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Norbert Elias, Process Sociology and International Relations

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ANDREW LINKLATER, MAY 29 2012

The influence of social theory on the study of international relations has been profound in recent years, and interest in historical sociology continues to grow. Many scholars have used concepts and perspectives in those fields to advance their area of specialisation. More often than that, they have imported modes of analysis that have not been used explicitly to understand international relations. They have looked to scholars who are not specialists in the discipline and who display little, if any, familiarity with the relevant literature. What is found attractive in their work is not their existing explanation of international relations or world politics then, but methods and orientations that are regarded as valuable for advancing the field.

Norbert Elias is an interesting exception to the general trend because over approximately six decades his writings returned repeatedly to the problem of violence in relations between states although, admittedly, his work did not display much familiarity with the IR literature and it is frustratingly difficult to establish whether or not he had read the early 'classics'. Reflections on state-building and war ran through his first major work, *The Civilizing Process*, which was first published in Switzerland in 1939. They were central to one of his last works, *Humana Conditio* (University College Dublin Press, 2010 published with *The Loneliness of the Dying* in the same volume) which was based on a lecture on nuclear weapons that was delivered in 1985. Reflections on war and international politics appear in what might seem unlikely places, namely in books on the sociology of sport, on social constructions of time, and on changing attitudes to dying and death. But that is in itself revealing. It indicates that Elias believed that 'the international' had to feature in all dimensions of social and political inquiry.

Elias criticised Sociology because it remained overly attached to the study of 'society', and was slow to recognise that domestic and international forces were closely interwoven. Many contemporary developments were played out at the global level and affected humanity as a whole. Elias did not comment on the study of international relations but it is probable that he would have regarded much of the literature as flawed albeit in a different way. The tendency to consider international relations 'as a domain apart' – to use Waltz's phrase – would have struck Elias as damaging to the field. Although he may have agreed with much of Waltz's substantive analysis – more will be said about his relationship with realism later – he would almost certainly have regarded his basic methodological orientation as misguided. To explain why that is so, it is necessary to turn to the key features of Elias's conception of process sociology – but not before providing a brief overview of his life.

Elias was born in Breslau, Germany in 1897, and died in Amsterdam in 1990. Initially a student of philosophy and medicine, Elias was drawn towards the new field of Sociology, and was for a time Karl Mannheim's personal assistant in the Department of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt. In 1933, shortly after Hitler's rise to power, Elias left Germany for Paris and then London where he completed, *The Civilizing Process*. Over the next quarter of a century, Elias published little although he continued to refine his thesis about the civilising process. He was an academic 'outsider' who did not hold a permanent university position until 1954 when, at the age of 57, he was appointed to a post in the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester. In the last thirty years of his life, Elias published prolifically, and his work has gradually been recognised as one of the most significant contributions to sociological thought in the twentieth century.

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Elias was a master of intellectual synthesis, and his work is of special interest to those who have synthetic or interdisciplinary leanings (although the two are not the same, and much interdisciplinary work promotes not synthesis but the exact opposite, namely additional specialisation or what Elias called, in a caustic phrase, 'pseudo-specialisation'). Scholarship, he argued, was in danger of increasing compartmentalisation, and scholars with failing to make connections across different disciplines in a mutually-intelligible language as part of a collective quest to understand very long-term human developments. That was the express purpose of what Elias called 'process sociology'.

In an important essay entitled, 'The retreat of sociologists into the present', Elias lamented the shortening of horizons in the discipline, with some research focusing on as little as a ten-year period. Enlightening though that work might be, the specific area was not placed in longer-term perspective. The analyst could only hope to understand the period in question by taking the broadest standpoint. But Elias did not grant a privileged position to the academic study of history. While remarking on major breakthroughs in the social sciences that would not have occurred without specialist works of history, Elias criticised many academic historians on two grounds. First, the tendency to select topics of manageable proportions led to the isolation of specific events, periods or eras. Their position within longer processes of development was lost from view. Second, a great deal of academic history did not set out to show what the analysis of particular events, periods and eras contributed to understanding long-term developments in human societies (See Elias's *An Essay on Time*, University College Dublin Press, 2007).

It is necessary to ask whether Elias set himself an impossible task, or suffered from nostalgia for an intellectual synthesis that was perhaps still feasible in the early part of the twentieth century – as Weber's writings demonstrated – but is idealistic or impracticable in an age of increasing specialisation. Many years must be devoted to mastering particular subject-areas – such is the volume of the available literature, archival material, relevant statistical data, and so forth. Scholars add to the specialist literature in ways that are hard to reconcile with the synthetic objectives of process sociology that run the danger of superficiality – or that in Elias's words, risk incurring 'contempt'. On the other hand, in reaction against specialisation or over-specialisation, many scholars do explore connections between disciplinary and inter-disciplinary areas. They are engaged in the search for the bigger picture, and are broadly in agreement with Elias's contention that synthesis lags behind analysis in the social sciences.

All that need be added is that Elias, who was, in the main, the classic 'lone scholar', argued that a profound grasp of long-term trends would require the establishment of large research groups whose members were drawn from different disciplines and who were united in the search for an inter-generational accumulation of knowledge about human development. For Elias, that project would require not only greater synthesis within the social sciences and the humanities, but new connections between biological and sociological modes of inquiry that would cast light on the development of the human species over millions of years (see *An Essay on Time* as listed earlier, *Involvement and Detachment*, University College Dublin Press, 2007, and *The Symbol Theory*, University College Dublin Press, 2010).

Turning now to process sociology and then to Elias's approach to international relations, it is important to stress that he was concerned with rehabilitating the long-term perspectives that had been pioneered by Comte and Marx in the nineteenth century. Such standpoints had fallen from favour. They had been criticised for supporting particular notions of historical teleology and progress that had rightly been abandoned. But in the ensuing 'retreat into the present', Elias argued, 'the baby was thrown out with the bathwater'. Elias opposed his own 'processual' approach to systems-theory, and specifically to Parsonian sociology although the criticisms also apply to neo-realism. Such perspectives reflected a more general tendency in human societies to reduce the 'variable to the invariable'. Certain assumptions about the immutability of social arrangements are often built into systems-theorising (an observation that is clearly relevant in the case of Waltz's neo-realism). The core concepts in such narratives tend to be 'process-reducing'. They regard developments in particular times and places as expressions of more general laws. Elias did not deny that there are patterns, as opposed to laws, in human history, and indeed recurrent features in the relations between societies. The challenge was to understand and explain them processually.

A brief description of the general purpose of *The Civilizing Process* will explain Elias's method. The discussion will then turn to his reflections on the differences between 'domestic' and 'international' politics and to his analysis of

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rising levels of global interconnectedness and the prospects for a condition in which humanity has at least reduced if not eradicated violence.

The Civilizing Process set out a 'preliminary' explanation of how Europeans came to think of themselves as 'civilised' – as more 'civilized' than their more violent medieval ancestors and the 'savage' peoples that surrounded them. The narrative showed how the idea of civilization emerged in France in the late eighteenth century, replacing the earlier idea of civility. It therefore reminds the reader that the sense of belonging to a superior civilization is a relatively recent development, as is the idea of a civilizing imperial project to bring 'progress' to societies that were deemed to languish behind modern European societies. The reference to a civilizing process has led some readers to suppose that Elias was repeating earlier nineteenth century narratives about the gradual ascent of European peoples to a position of superiority over all others. But that was not his intention. The task was to explain the development of European self-images – not to lend them a seal of approval. Elias emphasised that China had gone through a process that was similar in some respects to the European civilizing process. Long before the Europeans, it had succeeded in 'taming the warriors' and in promoting the significant pacification of society. Moreover, Elias made it clear that his work was designed to shed light on a civilization that had entered a period of profound crisis. A 'regression to barbarism' had taken place with the rise of National Socialism, but Europeans had not been prepared for it. Confidence in their 'natural' state of civilization had blinded them to the possibility of its collapse. They had been deluded in thinking that their civilization was a condition rather than a process – and one that could crumble quickly and go into reverse.

Elias sought to explain the European civilizing process rather than to compare different civilizing processes in human history. His analysis focused on such apparently disparate phenomena as state-building and domestic pacification, the growth of commerce and urban centres that integrated people in longer webs of interconnectedness, and the increased need for self-restraint in response to the everyday challenges of living together. In the 'manners books' or guides to conduct that appeared especially in the period between the 1300s and the 1700s, Elias identified changing emotional attitudes to the basic physical realities of human existence such as eating and drinking as well as nose-blowing and spitting, and urination and defecation. What had once been socially-acceptable became a source of shame. For example, being discovered naked became a source of embarrassment. What had once been permissible became forbidden (Elias borrowed the phraseology from Caxton's late-fifteenth century treatise on courtesy). The analysis considered such phenomena as changing table manners, but on the assumption that the seemingly mundane aspects of everyday life cast light on larger patterns of change in the ways in which people were bound together. Seemingly mundane forms of conduct were revealing features of the larger social totality. The increasing use of the knife and fork was a case in point. The knife was gradually turned from a weapon into a humdrum eating utensil. That was a manifestation of the larger pacification of society, and a symbol of changing attitudes to violence. Very gradually over time – and not in a linear fashion or in a 'straight line' – people came to regard certain forms of punishment – beheading, amputation, blinding and so forth – as incompatible with their state of civilization. As part of that same movement, they came to regard judicial torture as contradicting their civilized values. Changes occurred in attitudes to capital punishment and to the public execution of criminals so that, today, opponents of the death penalty maintain that it has no place in a society that regards itself as civilized. Capital punishment was either abolished or, like the bloody slaughter of animals in the abattoir, moved 'behind the scenes' where it could not offend civilized sensibilities. The same is true of death and dying. They have been screened from view, Elias argued, along with everything else that reminds people of their 'animality' (see Elias, *The Loneliness of the Dying*, op cit).

Elias maintained that those processes were largely unplanned – they developed 'behind the backs' of those involved, as they responded to the compulsions of interdependence. He also assigned particular importance to the 'standard setting' role of the absolutist court of Louis XIV that provided ideals of behaviour to which others felt they should aspire (see Elias *The Court Society*, University College Dublin Press, 2006). Through complex processes of the colonisation of 'lower strata' and strategies of imitation in which 'social inferiors' attempted to remake themselves in the image of those who stood above them, the process of civilization spread 'downwards' and 'outwards'. As illustrated by the idea of the 'white man's burden', nineteenth-century colonial attempts to 'civilize' non-European peoples represented a recent phase in the longer-term process in which Europeans came to regard themselves as civilized, and as entitled or duty-bound to export their civilization to other peoples.

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Imperial conquest demonstrated that Europeans were prepared to use force against other peoples; they were also prepared to use force against each other. They may have made major advances in removing the danger of violence from everyday life within their respective societies, but they did not have the same taboos against using force in their external relations. Elias referred to the 'Janus-faced' nature of state-formation: signification internal pacification co-existed with the expectation of war and with preparation for the next violent competition for security or survival. His explanation was essentially realist. There is, he maintained, a high probability of war wherever societies must provide their own security. They are often drawn into conflicts that no-one desired. The explanation of geopolitical rivalry and war has some parallels with 'defensive realism'; it relies on concepts that resemble the idea of the 'security dilemma' in International Relations. In short, states do not always try to project their power as far as possible for its own sake but in order to control areas that might otherwise fall into the hands of actual or potential adversaries. Motives may have been defensive, but other states took that for granted at their peril. They too were drawn into competition for power and security by what Elias, using a phrase that had been developed by Geoffrey Bateson, called 'double-bind processes'. Whatever they did could add to their insecurity and increase the danger of war.

The idea of the double-bind was designed to highlight particular dangers in the relations between states, namely the development of 'highly-emotive' responses that portrayed the other as the 'aggressor' and led to foreign policy that increased the level of fear and mutual distrust. Rivals could lack the appropriate level of detachment from their immediate security concerns that could assist them in understanding and controlling the processes to which they were subject (see Elias, *Involvement and Detachment*, University College Dublin Press, 2007). Such dangers were largely removed from relations between people within state-organised societies. But they were ever-present in international relations where no higher monopoly of physical power has responsibility for providing security.

The use of force then in the relations between states was still permissible, and there was little prospect that it would be forbidden. Elias referred to the 'split within our civilization' in which revulsion towards those who are violent towards others in the same society co-exists with permissive attitudes towards the use of force – and often maximum force – against enemies. One could safely predict that the same 'elimination contests' that had destroyed feudal lords during the long process of European state-formation would continue to dominate international politics – and might do so, Elias believed, until a world state has monopoly control of the instruments of violence.

It would be curious, however, if the civilizing process had absolutely no influence on how the relevant societies conducted their external relations – as if their behaviour could be explained by referring, in Waltz's phrase, to the 'propelling principles' that have dominated world politics for millennia. That is an instance of process-reduction in the social sciences that Elias vehemently rejected. His own comments about how the civilizing process has influenced relations between states were relatively-underdeveloped but they included the observation that civilized peoples were shocked by the Nazi genocides – appalled by the scale of the atrocities and by the realisation that one of their number – namely another technologically-advanced civilized European society – had presided over mass murder on an industrial scale. Developing the point further, it is hardly surprising that the Allies prosecuted war criminals in Tokyo and Nuremberg in the name of 'civilization'. Appeals to the values of 'civilized' peoples had been central in the development of the earlier humanitarian laws of war. It is unremarkable that self-defining civilized societies created the Genocide Convention and promoted the human rights culture. Nor is it surprising those values have been central to the development of the more recent idea of 'the responsibility to protect', to parallel innovations in international criminal law, and to the very difficult questions that surround the notion of humanitarian intervention.

In the 1980s, Elias observed the individual has gradually acquired a status in international law that was once monopolised by sovereign states. He referred to the Chernobyl incident as an example of new challenges in world politics that require higher levels of inter-state cooperation and the establishment of 'unions of states'. But loyalties to existing nation-states had a 'drag effect' on efforts to create new forms of political association. Old rivalries and suspicions had not exactly disappeared. During the so-called Second Cold War, Elias believed there was a very real danger of a war between the superpowers that could end in a 'return to the cave'.

Elias argued that whether or not such a conflict came about, it was clear that 'elimination struggles' between states were reaching 'the end of the road'. Societies faced pressures to tame violence in their relations with each other. Rising levels of global interconnectedness created incentives to develop 'social standards of self-restraint' that were

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unusual or unprecedented in the history of international relations. Humanity had entered what might prove to be a very early stage in a long process of global integration that could lead to a civilizing process that removes the danger of war. But there were no guarantees. Tensions had not come to an end. Civilized restraints could well break down if people became anxious once again about their security or survival. Disintegration could follow integration; future 'decivilizing thrusts' could not be ruled out (see *The Symbol Theory*, op cit).

Students of international relations may ask where Elias's writings 'belong' in the discipline. Where should they be located? Do they fall naturally into one or other of the main perspectives? The simple answer is that those writings would seem to have most in common with realism in the sense of emphasising the tragic qualities of international relations and the dangers that are intrinsic to the state of anarchy. But his main works have nothing in common with 'human nature' arguments of the kind that Waltz rejected in his critique of 'first image' thinking. They have nothing in common with the systemic approach to world politics that Waltz developed in the 1970s in opposition to 'reductionist' or 'inside-out' explanation. Suffice it to add that realist themes surface throughout Elias's writings but they must be seen in conjunction with his processual approach to the study of society and specifically with his explanation of the process of civilization.

There are interesting affinities between Elias's process sociology and the English School analysis of international society. Adam Watson and others have referred to the 'civilizing' role of diplomacy and other institutions of international society, although the choice of terms does not appear to have been influenced by reading Elias's writings on the civilizing process. Martin Wight maintained that every society of states developed within a particular civilization, a comment that invites the question of how the civilizing process of the societies involved shaped, and were shaped by, international society. English School reflections on the 'standard of civilization' are especially noteworthy, not least because they cast light on how the civilizing process that Elias set out to explain influenced the society of states in the nineteenth century. As students of human rights, democracy-promotion and liberal-inspired economic globalisation have shown, the standard of civilization has not disappeared from view but has been constantly renewed along with distinctions between the 'civilized' establishment and 'uncivilized' outsiders (for Elias's discussion of such discussions, see Norbert Elias and John Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, University College Dublin Press, 2008). All such investigations can be usefully linked with Elias's inquiry into the relationship between the civilizing process and the continuous transformation of human society.

The absence of any reference to international society is one of the main shortcomings of Elias's process sociology. He referred to the 'supranational' court society of the early modern period but seemed to assume that it more or less disappeared as a result of state-formation and specifically because of bourgeois nationalism. He did not discuss the respects in which diplomacy was part of the civilizing process, and one of the many ways in which the French absolutist court was 'standard-setting'. There was little discussion of how distinctions between the 'civilized' and the 'savage' were integral to the development of international society. Elias undoubtedly knew that people did not define themselves as civilized and then turn to the question of how they should behave towards other peoples. As far back as the eleventh century, the antecedents of modern notions of civilization developed in the course of relations with those who were deemed to be less civilized in the same society and in the wider world. That was apparent from the early phases of English state-formation and was critical to the 'medieval expansion' which Elias commented on (in connection with the crusades) and to Europe's overseas conquests. To build on Elias's work, it is necessary to analyse how ideas of civilization emerged as part of the interconnected development of modern states, overseas empires and European international society. Closer links between process sociology and the English School (which incorporates many of the realist themes that can be found in Elias's writings) are needed to explain that process in detail.

It is important to stress that there is no more to Elias's writings than a distinctive variation on realism or a standpoint with some broad affinities with English School inquiry. Elias had a particular conception of the social sciences that combined 'non-partisan' analysis with certain Enlightenment aspirations that were drawn from the writings of Comte and Marx. Such affinities raise questions about the relationship between Elias's perspective and the 'broad church' of critical international theory.

There is considerable antipathy in Elias's writings to the scholarly involvement in political struggles that jeopardised

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the acquisition of 'reality-congruent' knowledge (for understandings that may not be absolute but appear, by the standards of the time, to reflect reality). Hopes and aspirations for the future could contaminate the analysis of the social world. Sociology had therefore to embark on the 'detour of detachment' which involved the assiduous commitment to non-partisan scholarship. But it is detour rather than an end-point. Through the detour of detachment, Elias believed, humans can acquire a more realistic understanding of their world that might enable them – as a species – to control processes that had for the most part developed in unplanned ways. In one passage in his writings, he argued – in a formulation that is surprisingly close to the spirit of Frankfurt School critical theory – that the central challenge is to distinguish between the restraints that are necessary for people to live together relatively amicably, and the restraints that do no more than maintain the domination of specific interests. Elias's sympathies were with society's 'outsiders'. Normative themes ran through his writings. They are evident in his claim that people would belong to a 'very advanced civilization' if they could live together non-violently without the need for external coercion, and if they could rely on the power of self-restraint alone. He added that such a condition is unattainable at present, and may never be achieved, but it was important to attempt to move in that direction. It was not impossible, Elias argued, that people will learn in the millions of years that lie ahead how to co-exist without the levels of violence that have run through the history of human development.

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Andrew Linklater is Woodrow Wilson Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. He previously taught at the University of Tasmania, at Monash University in Australia, and at Keele University where he was Dean of Postgraduate Affairs. His main publications include the books, *Men and Citizens in the Theory of International Relations* (MacMillan 1982/1990), *Beyond Realism and Marxism: Critical Theory and International Relations* (MacMillan 1990), *The Transformation of Political Community: Ethical Foundations of the Post-Westphalian Era* (Polity Press 1998), *Key Concepts in International Relations – a five-volume collection of major articles in the study of international relations* (Routledge 2000); *The English School of International Relations* (2006) (co-authored with Hidemi Suganami), Cambridge 2006, *Critical Theory and World Politics: Sovereignty, Citizenship and Humanity* (Routledge 2007) and most recently, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge 2011). He is currently completing a second book on harm which is provisionally entitled, *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems*. He is a Fellow of the British Academy, a member of the Academy of Social Sciences, and a foundation fellow of the Learned Society of Wales.

Guide to Further Reading

Those who are engaging with Elias's work for the first time can best begin by consulting J. Goudsblom and S. Mennell (eds), *The Norbert Elias Reader*, Blackwell, 1989, an anthology that contains extracts from his major writings. That work can be usefully read alongside *Humana Conditio* (University College Dublin Press 2010) which is the one book that Elias devoted to international relations. But most of Elias's books make some reference to war. *The Germans* which appeared in English in 1996 (Polity Press) consists of a series of essays on the German 'regression to barbarism'. But the sections on the state and nationalism should interest students in International Relations.

The Civilizing Process is essential reading in order to acquire a deeper understanding of Elias's sociological perspective. It is a long and demanding book that repays close and repeated reading. Andrew Linklater and Stephen Mennell provide a summary of core themes in their 2010 article in *History and Theory* (volume 39).

University College Dublin Press is publishing the definitive version of Elias's complete writings in eighteen volumes (see www.ucdpress.ie). The revised version of *The Civilizing Process* will appear in the summer of 2012. The 2000 Blackwell Press edition is currently available.

As for the secondary literature, Stephen Mennell's *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, University College Dublin Press 1998, is a magisterial introduction to Elias's sociology. Robert van Krieken, *Norbert Elias*, Sage 1998 is also invaluable. A more specialist work that is especially useful for students of international relations is Jonathan Fletcher,

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Violence and Civilization: An Introduction to the Work of Norbert Elias, Polity Press, 1997. S. Loyal and S. Quilley (eds) *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*. Cambridge University Press, 2004 is a showcase for different disciplinary engagements with Elias's writings.

Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-Philosophical Sociology*, Routledge 2007 provides an advanced introduction to Elias's distinctive conception of sociological inquiry. Also important is Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes forthcoming work, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process*, Continuum 2013.

There is a substantial literature especially in Dutch, French and German on Elias. Some examples are Hermann Korte, *Über Norbert Elias*, Leske and Budrich 1997 and Florence Delmotte, *Norbert Elias : La Civilization et L'Etat*, Editions de L'Université de Bruxelles, Paris 2007.

On the subject of Elias and international relations the first book on that subject was Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, *The Nuclear Revolution and the End of the Cold War: Forced Restraint*, MacMillan 1992. See also Andrew Linklater, 'Process Sociology and International Relations', *The Sociological Review* in 2011 (59), and his most recent book (see author's biographical information below) that draws heavily on Eliasian process sociology.

The very useful Newsletter, *Figurations* which is published by the Norbert Elias Foundation can be consulted at <http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/>.

The new e-journal, *Human Figurations: Long-Term Perspectives on the Human Condition*, available at <http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/blog/?p=566>, will publish articles from authors in different disciplines who share Elias's interest in understanding long-term processes. The second issue which is available as of July 2012 is devoted to Norbert Elias and International Relations.

The 2011 DVD, '*Norbert Elias: Portrait of a Sociologist*' (produced by Abram de Swaan and Paul van den Bos and available from the Norbert Elias Foundation, see details above) contains interview material and discussions that provide insights into Elias's thinking in his later years.

About the author:

Andrew Linklater was Emeritus Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. His most recent book is *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of Global Order*, Bristol University Press, 2021. He has nearly completed a book on symbols in long-term perspective, which will be published posthumously with the help of and contribution by his former student Dr André Saramago.