

The Globalization of Human Society as a Very Long-term Social Process: Elias's Theory

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Previous bipolar figurations . . . were *de facto* regional in character. . . . Hence the victor in an elimination struggle was usually confronted, sooner or later, by outsider groups with a roughly equivalent or an even higher power ratio. In the present phase of the millennial elimination struggle, all possible actors are already on stage. (Elias, 1987b: 89-90)

Any attempt to pinpoint the exact beginning of a major social transformation such as globalization is likely to prove misleading. On the one hand it is true, as Peter Worsley (1984: 1) has strikingly written, that 'until our day, human society has never existed' — but only in the sense that never before have all the possible actors been on stage at once. On the other hand, some of the processes which in this century have made the human world one have been at work in human societies as long as the species *Homo sapiens* has existed.

In a sense, the potential for a single global human society has always existed, but the occasion has not arisen until now. Human beings have always remained one single species, capable of interbreeding, communicating (not, of course, without linguistic obstacles) and learning from each other. They have filled the globe without any further biological evolution. Plants, insects, fish, birds and other animals all divided into a great number of species no longer able to interbreed, each exploiting its distinctive capacities in a particular environment, and thus filling all the different niches of the planet which could offer a living. In contrast, the single human species adapted itself to widely varying conditions on earth by means not of biological but of *cultural* differentiation.

Humans filled the earth by learning from experience and by handing on

knowledge from one generation to another. They adapted themselves to new surroundings with the help of social transformations: that is, transformations in the form of social development, and without further evolutionary transformations breaking the biological unity of the species. (Elias, 1987c: 343)¹

The long-term socio-cultural differentiation of human groups in varying degrees of competitive interdependence has been familiar to sociologists since the days of the Victorian social evolutionists. So have processes of integration into larger co-ordinated units, processes which are the other side of the coin from differentiation, the two running together in the long term, though with many complicated leads and lags over the shorter term.

These long-term processes in human history have always been a central concern in the work of Norbert Elias. In his early writings, particularly in the second volume of *The Civilising Process* (1939), he focused on what is in effect chronologically the middle part of the long-term story of globalization and its antecedents in one region of the world. That is to say, he dealt with state-formation in Western Europe and, more particularly relevant to present purposes, the formation of *systems of states* and the growth and development of inter-state balances of power in the region through warfare from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century. In his later work, he has been concerned to extend the story both backwards and forwards in time — backwards to the role of 'survival units' in human society from its earliest beginnings, and forwards to the dynamics of the nuclear balance between the global superpowers since the Second World War.²

Survival Units

The life of early humans may well have been, in Thomas Hobbes's famous phrase, 'poor, nasty, brutish and short', but it was never (as Hobbes also asserted) 'solitary'. The primal condition of society is not a war of every human being against every other; all the evidence is that humans have always lived in groups. The primal condition appears rather to have been one in which human *groups* had no protection against possible annihilation or enslavement by another, stronger, *group* than their own physical strength, weapons, and *collective* fighting capacity. In other words, people always lived together in groups which Elias calls survival units. He attributes to Marx the crucial insight into the first of the elementary functions which members of a group have to perform adequately if they are to survive as a group (Elias, 1987d: 227): the need to provide food and

other basic wherewithals of life. But there is a second essential function, that of controlling violence — whether in conflicts internal to the survival group or in conflicts between different survival groups. It is a mistake, Elias argues, to see the 'economic' function as more 'basic' than that of using and counteracting the use of violence. The two are inextricably linked in processes of social development, and indeed in the earliest and smallest survival units are performed by the same non-specialist people. Marx was right to point out that not until a food surplus was produced could there emerge a specialist class of warriors who took no direct part in the production of food. Nor for that matter could there be priests specializing in the deployment, development and transmission of knowledge. On the other hand, in the long run, a relatively high level of physical security is essential to the regular production of a food surplus. Moreover, as populations increased with sedentary agriculture, the more irreversibly 'locked in' to agricultural production did they become (Festinger, 1983: 81–2). The greater their dependence on grown as opposed to gathered food, the more dependent were agrarian survival units on defence against external marauders or the internally disruptive. An agrarian community was virtually defenceless against organized military bands, unless it could mobilize an army of its own. This, as Goudsblom (1989b: 89) has remarked, explains the apparent functional paradox of warriorhood: *'the function of warriors was to fight against other warriors'*. Thus the connection between the emergence of economic surpluses on the one hand and specialist priests and warriors on the other is reciprocal, not causally one-sided, in a process through time.

A survival unit in which there has emerged a category of people specializing in the monopolization of violence, and no longer sharing directly in other tasks such as food production, can be spoken of as a state. In his later work, Elias has reviewed the archaeological evidence of the early development of the Sumerian city-states, finding in it support for the symbiotic connection between the monopolization of the means of violence and the monopolization of taxation that he had previously emphasized in European history (1939: Vol. II, 201–25), as well as for the advance hand in hand of the differentiation of social functions, the growth of large-scale administration and store-keeping centred on the temples, and the elaboration of defensive installations (1987d: 228–9).

Over the course of human development as a whole, the overall

trend has been towards survival units larger and larger both in population and geographical extent. The trend is particularly clear if one looks at the largest survival units existing in each successive period. Taagepera (1978) has demonstrated quantitatively how, after the collapse of each of the great empires of the Old World, the next succeeding one managed to integrate a larger geographical area than its precursor. The European state-formation process, to the understanding of which Elias (1939, Vol. II) insightfully contributed in his discussion of such component processes as the 'elimination contest' between competing territorial magnates, the 'monopoly mechanism', the 'royal mechanism', and the transformation of private into public monopolies, is only one small and relatively local instance of the overall trend in world history towards bigger survival units incorporating more people and more territory. Elias recognizes that a full study of this tendency would have to deal with the great variety of competitive figurations in different continents at different stages of the development of society. Such a study would, for instance, have to show why it was that the war-leaders of sedentary populations organized as military-agrarian state-societies were eventually able to mobilize the military and economic resources to defeat recurrent invasions by migrant pre-state people, in the end quite decisively. The question is not as obvious as it may seem, and the process took longer than is sometimes appreciated. Only at the stage of development reached by European society in about the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries did the power ratios between state and pre-state societies become so great that the latter no longer posed any serious military danger to the former. Such a study would also have to look at the role of military power in state-formation processes in continents and periods beyond those Elias dealt with in the European case; such writers as McNeill (1982), Mann (1986) and Gellner (1988) have contributed more recently to this task.

Inter-state Tension Systems

Just as clear as the overall trend towards bigger survival units is the persistent differential in the use of violence within and between survival units. It is often overlooked that in Volume II of *The Civilising Process* Elias constantly draws attention to the contrast between the taming of impulses towards the use of violence *within* state-societies — a taming following from people's being *forced* to live in peace with one another (Elias, 1939: Vol. I, 201) — and the

relatively unbridled persistence of violence in relations *between* states. Yet there is always a close linkage between the two levels. Warfare, whether between the many small territories of Europe around the end of the first millennium AD or between states in the modern world, does not in Elias's view stem from any inherent and constant aggressive impulse in human beings as individuals. It stems rather from the structure of competitive figurations in which they are caught up. Thus, in the elimination contest of medieval Europe, even a peaceably-inclined individual magnate could be compelled to compete for territory because if a neighbour gained territory, even from a third party, that neighbour's resulting increased military potential would be a threat to the peaceably-inclined magnate. On the other hand, the same competitive figuration makes the process of internal pacification essential; internal dissensions are externally weakening, and internal order, organization and taxation strengthen military potential.

This two-way relationship is a continuing element in the growth of geographically more and more inclusive systems of inter-state tensions which have eventuated in the globalization of human society. Elias (1939: Vol. II, 96-104) shows how throughout the later Middle Ages, England and the various territories that were to constitute France formed a single system of tensions. The final expulsion of the English from the system permitted the further consolidation of the French kings' hold over the mainland part of the former more extensive system. The emergence of a more centralized French state in turn facilitated its further expansion eastwards, creating a new and wider system of tensions with the Valois (later, the Bourbons) and Habsburgs as the principal poles. Already by the time of the Thirty Years War in the seventeenth century, the system of tensions had spread to involve all the states of Europe. It then underwent further development through further wars. To the east, the Habsburgs and Hohenzollerns were creating empires of their own partly within and partly outside the old Imperial territory, but it was only after the Napoleonic Wars that Prussia and Austria achieved a duopoly in Germany; the war of 1866 then resulted in Austria's expulsion from the German Confederation and Prussia's hegemony over the remaining territory. The interplay of the internal and the external is seen especially clearly in the Franco-Prussian War which shortly followed and which led both to the consolidation of a single (though admittedly still federal) German state and set the scene for the two World Wars of the present century. Those are so

called because, though both began in Europe, they unfolded within a system of inter-state tensions that was for the first time truly global in reach. And out of these struggles there emerged in turn the world-wide duopolistic hegemony of the two nuclear super-powers that has been a major preoccupation of Elias's old age.

The Pacification of Global Society?

Writing on the eve of the Second World War, Elias was highly conscious of the tensions propelling the states of the world towards a global conflict, but saw the possibility that in the long term the outcome might be something like a world government.

[T]hat, in our day, just as earlier, the dynamics of increasing interdependence are impelling the figuration of state societies towards . . . conflicts, to the formation of monopolies of physical force over larger areas of the earth and thus, through all the terrors and struggles, towards their pacification, is clear enough. And . . . beyond . . . the tensions of the next stage are already emerging. One can see the first outlines of a worldwide system of tensions composed by alliances and supra-state units of various kinds, the prelude of struggles embracing the whole globe, which are the preconditions for a worldwide monopoly of physical force, *for a single central political institution and thus for the pacification of the earth.* (1939: Vol. II, 331–2, my italics)

In part, that passage still seems highly prescient, in view of the emergence after 1945 of inter-state groupings such as NATO, the European Community, the Warsaw Pact, Comecon, and some other inter-state groupings elsewhere on the globe. But in his writings since the 1960s, Elias has been far more pessimistic about his earlier vision of a single world monopoly apparatus with the capacity to punish states which breach the peace. In *Humana Conditio*, his reflections on the fortieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe (1985: 112), he sees this as more remote than ever. He rates the chances of nuclear war between the superpowers as quite high. He surveys a great many instances of 'hegemonial struggles' between state-societies from antiquity onwards, and the 'hegemonial fevers' which members of competing survival units experienced in the course of their struggles with each other. There has been no case in history, he says (1985: 68–9), where competition between great powers did not sooner or later lead to war.

This competition has been a powerful force in the globalization of human society.

The most powerful state-societies are no less constrained than the smaller, less powerful state-societies which have been drawn into their orbit. Together they form a common figuration — a structural 'clinch'. The balance of power between interdependent states is such that each is so dependent on the others that it sees in every opposing state a threat to its own internal distribution of power, independence and even physical existence. The result of the 'clinch' is that each side constantly tries to improve its power potential and strategic chances in any future warlike encounter. Every increase in the power chances of one side, however slight, will be perceived by the other side as a weakening and a setback in its own position. Within the framework of this figuration it *will* constitute a setback. So counter moves will be set in motion as the weakened side attempts to improve its chances; and these in turn will provoke the first side to make its own countermoves. (Elias, 1970: 169–70)

The parallels between this figuration and that depicted by Elias much earlier in the elimination contest between small territories in Europe are evident, but now the scale is world-wide. Indeed the boundaries between opposing power groups are no longer simply geographical lines. Throughout the world, and especially in the poorer countries of the Third World, states' internal axes of tension fall into line, as if in a magnetic field, with the axes of tension between the great powers. It is particularly clear in the case of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary movements in the republics of South America (1970: 169). Every fluctuation in power chances — between Sandinistas and Contras, for example — disturbs the balance of tensions between the great power blocs, representing a potential gain to one side, a potential loss to the other. Moreover, these struggles have economic consequences:

In highly developed and relatively prosperous societies, the dialectical threat of force does not hinder, and may even positively promote, further development and increasing social wealth; yet in any poor country the polarisation of dedicated revolutionaries and counter-revolutionaries usually leads only to further impoverishment. On close examination, aid from the great powers proves to be a mere palliative. Basically it is meant not so much to assist the development of the countries concerned as to gain supporters for one side or the other. (1970: 171)

The rather bleak view found in Elias's later writings has not gone unquestioned. Using many of Elias's own ideas, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh (1983, 1990) has arrived at a lower estimate of the chances that the rivalry between the superpowers will end in nuclear war. He argues that nuclear weapons have unintended benefits: they force the great powers to conduct themselves in a

much more prudent and restrained manner than in prenuclear times,³ and *may* possibly come to serve, in the absence of anything yet resembling a world government, as a functional equivalent at the international level of the central monopoly of violence held by states.

Both Benthem van den Bergh and Elias (1987b: 74–115) see the risk of a nuclear holocaust arising not because any group of people with the means to do so seriously wants to bring about such a war, but because the bi-polar struggle between the superpowers has assumed the form of a *double-bind figuration*. The compelling force of such an unplanned social process cannot be understood simply in voluntaristic terms — that is, in terms of the perceptions, plans and intentions of one side or the other considered alone. For the perceptions, plans and intentions of each side are in considerable part formed in response to the perceptions, plans and intentions of the other. The two sides are bound together in interdependence through the danger they pose each other. Moreover, a double-bind figuration tends to be self-escalating, not just because each accumulates more and better arms in response to the other's accumulation of arms, but also for a reason more characteristic of Elias's thinking: the reciprocal danger enhances the emotive fantasy and unrealistic ideology on both sides.

Elias's thinking about 'hegemonial fevers' in inter-state conflicts is linked in fact to two other elements in his work which at first glance may not seem relevant here: his theory of involvement and detachment in the development of knowledge and the sciences (1987b; see also Mennell, 1989: 159–99) and his theory of established-outsiders relationships (Elias and Scotson, 1965; Elias, 1976; Mennell, 1989: 115–39). The emotional fantasies and beliefs of the antagonists in relation to each other play as major a part in keeping the double-bind process going as does the competitive circularity in the development of weapons. Each side's they-image involves a distortion of the vices of the other side, just as its we-image is an exaggerated picture of virtue. (In *The Established and the Outsiders* [1965], Elias and Scotson depicted the process of distortion in the microcosm of a local community, where a dominant faction viewed itself in relation to an outsider group through the distorting lens of a 'minority of the best' and a 'minority of the worst' respectively.) Relaxation of the double-bind process may just be possible because fear of the bomb may outweigh the fear and hatred of the enemy; but it can only be very slowly

achieved because it requires 'a change in the mentality of both sides, a higher level of detachment and self-control in their dealings with one another'. And this is extremely difficult because

If the danger which one group of humans represents for the other is high, the emotivity of thinking, its fantasy-content, is also likely to remain high. If the fantasy-content of thinking and knowledge is high and thus its reality-orientation low, the ability of both sides to bring the situation under control will also remain low, the danger level and the level of fear will remain high, and so on *ad infinitum*. (Elias, 1987b: 99).

Nevertheless, the very existence of nuclear weapons since 1945 made the hegemonial fevers of the Cold War somewhat different from the many earlier ones. In contrast to all former weapons, which made the fighting and winning of wars possible, nuclear weapons have, as Bernard Brodie put it, only 'utility in non-use', for the prevention of war. The situation has been summed up as 'Mutually Assured Destruction', or MAD for short. But, says Benthem van den Bergh, the iron embrace of the nuclear powers is not so mad at all, and certainly the least mad of all the ways of thinking about nuclear weapons and strategic situations between great powers. *Nuclear weapons may thus have begun to function as an external constraint towards self-restraint* in international relations. Benthem van den Bergh sees an analogy with the civilizing process depicted by Elias within states. Peaceful conduct within states is not a gift from God: it requires the ever-present threat of the state's monopoly of violence, even if that threat, at least in Western Europe, has been pushed more and more into the background. In inter-state relations, nuclear weapons are the only conceivable alternative to a world monopoly of violence. The MAD balance may have acquired a civilizing function in international politics: it forces the political and military establishments of the great powers to restrain themselves and to act with great care and circumspection. Mutually Assured Destruction exerts pressures towards Mutually Expected Self-Restraint (in Goudsblom's phrase). Possibly the most graphic illustration of the 'civilizing' functions of MAD is the extraordinary lengths to which both sides have gone to eliminate the possibility of the accidental or unauthorized use of nuclear weapons. The common interests of the nuclear oligopolists, argues Benthem van den Bergh, may lead to their acting as an external constraint *forcing* other states to behave peacefully; but in the longer term, the existence of a functional equivalent for the central

monopoly of the state could become a social constraint towards self-restraint, as it will change states' expectations of each other's conduct. He does not see this as *likely*, but as the only *possible* way in which a peaceful world can emerge.

Elias remains sceptical of this argument, even as far as it goes. His scepticism seems to stem in effect from the conclusion he drew at the end of *The Civilising Process*, that 'wars between smaller units have been, in the course of history up to now, inevitable stages and instruments in the pacification of larger ones' (1939: Vol. II, 331). He is inclined to dwell on the continuities between pre-nuclear and nuclear times; the dangers inherent in inter-state double-binds remain the same. Benthem van den Bergh in contrast emphasizes the differences. Before the nuclear age there were always pressures and incentives towards integration on a higher level through war, because there was always a potential threat from still other larger survival units outside. Now, with the factual integration of humanity as a whole in a world-wide system of tensions, there are no larger survival units outside the great powers regime to provide that incentive. And nuclear weapons make development to a higher level of integration through hegemonial war impossible: a nuclear war would result in a regression to a much lower level of integration.

Current developments in Eastern Europe may possibly lend support to Benthem van den Bergh, though the sheer speed of events may make both parties to the discussion seem unrealistically cautious in their estimate of the possibilities of the pacification of the global society. Time will tell: this, of all things, requires a longer term perspective than that of the instant commentator.

Conclusions: Micro/Macro Relationships

One of the *Leitmotive* of Norbert Elias's thinking is the long-term integration of humanity and the obstacles it encounters. He has tackled the subject from the earliest beginnings in the smallest survival units to the present tight mesh of inter-state and intra-state tensions worldwide, when humanity perhaps stands at a saddle point: the possibility of global pacification on the one side, and on the other the chances of destruction through nuclear holocaust or ecological disaster — both produced by the globalization of human interdependencies.

Elias's most historically detailed studies are of the middle phases of the process in one continent. He has not produced so detailed an account of the emergence of the modern world system as

Wallerstein, for example, though there are many points of contact between their approaches. Elias is sometimes accused of paying insufficient attention to the economic components of the process, but that is unjust. It was in reaction to a prevalent overemphasis on economics that he tried to show the equal centrality of violence and its control, intermeshing with economic development and with the development of knowledge, in the overall development of human society.

That such a comprehensive vision of the long-term structural integration of human society should be found in the work of someone popularly associated mainly with the study of changing manners and social habitus ought to be no surprise. Because interdependence is Elias's central category, he has always been able to bridge the gap between micro and macro-sociology with seeming ease. Note that he always speaks of *interdependence*, not of dependency, for power relations are always bipolar or multipolar, and power ratios are an aspect of all human relationships from the most microscopic to the most macroscopic. Because Elias thinks of power in terms of flexible, labile, balances often changing in a discernible direction over time, he is able to bypass such debates as that concerning the definition of the periphery, semi-periphery and core in which world-systems theorists have tended to become bogged down. He seeks process theories in which 'the processes come into the foreground, with 'phases' or 'stages' no longer defined as stationary states but in terms of the very processes of which they are part and through which they are generated' (Goudsblom, 1989a: 18; cf. Mennell, 1989: 176-81). I would therefore argue that, if Elias's own writing about the globalization of human society has centred mainly on the chances of nuclear war, there is much in his underlying theoretical strategy of great value to others in investigating many other aspects of global society. To reach for just one example, a topic to which Elias himself has not returned since his earliest work, what about the prospects for the globalization of manners? After all, he began his study of the European civilizing process from the observation that the notion of civilization represented the self-satisfaction of Europeans in a colonialist age. What are the implications now for a world-wide civilizing process, considered as changes in ways of demanding and showing respect, when Europe and Europe-over-the-ocean no longer occupy the hegemonic position? Or do they?

Notes

1. Here and elsewhere Elias avoids using the word 'evolution' except in a strictly biological context; he prefers to speak of 'development' in a social context, to underline the very great differences between biological and social processes. Other writers, however, either do not make the distinction, or use the terminology in an opposite sense. For example, Stephen K. Sanderson in a recent paper (1989) and a forthcoming book (1990) argues for what he calls 'evolutionism without developmentalism'. Although I entirely agree with his argument — like Elias, he is pursuing a non-teleological, non-unilinear form of what I would call developmental theory — he employs the two words 'evolutionism' and 'developmentalism' in precisely the reverse sense to Elias's usage. That is, I think, because Robert Nisbet (1969) made 'developmentalism' a dirty word among American sociologists, whereas in the world of British anthropology and sociology the same connotations have remained attached to 'evolutionism'. The nomenclature is confusing, but in the underlying argument there is no disagreement.

2. It is pointless to list separately Elias's writings on the early origins of human-kind and on the present-day superpower balance, since he so often deals with both topics within the same book or article. Relevant sources are: *What is Sociology?* (1970: 138–9, 155, 168–72); *Humana Conditio* (1985); *Die Gesellschaft der Individuen* (1987a: 218–26); *Involvement and Detachment* (1987b), especially pp. vii–xv of the Introduction written for the English edition, and pp. 74–115 of the essay 'The Fishermen in the Maelstrom'; 'The retreat of sociologists into the present' (1987d). See also Haferkamp (1987), Mennell (1987) and Mennell (1989: 217–23).

3. At least in their direct dealings with each other; and their use of surrogates in countries throughout the world, to which Elias alluded in the passage just quoted, is itself in part a manifestation of the restraint enjoined on them in direct dealings.

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