Shared Anxieties and Transnational Migration: Moralised Tensions in Liberal-Democratic Societies

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ALEXANDER MACK, APR 1 2023

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).

Liberal-democratic societies find themselves torn between contradictory moral imperatives. These attachments emphasise open-minded tolerance while swinging to expressions of close-minded intolerance. Current perspectives in International Relations (IR) such as securitisation understand these tensions through the conceptualisation of static slices between threats and non-threats, normal and exceptional politics. Process sociology takes a more dynamic approach to the questions of how people/groups/things become and are sustained as threats across time, by synthesising conceptualisations of relational orientation with sociologies of risk. One example of a process sociological research project is the inquiry completed by the author, which investigated the representations of transnational migration articulated by the United Kingdom (UK) and Australian Prime Ministers across a 16-year period (from 2001 to 2017). The study explored how the language of political leaders in two liberal-democratic societies fluctuated between moralised and emotionalised identifications as more open inclusive societies, as well as more closed exclusive societies. Process sociological research offers exciting possibilities for international relations students to develop innovative research that combines both a detailed methodological study with a rigorous conceptual synthesis.

Successive UK and Australian leaders mobilised shared anxieties via ambiguous representations of transnational movement, in ways that socio-psychologically fortified their respective societies. Their language propagated more idealised nationalist identifications, yet maintained commitments to humanist compassion that were shallow. The commodification of some transnational movements as more harmless, generally those which brought greater financial wealth, contrasted with more harmful interpretations of asylum seekers, refugees, boat arrivals (in the Australian case) and EU migrants (in the UK case).

UK and Australian leaders circulated more insecure orientations in their respective societies, to maintain their hold on the balance of societal power. They blamed their political opponents for fostering harmful people movements that endangered society, which in turn legitimised border protection practices. These procedures were maintained by the criminalisation and stigmatisation of transnational people movements with wider societal fears about societal institutions such as healthcare (in the UK case), and fears about societal cohesion linked to undesirable public opinion (in the Australian case). The circulation of fears widened the reasons to reject transnational movements of people (e.g. asylum seekers, refugees, boat arrivals, EU migrants), and mythologised the ‘protective’ capabilities of the leaders themselves alongside their party-government establishments.

The aim of the research was to verify the fluctuating shared anxieties of inclusive association and exclusive disassociation, which illustrate the ways in which people orientate themselves within and beyond their myriad of societal groupings. In order to substantiate those oscillations, the study reconstructed the societal processes reflected in the speeches, interviews, and press conferences of UK Prime Ministers Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Theresa May, as well as Australian leaders John Howard, Kevin Rudd, Julia Gillard, Tony Abbott and Malcolm Turnbull. This method used a combination of critical discourse analysis, with a conceptual approach that

amalgamated the models and vocabularies of process sociology developed by Norbert Elias and the strand of risk sociology advocated by Ulrich Beck.

The study advanced a sociology for shared anxieties by synthesising a common sociology of knowledge conversation about 'social anxieties' in the work of Elias (2009, 138-140) and Beck (1992, 49, 100). Despite their generational differences, they shared a mutual interest in developing a more relational process-orientated research premised on understanding the growth of webs of interdependence, knowledge development, and power balances that interconnect patterns of organisation from localised communities to wider globalised societies.

Understanding 'Us vs Them' Polarisations: Established–Outsider Relations, Normative Codes & the Involvement–Detachment Balance

In their study of the intra-state movement of people from across the UK into a small community in Leicester, Elias and Scotson (2008, 127) observed.

The more secure the members of a group feel in their superiority and their pride, the less great the distortion, the gap between image and reality likely to be; and the more threatened and insecure they feel, the more likely it is that internal pressure, and as part of it internal competition, will drive common beliefs towards extremes of illusion and doctrinaire rigidity.

They investigated the pressures of societal interdependence and practices of adaptation that constituted a shifting balance of societal power in the Winston Pava community. Older more 'established' members of the community used gossip to maintain their internalised cohesion (the I–am and we–are emotional identifications), which separated themselves from newer 'outsider' groups (Elias 2008; Mennell 1998, 115-139).

The Winston Parva study highlighted in miniature, how people in more powerful established positions in society come to feel 'secure' in their orientations towards some groups of people. Often, this was accomplished via emotionally charged appeals to certain societally recognised values that expressed more 'insecure' representations, and legitimised their practices towards less powerful outsider groups.

The patterns of emotional identification that swing across the spectrum of secure and insecure orientation noted by Elias and Scotson are applicable at wider degrees of societal integration, from smaller communities to larger societies, and the extensive varieties of multi-layered human organisation. In current times, 'cheap transport and increased mobility over longer distances, have made it still more common throughout the world for displaced groups to impinge on older established groups' (Mennell 1998, 124).

Liberal-democratic societies and their party-political establishments are confronted with the pressures of globalised interdependences, and corresponding anxieties that are often expressed through different moral imperatives. These overlapping, interweaving attachments encompass the duality of nation-state normative codes (Elias 2013, 169-170; c.f. Beck 2006, 73-74). The tensions between a humanist-egalitarian code that prioritises attachments to people, and a collective-nationalist code, which emphasises state-society as the highest corresponding values.

Leader language offers a window into the overall direction of societal change by tracing the balance of humanist and nationalist attachments across the involvement–detachment balance. This is an open spectrum of more involved subject–oriented magical-mythical beliefs, in elastic tension with the growth of more detached object–orientated verifiable knowledge (Elias 2007; Mennell 1998, 160).

Fortified Relations in the Language of Tony Blair & John Howard

Remarks by UK and Australian Prime Ministers Tony Blair and John Howard illustrate more fortified relations that raised the barriers of inclusion and widened degrees of exclusion between party-government establishments, and asylum-seeker outsiders. This was through representations that mobilised shared anxieties via appeals to both humanist and nationalist normative codes along the involvement–detachment balance.

During a 2005 press conference, Blair raised concerns that.

Britain is again open for business on asylum claims that are not genuine……this country is a tolerant country and I wouldn't want it on my conscience…sending people back to torture…..And we are worried, having really battened down the hatches on the asylum system and managed to get real progress so that the claims are now a quarter of what they were three years ago.

His remark articulated humanist-egalitarian attachments towards a UK that is a 'tolerant' place for asylum seekers fleeing persecution, and the weight of his own conscience. Blair oscillated towards collective-nationalist commitments to protect society from deceitful claims by reducing the numbers of those applications. He also mythologised asylum seekers using a 'battened down the hatches' storm analogy, and the capacities of his government to withstand such pressure.

Comments by Howard in 2002 demonstrated a similar overall pattern.

We're a lot more open and less arbitrary than other countries and it's one of the reasons why many people in this country get angry when the critics of the Government's [asylum seeker] policy talk about how harsh and inhumane we are…..we are in the process of maintaining the integrity of a border protection system and people are trying to break it, there are people in Australia who are political activists as well as lawyers and they're trying to break it.

He propagated idealised human-egalitarian beliefs about the relative openness of Australian society, and rejected criticism that his government was 'harsh' and 'inhuman' towards asylum seekers. Howard's remark gave greater emphasis to collective-nationalist attachments via the condemnation of 'political activists' and 'lawyers' for threatening the preservation of Australia's 'border protection system'.

Each statement circulated more insecure orientations that expressed lower degrees of mutual identification with asylum seekers, through the dissemination of more involved beliefs of the party-government establishments represented by Blair and Howard themselves. Blair's objectification of asylum seekers into reducible figures foreshadowed David Cameron's net migration pledge to reduce overall numbers of human movement into the UK. Howard's language set the tone for future leaders such as Tony Abbott to attack any form of assessment and evaluation about Australia's offshore detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island from the UNHCR.

Conceptualising Securing–Insecuring Processes

Understanding the securing and insecuring processes that situate relations between established and outsider groups in contemporary societies connects with the work of securitisation researchers. Efforts by the 'Paris School' have highlighted how the mutual constitution of security and insecurity practices informs the legitimation struggles conducted by professional and political groups (see Bigo and Tsoukala eds 2008; for a wider overview see Balzacq et. al. 2016, 498). Yet, the concept of securitisation remains entangled in static either/or polarisations between threats and non-threats, as well as presumptions of normal versus exceptional societal relations (for the later see Aradau 2004; Austin and Beaulieu-Brossard 2018).

In contrast, a process sociological approach redirects attention towards understanding the fluctuations that maintain and/or expand certain power balances. This more dynamic outlook would investigate how more insecure representations of threat/non-threat regarding certain people, groups and/or things, become normalised and habituated modes of emotional identification over the course of time.

More broadly, understanding the development of secure and insecure orientations opens the space for a wide range of interconnected studies. These inquiries would investigate the management of risks, organised violence, and surveillance. The *first* avenue builds connections with sociologies of risk, concentrating on the management of uncertainties and the links between knowledge processes and emotional regulation (see Mack 2021). The *second* could explore the practice of organised violence, how certain societal groups have secured themselves through regulations and deregulations on violence, for example see Dunning (2016) and Linklater (2016). The *third* avenue

might study the growth of legal-political establishments and their technologized management of particular outsider groups, which amalgamates research on moral panics, and algorithmic surveillance (Critcher et. al. eds 2016; Amoore 2013).

Each of these options develops from the open question of how people and their societies have orientated themselves across time. The responses direct IR researchers towards an investigation of the sociological and psychological balances between people. There are inspiring opportunities for further research in IR through process sociology.

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