Process Sociology and Global Challenges: Reflections on the Covid-19 Pandemic

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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).

Anyone who encounters Elias's writings for the first time can find it hard to find an easy access point. The reason is that Elias rarely located his investigations in the wider literature or explained where they stood in the development of the social sciences. Drawing on my experience, discovering a direct link between one's research project and his major works is essential. Pulling on the relevant thread can lead to an engagement with writings which brings enormous rewards. For those who have not found the relevant link, large claims about Elias's importance for IR may seem exaggerated. One might wish it were otherwise and that Elias's work was a standard reference point (see the author's 2012 essay in E-IR). But those who support Elias's process sociology have long had a battle on their hands to find effective ways of demonstrating the value of the approach (Mennell 1998: ch. 1 provides an overview of the challenges).

This essay argues that Covid-19 provides one of the threads noted above, a link between elements of some common experiences of the effects of a global pandemic and Elias's writings. Unlike world historians such as W. H. McNeill, Elias did not discuss contagious diseases that have plagued humanity. But he underscored persistent dangers as the following passage from his last major work, *The Symbol Theory*, indicates. 'Humankind', Elias (2011: 124) observed, 'has gained the ascendancy over most of its potential rivals and enemies in the animal kingdom…(Humans) have killed, imprisoned or confined to reserves other animal species, and are just beginning to notice that rule over others entails some responsibility for them'; but 'at the level of viruses and bacilli the struggle goes on' (see also Goudsblom 1986). Those who are already familiar with Elias's writings will recognise that the above statement contains a summary of core themes in his reflections on long-term social and political development which began with his 1939 study, *On the Process of Civilization: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* . The purpose of this essay is to unpack underlying ideas that have special relevance for students of international relations with an interest in long-term perspectives. The aim is to show that the significance of Elias's writings lies in his efforts to improve the human means of orientation to the complex interdependencies between people (van Benthem van den Bergh 1996; Saramago 2015). By improving the ways in which people orientate themselves to the world, Elias argued, the social sciences can enable human groups to reduce the level of subjection to processes that largely escape their control (Linklater 2021: 22ff).

Elias's analysis of long-term processes that have affected the whole species emphasised the latter's astonishing rise to dominance on the planet. Nothing was pre-ordained on that front. The earliest proto-human and human societies were not bound to survive, let alone set in motion patterns of change that have transformed life on earth. Three points are worth making in this context. First, Elias (2011) regarded the development of language and the unique capacity for using symbols as fundamental elements of the great transformation. They facilitated the rise of unusually high levels of cooperation in the human world. Second, an associated development was the greater capacity to acquire and store knowledge that could be transmitted across the generations. Elias (2007) connected that process with shifts in the balance of power between involvement and detachment – between highly emotive immersion in the moment and the capacity to stand back from immediate fears, for example, in the attempt to outmanoeuvre

competing predatory species.

The development of a species monopoly of control of fire and of complex tools and weapons revealed how greater detachment secured long-term evolutionary advantages for human groups (Elias 2007; Goudsblom 1994). Through those shifts, they acquired greater power over the non-human world and began the journey that led to the global dominance of the species.

Third, Elias also stressed the unique human capacity for creating larger associations – the first villages, towns and states – the first 'survival units' – that preceded modern nation-states with their unprecedented collective powers. Elias highlighted the role of war in the formation of larger human associations. The formation of survival units of 'greater magnitude' was inextricably linked with recurring 'elimination contests' between societies (Elias 2008a; Elias 2012 [1939]). Viable societies of greater scale could wage more destructive forms of warfare over greater distances. The whole process led to modern 'annihilation units' that can destroy large sections of the world's population and the human habitat, thereby creating the modern danger of a 'return to the caves' (Elias 2010a: 78, 128). One of the paradoxes of human biological evolution and cultural change arose with the emergence of increased collective power. The dangers that stemmed from natural forces declined relative to the dangers that societies posed to each other in the permanent struggle for power and security.

But as already noted, the risk of viral attack had not been eliminated in the course of those processes. Moreover, one of Elias's last essays emphasised that the domination of nature created new problems for human groups (Elias 2009). A modern variant of a recurrent feature of human history had emerged, namely the subjection of societies to processes they cannot control. The overall trend towards longer and deeper social interconnections invariably exposed peoples to unforeseen crises and challenges – to unexpected international conflicts and economic upheaval but also to pandemics.

Writing in the 1980s, Elias observed that the patterns of global integration which have been ascendant in the recent period could be replaced by a dominant process of disintegration. Four specific themes in Elias's writings about the ever-shifting balance of power between centripetal and centrifugal forces have particular importance for current and future analyses of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on global directions of change.

First, according to Elias (2008b: 86-7) 'humanity' is no longer a 'beautiful' ideal but conveys the 'social reality' of 'the fast-growing interdependence of all hitherto independent subgroups of humankind'. The spread of Covid-19 confirms the point. Arguably, human awareness of the complex interconnections between people and the resulting dangers is greater than ever before.

Second, national attachments have remained dominant in the modern era, notwithstanding rising levels of global interconnectedness. As Elias often argued, the nation-state remains the primary 'survival unit' to which people turn when they fear for their survival and security. The continuing centrality of the state's traditional monopolies of power has been all too obvious in recent times, as is evident from the unrivalled capacity of state institutions to reduce social connections through enforceable lock-down strategies and border closures and, in affluent regions, in the development of vaccination programmes that, in the main, privilege the interests of citizens.

Third, Elias repeatedly stressed that concerns about national security often generate highly involved, emotive collective standpoints that make events even harder to control. The question for social-scientific investigation is whether more detached quests for what Elias (2007) called 'reality-congruent knowledge' can gain the upper hand. Put differently, the question is how far balances of power shift between blaming adversaries for creating fear and insecurity to understanding the global forces that drive societies towards relations of competition and conflict that they may not have actively desired and cannot control (Elias 2010a).

Fourth, those three points were combined in the observation that tensions often arise between inward-looking national perspectives and a more outward standpoint that has 'humanity as its horizon' (Elias 2008c: 286). Regarding Covid-19, in the coming years, tensions may increase between groups that characterise the pandemic as a national crisis (and celebrate national achievements in defeating the virus and embrace what the World Health

Organisation has called 'vaccine nationalism') and groups that stress the imperative of robust global cooperative arrangements to defeat the virus (for example, by strengthening health care systems in the world's poorest regions).

As Elias argued, balances of power between the forces of integration and disintegration are constantly shifting, whether slowly and imperceptibly or rapidly and obvious to all. Specific yardsticks are needed to track the main directions of change as accurately as possible. Elias's writings identified four criteria for ascertaining the principal social trajectories – first, whether levels of physical violence are increasing or are in decline; whether the power of individual self- restraint relative to external constraints such as the fear of punishment is increasing or decreasing; whether emotional identification between people is widening or contracting; and whether social planning that is designed to reduce the dominance of uncontrolled processes is advancing or retreating. For the most part, Elias used those ideas to describe and explain the main directions of change in so-called 'civilized' European societies. But they can be employed to track shifting balances of power between integrative and disintegrative tendencies in world politics in the modern period and in the long-term development of human societies (Linklater 2012: 229ff).

Elias used such criteria to highlight the contrasts between intra- and inter-societal relations. He argued that the empirical evidence indicated that there has been an overall, but far from even, reduction in the levels of inter-personal violence within European 'civilized' societies over several centuries. In international relations, on the other hand, the threat and use of violence have remained relatively high. In addition, there had been a general increase in the influence of self-restraint as opposed to external constraint within those societies. By comparison, levels of self-restraint in world politics have remained comparatively low. Elias also argued that the scope of emotional identification had widened in 'civilized' societies and that social planning had increased in tandem. In world politics, however, identification with co-nationals prevailed. 'Humanity' was a 'blank space' on the emotional maps of most people (Elias 2010b: 18) and, as a result, global planning was severely limited, at least in comparison with national steering mechanisms.

Elias (1939) set out to explain the main directions of change over roughly five centuries in European societies. He emphasised how ideas of civilization and symbols of civilized existence such as the 'refinement' of manners had contributed to the overall course of social development. The inquiry invites detailed investigations of how collective symbols can influence the balance of power between integrative and disintegrative forces in world politics (Linklater 2019).

National symbols clearly dominate, but global symbols such as the Red Cross and figureheads such as Mandela or Greta Thunberg have strong emotional appeal for many groups. Certain questions arise about how the symbolic framing of Covid-19 (in addition to climate change or the 'climate emergency') will influence global directions. Will it be represented first and foremost as a symbol of national anxieties in the context of global interconnections? Will it symbolise the national sacrifice in a 'war' to defeat an 'invisible enemy'? Will it be portrayed as a symbol of threats to humanity that 'post-national' groups can harness to foster higher levels of transnational solidarity and to increase global planning? (see the discussion of the relationship between Covid-19, national populism and more detached or realistic assessments of human challenges in Pratt and Lutyens 2022). How will balances of power between 'national' and 'global' narratives change within societies, in the relations between international governmental and non-governmental organisations, and in world politics in the coming years? Understanding Elias's sociological perspective can equip analysts with invaluable resources as they consider such questions from a long-term perspective.

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