economic model of the free market has been stressed again and again by sociologists; it is the stock-in-trade of economic sociologists, especially. They have shown how "economic" behaviour is affected by varying "non-economic" conditions. Following Weber (1920), many sociologists studied the influence of values, religious ideas and other cultural and psychological traits (e.g. Henry 1948; Kennedy 1962). In Marxism, on the other hand, the historical limits of "bourgeois" economics were emphasized by relating its scope to the capitalist relations of production and class structure.

Thus, although sociologists (including the Marxists among them) are united by their common recognition of the variability and social contingency of economic activities, their opinions differ strongly on the more general view of society in which these varying activities should be placed. There are good reasons to assert that the concept of interdependence should be central in such a view. Interdependence implies power; the more one-sided the interdependence in a given relationship is, the greater the power differential. Thus, power is inherent in all relations between men, not specific to the sphere of politics nor, as far as the economy is concerned, only due to "imperfections" of the market. Possession of relatively scarce material means (land, capital) is one power
resource, and often an important one.

It is not enough to justify the centrality of the concept of interdependence for the study of economic processes in the abstract. The best defense I can give here is to show, very briefly, how the concept might be used in a few illustrative cases.

a) The interdependence between members of the same household is in no small part "economic" in nature – if only because they form a consumers' unit, living in the same house, having their meals together and using the same household items. One source of power differences within this group is the relative importance of the economic functions fulfilled for the group by different members. In the ideal-typical Western middle class family of today (or yesterday) the division of labour between the money earning husband and the "non-producing" wife, performing domestic and child-rearing tasks, gives the husband a power advantage.

In the traditional bourgeois or farmer's family ownership of capital or land is a very important power resource, particularly in the relation between parents and children. The decline of the importance of this type of ownership is probably one of the changes which have brought about a diminishing of the power differentials between parents and children in Western societies during the last decades.

Interdependencies within families or households are, of course, not only economic. They are, at least, also affective or emotional. The emotional identification of men with "their" families probably has been and still is highly important in the motivation of economic activities. Far from being an isolated and egoistic individual, "economic man" was in reality a family man. The continuing efforts to the accumulation of capital by capitalist entrepreneurs are not comprehensible without referring to their orientation to future generations, especially their own children.

b) The concepts of interdependence and power are important, even indispensable for the analysis of
class relations. In classical economic theory, classes are abstract categories, carriers of general factors of production - land, capital, and labour. The relations between these classes are analysed in terms of competition and exchange, not in terms of power and dependence. In this way it is suggested that the parties are somehow on equal footing and participating in a fair exchange. The resulting unequal distribution of income is reduced to differences in relative scarcity which are not explained themselves. In view of the historical situations to be analysed, it is more adequate to regard capital ownership as an advantageous power resource in itself, monopolized to a high degree by one class, backed by political arrangements (such as the protection of property rights by the state), and - in the "classical" capitalist production - creating relations of relatively one-sided interdependence between owners-entrepreneurs and non-owning workers.

This almost amounts to a summary of Marx's "critique of political economy". In Marxism, however, class relations tend to be viewed in an all-or-nothing way; as long as the (or most) means of production are privately owned, the working class does not have any power in relation to the absolutely dominant capital owning class. (This view is often qualified by Marxists, but never abandoned.) In this sense, Marxist theory is static: within capitalism no "fundamental" changes are possible.

The concept of interdependence reminds us of the fact that the dichotomy of power resting in one group and absolute powerlessness in another group is a theoretical borderline case. Interdependence is more or less one-sided, in varying degrees, and so is the power balance. This conceptualisation enables us to perceive far-reaching changes in the class structure of Western societies during this century. The power balance between bourgeoisie and working class became less unequal; in other words, the interdependence between the two classes became less one-sided. Properly speaking, this contention is too simple: for the dividing lines between the two classes became less clear, as
capital was vested increasingly in impersonal organisations, the distribution of personal wealth became somewhat less unequal, a partial "separati of ownership and control" took place, and a highl differentiated "new middle class" emerged (12).

c) The growing economic functions of the state in Western national societies from the second half of the nineteenth century are part of this same development. Here, too, the concept of interdependence may be clarifying. First, because of the growing scale and complexity of industrial production, owners and managers of industrial firms became more dependent on the state for support - directly through credits and investment facilities indirectly, and more importantly, through infrastructural arrangements, education, and scientific and technological research. Secondly, representatives of the state became more dependent on industrial organisations for the goals of national power and autonomy. In the figuration of competitively interdependent Western nation states, industrial power came to be regarded by politicians of different ideological hue as a necessary condition to national power. Thirdly, the increased power of the working class in relation to other social classes in Western state societies is reflected in the expanded welfare functions of the state. As politicians became more dependent on large masses of the population, they became more favourable to governmental welfare measures, which made members of the lower strata, in turn, more dependent on government bureaucracies (De Swaan 1976).

As a consequence of the growing interrelationship between the "private" and the "public" sector it has become more problematic to analyse the functioning of Western national economies in terms of market processes. Market mechanisms are influence constrained, circumscribed by all kinds of legal regulations and governmental measures and pressures. It would be misleading to conceive the state as a monolithic and external whole, intervening from the outside into the economic market. Private organisations and state bureaucracies are often intertwined to the degree that they are
sarcely distinguishable. In so far as economists take state laws and government policies as unexplained givens, they have less to explain than, say, a century ago. Explaining economic processes now requires, more than before, a more comprehensive view, which takes the intimate relationships between economic and political processes as its starting-point.

The changing nature of social figurations

Figurational sociology stresses the point that social figurations always exhibit changes, both short-term fluctuations and long-term developments. It criticises the widespread tendency toward Zustandsreduktion, i.e. reducing changes to unchanging essences or structures. Economics has shown this tendency most conspicuously in its idea of a future "stationary state" and its static equilibrium models (13).

Even the more realistic models of classical economics which allowed for change, were - to repeat - at best relevant for specific societies in specific phases of development. As these models pretended to be universal for all societies above the level of barbarism, they conferred immortality upon institutions which had developed gradually and continued to change.

Today most economists, living in a world in which the variety of economic institutions is more striking and better known than ever before, are more modest in that they claim their models to be valid only for one national society or - on a more general and abstract level - one, rather vaguely defined, type of societies, whose "institutional" characteristics are taken as constant (although they often remain unspecified). As stated before, this assumption of institutional constancy is problematic - to say the least - especially for theories dealing with long-term changes.

Most economic theories as well as empirical studies, however, focus on short-term changes, like the rise and fall of prices, fluctuations in the level
of investment, or shifts in the balance of payment.
The interconnections between these changes and
the long-term developments in which they are em­
bedded are not explored systematically. Therefore
the scope of these theories is fairly limited and
is, moreover, largely unknown.

The non-planning of social change

One central assumption of figurational sociology
is this: changes of figurations, while being the
outcome of intentional actions of the inter­
dependent individuals who form these figurations,
are for the most part not intended nor foreseen
by any of the individuals involved. Apart from
the notion of interdependence, this insight is
basic not only to figurational sociology, but
also (and from a much earlier date) to economics.
Economists are fond of giving examples of this
"trick of reason", this ironical relation between
human intentions and unintended results. For
example, if labour unions succeed in getting
higher nominal wages for their members, they may
induce inflation which results in a worsened
material condition for the wage-earners. Or, if
farmers raise their production in order to get a
higher income, the prices of farm products may
fall to such an extent that the end result is
lowered incomes for the farmers. Or, a Keynesian
example, if people wish to save more money, the
consequence may be a lowered demand of consumer
goods, therefore, in the end, less savings.

Adam Smith interpreted the relation between in­
tended behaviour and unintended results optimis­
tically: morally bad or neutral motives - the
egoistic pursuit of self-interest - led to the
maximalisation of total wealth. From Malthus and
Ricardo onwards, however, there is also a pessi­
mistic tradition in economic thinking, which boil
down to the crippling idea that all efforts are i
vain. In Keynes's theory the unplanned results
of well-intended actions are also negative, but
unlike classical theory the conclusion is far fro
fatalistic: if people come to know the unintended
consequences of their actions, they are able to
do something about them collectively.
Almost all changes thus conceived and analysed are short-term. The "institutional framework" of these changes is seldom conceived in developmental terms, let alone studied as the result of ongoing human actions. In so far as economists bother about explaining this framework at all, they tend to fall back on the simplest kind of functionalism; by ascribing certain general functions to institutions they sometimes suggest that these are the direct result of human intentions (14). Needless to say, this will not do as an explanations. Even if the functions now ascribed to an economic institution like the use of money were manifest to those who originally brought it into practice, an adequate explanation of money-use and its expansion should refer to largely unplanned changes such as the increasing division of labour, the expansion of trade, and the formation of states. In sum, figurational sociology goes further than economics in stressing that both short-term fluctuations and long-term developments are to be conceived as the largely unplanned results of intentional human behaviour.

The economist's conception of changes as the unintended results of intentional actions is largely bound to the market. Spontaneous processes tend to be identified with market forces, planning with organisation and political authority. Thus, a dichotomy is suggested between market forces and planning, or spontaneous processes and political and organisational control (15). Some economists, criticising their fellow-economists for sticking too much to obsolete market theories, have pointed out the enormously increased significance of planning in the course of this century, stressing the expansion of the government's role in economic affairs and the growing control of the market by megacorporations (Galbraith 1971).

The importance of this development is undeniable. However, the identification of the activities of government bureaucracies and large private organisations with planning and control has to be questioned. "Planned change" is a matter of degree and, moreover, of scope. The wider the scope in time and place, in other words the longer the time-
span and the larger the figurations studied, the more difficult it is to speak of planned change. All planning realised until now - both in capitalist societies and in communist societies whose economies are often identified as "central planned economies" - is relative in at least six respects:

1) The planning organisations themselves are, to a large extent, the result of an unplanned development; 2) The stated goals of the plan are the outcome of a bargaining process often leading to a compromise not intended by any one individual; 3) The goals are adapted to largely unplanned conditions, among which the wishes of the interdependent individuals involved; 4) The specific goals typically are short-term (no more than five years); in so far as considerations for longer periods play a role, they are rather vague; 5) The extent to which the goals are attained varies strongly; often they are modified drastically or even given up completely before the end of the planning period; 6) Even in so far as the planning is successful, i.e. the goals are attained, this will have unintended consequences not only for the "planning unit" itself (i.e. the figuration which is, so to speak, the target of the planning in the stated period), but also, and more importantly, for longer periods and larger figurations.

This last point deserves some elaboration. Just intentional actions by individuals have unintended consequences for the figurations of which they are a part, so the organised, coordinated, and goal-oriented activities of figurations have unintended consequences for the larger figurations of which they are a part, - e.g. the planning activities of corporations for national economies, or those of states for international figurations. The unplanned consequences of planning have received much attention recently in relation to the so-called environmental crisis. The awareness has grown that the short-term planning of economic expansion by industrial firms and states may have disastrous consequences in the long run; and that the control of this development is beyond the reach of any of the organised units involved.

Problems of this type have not escaped the atten-
ion of economists. One way in which they have tried to tackle them is by using game-theoretical models. Illuminating though these models may be, they cannot be a substitute for empirical investigations. It may be regarded as the special task of developmental sociology, in particular figural sociology, to clarify the relation between short-term, conscious decisions and long-term, unplanned developments by grounding this relation in historical changes.

The structure of social development according to the central tenets of figural sociology, social developments, although largely unplanned, are structured, i.e. exhibit regularities. In so far as economists study developments, they share this view. Theories of economic growth, of long-term shifts in the working population, of the business cycle, try to show and explain precise regularities (16). Again, these theories have the virtues of their virtues: their numerical precision is at the cost of empirical precision, which would allow for more variations; and their parsimony - the selection of only a few crucial variables - limits their explanatory power. Thus, models of economic growth suggest an automatic relation between investment, capital accumulation and technological innovation on the one hand and growth of output on the other hand. However, the "independent" variables themselves are not explained. Why it is that certain societies show a certain rate of economic growth (or stagnation, or decline) in a certain historical period remains obscure in these theories.

This important question has been left to sociologists, who have basically developed two kinds of answers: 1) Modernisation theories (e.g. Lerner 1958; Parsons 1966) have stressed the importance of national institutions and values for economic growth, - e.g., a "rational" state bureaucracy, "modern" educational arrangements, differentiation between economic organisations and families, and values like rationality and "achievement".

2) Dependencia or "world system" theories (e.g. Wallerstein 1974, 1979; Chirot 1977) have stressed
the development of relations of one-sided dependence and unequal power between different territorially defined populations - among them nations - which on the one hand has enabled some states to industrialise and grow successfully and on the other hand has brought about a "development of underdevelopment" for other states or areas in the world.

From the perspective of figurational sociology it is not difficult to observe that both types of theories, although contradictory in some of their assumptions and implications, do not exclude each other completely (17). The criticism by dependence or world system theories of the traditional sociological focus on national societies as more or less closed systems is important, and their emphasis on international interdependencies is essential for sociological theory. This does not deny the fact, however, that developments within national states may have a relative autonomy and are, to that extent, not reducable to international relations.

Norbert Elias has pointed out, in criticising Marx and Engels, that the economic development is not the one and only type of structured long-term social change. Besides economic developments, regularities are also observable in political developments (state formation processes), affective developments (civilizing processes), and cognitive developments (rationalisation, growth of relative adequate knowledge).

The European expansion since the sixteenth century is the most important historical case of a tendency identified by figurational sociology as the most pervasive in human history, seen from a long-term perspective: the growing interdependence between increasing numbers of people over larger and larger areas. Economic, political, affective, and cognitive developments are all part of or interconnected with this general tendency. The growth of international trade, the concomitant increase of the international division of labour (partly enforced by military power), and, more recently, the internationalisation or large corporations are
among the most important economic developments during the last centuries connected with this tendency. Today, more than ever before, international economic processes are massive, uncontrolled, and unsurveyable to such an extent that they arouse feelings of powerlessness and helplessness in individuals who are part of these processes and dependent on them for their sheer survival.

5. Economics, economic sociology, and Marxism

This paper has focused on economics as its main object of criticism, though some critical remarks about two other disciplines devoted to the study of economic processes, economic sociology and Marxism, have also been made. In this section, the limitations of each discipline as seen from the standpoint of figurational sociology will be summarized.

Some of the limitations of economics have been pointed out by economic sociology, and some of the limitations of both economics and economic sociology by Marxism. In other words, figurational sociology's criticism of economics is not completely new, as it shares some of the viewpoints developed earlier by the other perspectives. Yet its own perspective is clearly different from these alternatives, as will be argued in this section.

For reasons of clarity and length, hardly any attention will be paid to the theoretical differences within economics, economic sociology and Marxism. This is, of course, a simplification. Criticism is focused on general characteristics of what were the dominant views in each during the last decades. Both the unorthodox views and the more subtle differences within the established orthodoxies are largely ignored.

Western economics is still dominated by thinking in terms of market processes, however qualified; its most prestigious theoretical activity is the construction of models which specify mathematical relations between selected variables. Conventional economic sociology derives its theoretical view-
points mainly from structural functionalism, the Weberian critique of Marxism, and the social psychology of motivation and attitudes. Marxism differs from the other two in that it is not an established science (like economics) or specialty (like economic sociology), but defines itself as a distinctive perspective which cross-cuts the established social sciences, particularly economic and sociology. Although Marxists often have vehement discussions among themselves they generally share a common set of viewpoints.

Economics

The criticisms levelled against ways of thinking common in economics may be summarised as follows. Economists are still working with simplified market models. Although at least some of the simplifications are recognized as such, this hardly leads to investigations of the gaps between assumptions and actual social processes. Nor is much research or theoretical activity devoted to the historical limits of the models. Because of this lack of historically informed reflection on the assumptions, naive ideological prejudices may acquire too much influence. One of the most striking simplifications of market models is that of the freely choosing individual, not constrained by basic interdependencies.

Modern economics focuses on quantitative variables and their interconnections, in order to express them as mathematical formulae. Although this orientation reflects part of the reality of modern highly differentiated societies, it leads to the neglect of social processes not so easily quantifiable - especially political and organisational changes -, which is at the cost of theoretical scope and explanatory power. Since these models take "institutional factors" as a given, constant context, they cannot, in particular, explain long-term economic developments in which the "context" itself is changing conspicuously. Nor can they account for variations in economic development between different national societies.

The focus on quantitative variables is related to
A tendency toward reification; lawlike generalizations concerning economic processes often give the impression that human beings have nothing to do with them. On the other hand, by positing a dichotomy of spontaneous market forces and planning, economists sometimes misleadingly suggest that social processes outside the market sphere are the direct consequence of goal-directed planning.

**Economic sociology**

Much of what has been said here on the limitations of economic theory has been advanced before by advocates of economic sociology. They have claimed a division of labour between economists studying economic processes within the framework of economic institutions taken as given, and economic sociologists studying these institutions themselves. The claim could be justified by the growing analytical specialization of economics, its transformation from a broad science of society into a more confined field. In this way, room was made for other disciplines to study economic processes, particularly economic history and economic sociology.

Economic sociologists have made important contributions to the study of economic processes by pointing out the social variability of economic institutions and their interrelations with other social phenomena. Yet the ways in which they have worked out these ideas lend themselves to criticism. Economic sociology, too, shows a tendency toward *Vorschriftenreduktion*, which either takes the form of isolating the object of study—e.g. an industrial firm—from the wider, changing social context (this tendency is particularly strong in industrial sociology (18)), or of reducing social developments to transitions from one stable stage into another. Thus, modernisation theories typically take as their starting-point a dichotomy of "traditional" and "modern"; modernisation is subsequently defined as the transition from the first to the second stage (e.g. Lerner 1958; cf. Elias 1969b, XIV ff.). By taking "modernity" as a fixed category, it is intimated that "modern" societies
are basically similar, and not changing fundamentally anymore.

Much of economic sociology - particularly in the perspective of structural functionalism (Parsons and Smelser 1956; Smelser 1963) - leans heavily toward "idealism", although this is never expressed as a conscious theoretical preference. Economic institutions are conceived primarily as clusters of normative role expectations regulating economic activities. Similarly, economic motivations are conceived as "value-orientations" acquired by socialisation, and not related directly to human interdependencies (Parsons 1940).

This strain of "idealism" is connected with a tendency to neglect power differences, especially as these take the form of conflict-generating exploitation. In so far as power has a place in this type of analysis, it is seen mainly as derivative from the normative role structure, as social control functionally necessary for ensuring conformity, or as a means for attaining collective goals.

In economic sociology there is also a tendency toward reification: human figurations are often split up into impersonal, seemingly nonhuman "variables", "factors", or "elements" - such as norms, values, attitudes, roles - which are synthesized in holistic but still impersonal concepts like "structure" or "system".

Since the end of the 1960's, structural functionalism has been increasingly discredited, and economic sociology, like other subdisciplines, is no longer dominated by it anymore. Yet a clear alternative, a new and more adequate perspective covering the whole range of economic sociology, has not been developed until now. The only effort to give economic sociology paradigmatic unity and coherence came from structural functionalism. In this sense the dissolution of structural functionalism has brought about the dissolution of economic sociology.
Figurational sociology agrees with some of the Marxist criticisms of conventional economic sociology: its one-sided emphasis on norms and values, its neglect of unequal, more or less exploitative power relations, and its implicit conceptualisation or "modernity" as the end stage of social development.

However, figurational sociology rejects the suggestion that the only alternative to this "bourgeois" approach would be Marxism. It is not necessary to choose between "idealism" and "materialism". Not only is it possible to give "ideal" and "material" factors about equal weight in the explanation of social developments (as Weber attempted to do), but the whole dichotomy of material or economic base and ideal superstructure is itself assailable. First, the implication that the economic sphere is material as opposed to "ideal" or "spiritual" is misleading, - as if men could perform economic activities mindlessly (Elias 1971, 149 ff.). Secondly, both political and affective interdependencies do not have a clear place in this dichotomy.

As stated before, economic, political, affective, and cognitive processes are all to be regarded as structured, relatively autonomous, and at the same time highly interconnected. According to this view, there is no determinant base, economic or otherwise. Explanations of social change cannot be, therefore, reductions of one type of social change to another.

Some Marxists - for instance, the structuralist school of Althusser *cum suis* - recognize the relative autonomy of political and "cultural" developments. Still they maintain the distinction of base and superstructure, claiming that "in the last instance" - to use Engels's famous phrase - the economic development is decisive. The meaning of this and similar statements is highly obscure (Pels 1971). Actually they reflect a not very successful effort to do justice to empirical facts (which makes straightforward determinism impossi-
ble), and at the same time to save the identity of Marxism as a distinct, even oppositional perspective (which makes the dogmatic reaffirmation of determinism almost inevitable).

The same dilemma between empiricism and dogmatism in Marxism arises when it has to assess the significance of social changes in capitalist societies during the last hundred years. Empirically it has to recognize important changes in the composition of classes, the position of workers and bourgeoisie, the role of the state. Theoretically it can only maintain its original position by stressing the still capitalist nature of Western societies and concluding that therefore class relations have not changed "essentially". This essentialism is, again part of a "strategy of immunization" against empirical criticism.

The same difficulty appears in the ambiguous use of the concept of power. On the one hand, changes in the power relations in capitalist societies are sometimes recognized - be it only implicitly - in so far as they can be interpreted as positive results of the class struggle. On the other hand, however, the dichotomous and absolutist conceptualisation of "power" is maintained, implying that "the power" rests in one group: the ruling class. Once it is recognized unambiguously that power-dependence relations are a matter of degree, it is not difficult to observe that the power balance of bourgeoisie and working class has shifted in favour of the latter.

6. Conclusion

What conclusions may be drawn with respect to the paradigmatic significance of figurational sociology for the study of economic processes? Does it offer a potentially more adequate view than other perspectives? In view of the argument developed in this paper, this question can be answered in the affirmative, I think. However, some qualifications must be added.

The question, and therefore the answer, only makes sense in so far as figurational sociology
and the other perspectives are orientated to the same kind of problems, or, in other words, are to be regarded as competing views. Figurational sociology is in competition with Marxism - in so far as this claims to be a social science - as well as with conventional economic sociology (except for some highly technical parts of industrial sociology), but far less with the greater part of economics. I will return to this.

Furthermore, if figurational sociology's view of economic processes is relatively adequate compared to other views, it is also rather empty, not substantiated by important empirical findings. As stated at the beginning of this paper, figurational sociology can prove its superiority in this field only by developing substantial theory based on empirical research.

If figurational sociology develops substantial theory on economic processes, it will profit from what has been done already - by sociologists, Marxists, economic historians, and also by economists. Especially the work by sociologically oriented, 'institutional' economists, like Schumpeter, Myrdal, Galbraith, Heilbroner, and Hirsch, cannot be neglected (19). In sum, figurational sociology's originality must not be overemphasized. It will show its distinctiveness in the field of economic processes not by the outright rejection of other theories, but rather by modifying and correcting them into a more adequate language, and integrating them into a more general perspective. In this way, it offers a potential substitute for both Marxism and conventional economic sociology.

The conclusion for economics is different. On the one hand, the type of research and theoretical activities common in economics are further removed from figurational sociology and, at first sight, much more vulnerable to its criticism. On the other hand, figurational sociology cannot pretend to provide a competing alternative, not even potentially and in the long run. First, as suggested above, economic processes in modern societies, to a much larger extent than other social
processes, are indeed conceivable as quantitative variables. This is one of the specific qualities of economic processes in modern societies which justify a distinct, "economic" approach.

Moreover, modern economics is more policy-oriented and policy-relevant than sociology. Models which specify relations between quantitative variables can be extremely useful for policy-makers: if one or more of the variables can be manipulated directly, the model indicates ways to influence the other variables. Since the policy-makers themselves are not included in the models, they can use them freely as problem-solving instruments. Because of their alleged capacity for suggesting solutions to widely recognized problems, economic models are often used in public discussions too, even if they are imprecise and largely speculative. Economics has developed into a largely applied science because many problems in its field are clear, specific, and commonly defined as problems to be solved - e.g., profits and investment possibilities for commercial firms, national output and unemployment for national states, and so on.

As far as the relevance for the solution of short-term, publicly recognized problems in the economic sphere is concerned, no sociology - whatever its perspective - can compete with economics. Even more than other sociological styles, figurational sociology is detached from immediate, pressing problems. Its relevance must be sought in the intellectual clarification of basic social issues. By its more detached, more fundamental approach it may hope to contribute to a better solution of long-term problems, but this promise is not the surest way to public success.

The main problem for the development of substantial theory with respect to economic processes from the perspective of figurational sociology is that this perspective gives only vague indications of what to investigate and how to do it. Aside from the body of substantial theory it has developed until now, figurational sociology mainly consists of programmatic statements which have paradigmatic significance, but do not form a paradigm in itself. Abov
all, they have a critical function, - they can show the inadequacies in other perspectives.

In this paper I have tried to show the importance of this critical function with respect to various approaches of economic processes. To what extent figurational sociology will develop its own approach and theory in this field, remains to be seen. But it is something to work for.

Notes

1. This claim is gaining growing recognition, at least in the Netherlands. Cf. Flap and Kuiper (1979).

2. "Paradigm" may be defined loosely as a scientific perspective - consisting of general concepts, research methods, and substantial theory -, which gives indications of the problems to be investigated (cf. Kuhn 1970).

3. The view that civilising processes are relatively autonomous and have, in turn, an influence on economic processes, has never been advanced explicitly by figurational sociologists. However, this view is in accordance with figurational sociology's theoretical position, which is anti-reductionist, and with its empirical findings. For example, the increasing refinement of table manners in French court society in the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries as described by Elias (1939, I, esp. 133-174) was relatively autonomous to the extent that its dynamics was not a corollary of economic and political developments. (This is not to deny that the refinement of manners was related to the competition for status and power; see also Elias 1969a.) One might suggest that the relative autonomy of civilising processes depends on the extent to which the "carrying" groups are in a position of relative freedom from work obligations, economic insecurity, and physical threats.

4. The impression that the economic development, after all, is the determinant base of social development is given in the Elias-inspired textbook by Hurd et al. (1973). Cf. Van Heerikhuizen, 89.

5. Goudsblom (1977b, 198-9) has made a similar distinction between four "problems of social existence". The distinction goes back, probably, to one made by Elias in a lecture held in Amsterdam, autumn 1973. Elias suggested then four basic human needs: for food and shelter; for physical safety; for sex and sociability; and for orientation.

6. The identification of the economy with the production and distribution of material goods, still quite common in the
nineteenth century (Schumpeter 1954, 625 ff.), is rejected by modern economists. They tend to define their science and its object more analytically; the economy, they say for instance, consists of human activities in so far as these involve the choice between and the selective use of scarce, alternatively applicable means (cf. Belshaw 1919, ch. 1). This shift in economic thought since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reflects the economic development itself: "nonmaterial production" became more important both for consumption and for the organization of material production. Still, the activities of production and distribution of material goods may be regarded as the "hard core" of the economies even of modern societies, since they are a) monetarized more thoroughly than other activities, b) more important, on the whole, for the satisfaction of basic human needs than "services", c) interconnected with activities of "nonmaterial" production (administration, planning, information) which are instrumental with respect to them.

7. In view of the changes and varieties in economic thought, the attempt to identify these assumptions and styles of thought is risky (see also section 5 on this problem). Specifically, figurational sociology is compared here with economics as taught at Western universities during the last few decades. Ideas central to this kind of economics are to be found most easily in widely used textbooks, such as Samuelson (1964, and other editions). A comprehensive survey of economic thought in earlier periods is given by Schumpeter (1954).

8. This has been advanced most emphatically by Marx (1867) and his followers. As Marx recognized, the justification was often only implicit - by taking for granted laissez-faire private property, and class distinctions (cf. Schumpeter 1954, 544-554).

9. One example is the Cobb-Douglas function concerning the distribution of national income between capital and labour, and its various derivations and modifications (Pen 1971, 190 ff.).

10. These models are developed nowadays by economic planning departments of national governments, such as the Central Plan Bureau in the Netherlands.

11. Some economic treatises contain expressions of a similar tendency - toward the personification of collectivities. See for instance the definition of economics given by Samuelson (1964): "Economics is the study of how men and society choose, with or without the use of money, to employ scarce productive resources to produce various
commodities over time and distribute them for consumption, now and in the future, among various people and groups in society" (p. 11, italics deleted).

12. The thesis of the growing interdependence between different classes or strata in Western societies during the last few centuries has been advanced by Elias (1970, 69-74), among others. A statistical analysis of changes in the distribution of wealth in Britain is given by Atkinson (1974). I myself have tried to give a sociological interpretation of similar changes in the Netherlands (Wilterdink 1977). A new interpretation of the "rise of the new middle class", the "separation of ownership and control" and the "managerial revolution" has been offered recently by Gouldner (1979).

13. Marshall and Walras were among the more sophisticated constructors of static equilibrium models around the turn of the century. Schumpeter, in his history of economic thought, makes a sharp distinction between static methods (which he deems acceptable) and the perception of economic reality as static (which he rejects). However, he also points out that static method and static reality were often confused, and, moreover, that the static models were abstract constructions far removed from reality. Schumpeter (1954), 562-3, 963-971.

14. Functionalist explanations of the division of labour and the use of money are often found in economic textbooks. See e.g. Samuelson (1964), 49-53.

15. A similar dichotomy is sometimes suggested: between individual market actions and the impersonal institutional framework, which is not conceived in terms of interdependent and acting human beings. This is a specification of the, false though widespread, dichotomy of "individual" and "society", in which the first is "de-socialised" (i.e. stripped of interdependencies), the latter "de-humanised" or reified (Elias 1970, 9 ff.). In sum, economists are inclined to define social processes outside the market either as thing-like institutions or as organised planning; in other words, either to reify these processes or to see them as the direct outcome of human intentions (see also notes 11 and 14).

16. A well-known theory of the business cycle is Kondratieff's. Colin Clark and others have analysed changes in the composition of the working population. An influential economic growth model has been developed by Robert M. Solow. Sociologists like Aron (1962) and Bell (1973) have incorporated economic growth theories in their interpretations of economic developments.
17. The contradictions are to a large extent ideological. Modernisation theories tended to legitimise the inequality between rich and poor countries by minimising international interdependencies and power differences, and by overstressing the internal "backwardness" of non-Western societies, induced by traditional culture. It was suggested, in this way, that Western society was the superior model to be followed by all other societies. Dependencia or world system theories, partly based on the older Marxist (and leninist) theory of imperialism, were developed in opposition to these ideology-bound modernisation theories. In their criticisms, authors like Andre Gunder Frank often overreacted by representing the Western, capitalist powers as the sole determinants (and therefore as exclusively guilty) of non-Western poverty. Cf. Vellinga (1979).

18. As exemplified by the famous Hawthorne studies and late research in the Human Relations tradition. Cf. Parker et.al. (1967), 105-9; Goudsblom (1977b), 123-4.

19. Their ideas have historical links with Veblen's institutional economics and the German Historical School around the turn of the century, represented by men like Schmoller, Sombart, Spiethoff, and Weber.

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