Process Sociology and the Global Ecological Crisis

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This article is part of a series on process sociology, which was compiled and edited by Alexandros Koutsoukis and Andrew Linklater (before his untimely passing).

As the effects of the global ecological crisis become increasingly more evident, there have been growing calls within International Relations (IR) for the discipline to develop more sophisticated theoretical and analytical frameworks that are capable of encompassing the role of human/non-human nature relations in world politics (see: Cudworth and Hobden 2011; Burke et al. 2016; Harrington 2016; Hamilton 2018; Corry 2019; Pereira and Saramago 2020; Kurki 2020, to name a few examples). These calls have emphasized the need for IR to overcome its tendency to treat non-human nature as something separate from human social processes, forming little more than the background for human dramas. Instead, the argument is that there is a growing need to recognize the fundamental embeddedness of human life and social world in non-human nature and the inescapable developmental interweaving of the human and the non-human parts of the universe.

Process sociology provides a particularly compelling approach to theorize and analyse these relations. It frames human/non-human nature relations in the long-term process of evolution on Earth in a way that recognizes the fundamental embeddedness of humans in nature, while avoiding a reductionist perspective that sees human behaviour and social processes as simply the causal outcome of natural-biological processes. It adopts an approach that emphasizes the unity of humans and nature, while highlighting evolved, distinguishable features of the human species that have allowed it to play a key, and frequently destructive, role in the recent ecological history of the Earth (Elias 2011).

These evolved features, such as the vocal apparatus and cortical brain dominance, have permitted human communication and learning to occur through the production and reception of sound-patterns that are not predominantly genetically determined, as is the case with other animals (Elias 2011: 71). Human beings thus possess a unique capacity to produce symbolically codified stocks of knowledge about their world and their conditions of existence that function as means of behavioural orientation that can be passed on between generations (see, Linklater 2019). Symbolic communication permits humans to develop learning processes about the world that can be symbolically codified into an ever-expanding fund of knowledge that orientates their control of external non-human nature, and its manipulation towards human ends, at a pace that far exceeds that of other species. This opened the way for the human species' preponderance, and eventual destabilizing impact, on the planet's ecosystems (see: Quilley 2004; 2011; Goudsblom 1995; Goudsblom and De Vriers 2002).

However, these same learning processes have also been argued to potentially open the way for a more reflexive relation with non-human nature; one in which humans beings learn how to more consciously control their own capacity to control non-human nature and how to orientate their activity towards the development of more ecologically sustainable forms of social organization. Described as 'ecological civilizing processes' (see Rohloff 2018; Quilley 2009, 2011), these learning processes are characterised by 'increases in self-restraint regarding consumption, [and] increases in foresight and recognition of interdependencies between humans and 'the environment'' (Rohloff 2018: 36). One of the main innovative aspects of process sociology is how it provides a theoretical framework that permits tracing the social processes regulating the development of these collective learning processes.

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From a process sociological perspective, human/non-human nature relations, and the possibility of ecological civilizing processes, are shaped by what Norbert Elias (2012) calls the 'triad of controls'. This concept refers to one of the 'universals' of human development (see Saramago 2021), i.e., a set of controls that all societies, irrespective of their context, have to exercise in order to ensure their continued survival and reproduction. The triad of controls entails: 1) control over non-human complexes of events – that is, control over 'natural events'; 2) control over interpersonal relationships – that is, over social processes; and 3) control of human beings over themselves as individuals – that is, over their internal impulses and inclinations. These three dimensions of control 'are interdependent both in their development and in their functioning', being that, for example, 'the extension of control over nature is directly interdependent with changes in both self-control and in control over interpersonal relations' (Elias 2012: 152). The triad of controls permits tracing the intertwinement of developments at the level of social relations between people, relations between human societies and external non-human nature, and people's relations with their own internal inclinations and impulses. Specifically, it permits to theoretically capture the interweaving between safety/danger ratios in human relations with non-human nature and how these influence both people's control over their internal impulses and over the social processes that they collectively constitute (Quilley 2004: 60).

The argument in this context is that, when threatened by natural phenomena that they cannot control, human beings tend to be less capable of exercising self-control over their internal affects, namely in what regards emotions of fear and insecurity. Human knowledge production about external nature and about society thus tends to be more 'involved', i.e., predominantly shaped by ego-centric concerns and by society- and time-bound perspectives (Elias 2007: 125; see also: Saramago 2020). Under these conditions, the social production of symbolically codified knowledge, on the basis of which people orientate themselves in relation to the natural and social worlds, exhibits a high level of 'fantasy-content' (Elias 2007: 137; see, Linklater 2022). It is focused on filling the gaps in knowledge with forms of 'magical-mythical' thinking that are more concerned with understanding the meaning of natural phenomena for oneself and ones' community, rather than understanding their underlying processual dynamics (Elias 2007: 137). Perceiving nature and society in a more involved and ego-centric manner blocks people's capacity to achieve a more decentred perspective, on the basis of which they might analyse natural and social processes, and develop symbolic models of these phenomena, whose focus is not so much on capturing their meaning but rather in understanding what they are, how their development is structured, and how they are connected to each other.

As such, people's capacity to orientate vis-à-vis non-human nature and society in a manner that guarantees a more adequate intervention in natural and social phenomena, and a greater degree of collective and conscious control over them, is lower under conditions of relatively high involvement than under conditions in which the balance between more involved and more detached perspectives, between fantasy-content and more decentred and reliable knowledge, has significantly tilted towards the latter. Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic – itself an unplanned process arising from deforestation and destruction of natural habitats (World Wildlife Fund 2020) – that sought to regain control over the phenomenon either by denying its existence or by adopting a nationalist isolationist response characterized by the targeting of migrants and the hoarding of medical resources, expressed such a slide towards higher levels of involvement and the development of symbolically-mediated forms of the triad of controls that embodied a higher level of fantasy-content.

From a process sociological perspective, the possibility of ecological civilizing processes thus involves a conscious and continued effort at detachment. One that permits the development of less ego-centric and more 'reality-congruent' means of orientation regarding the radical conditions of social and ecological global interdependence of human and non-human life, as well as their political and ethical implications (Saramago 2020). Such means of orientation are fundamental for the emergence of a global ecological civilizing process characterized by the development of symbolically-mediated patterns of the triad of controls oriented by values that are more congruent with the reality of global ecological interdependence, such as ecological sustainability, democratic dialogue and the stretching of people's perspectives beyond their national standpoints in decision-making processes that affect relevant human and non-human outsiders (Saramago 2020; see also: Linklater 2009: 487, 2016: Ch. 10 and 11). Such more detached perspectives would 'recognize the entire vital network of interdependencies in which human lives evolve' (Goudsblom 2002b, 414). It would imply a conception of non-human nature as a self-organizing emergent process, of which human beings are an indissociable part, and whose relations with non-human nature thus have to be oriented towards understanding its natural processual dynamics and how better human beings might

position themselves vis-à-vis those dynamics so as to ensure their own survival and flourishing while guaranteeing the sustainability of the natural processes on which all life on the planet depends. Control over nature, under those conditions, would assume less the form of domination and more the form of a 'working-with' emergent natural processes towards human-established ends (see Saramago 2020, 215)

But the process sociological perspective also notes that exactly as a consequence of the social processes mentioned above, namely the interweaving between safety/danger ratios and the involvement-detachment balance in people's perspectives of the natural and social worlds, as the effects of the global ecological crisis are increasingly felt and pose a growing threat to human beings and their societies, it becomes increasingly more difficult to develop such a more detached perspective.

Process sociology thus reserves a fundamental role for social scientists in this context. As conscious producers of more detached and less ego- and nation-centred symbolically mediated means of orientation, social scientists can play a fundamental role in promoting the widening of people's self-images and modes of attunement in ways that might underline patterns of self-restraint, control of external nature and control of social processes that are more adequate to the reality of global ecological interdependence. This entails, further, the need for a connection between the social scientific production of such means of orientation and social and political movements capable of promoting new local, national, and global patterns of the triad of controls that, codified in norms such as cosmopolitan ecological citizenship, deal with the 'disjuncture' between more involved attachments to nation-states and the need for worldwide steering mechanisms (Linklater 2016: 467). The possibility of ecological civilizing processes thus involves an arduous and potentially inter-generational effort focused both on the development of more detached analyses of humankind's ecological interdependence and on the involved assessment of the constantly changing historical potentials and limits to human activity (on the complex relation between involvement and detachment in process sociology, see: Linklater 2019b). But as Elias (2011: 174) notes, 'it is unlikely that [human beings] will find (…) anything better to do than to search for just that, for the production of better conditions of life on Earth'.

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