

# Norbert Elias's contribution to Andrew Linklater's contribution to International Relations

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## Abstract

Andrew Linklater's projected trilogy of books for Cambridge University Press rests distinctively on the work of the sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990). Linklater is creating a powerful theoretical orientation for the field of International Relations by synthesising the ideas of Martin Wight and the 'English School' of IR with those of Elias. Though Elias is best known for his theory of civilising processes – on which Linklater draws most prominently – his writings are far more extensive. In particular, his sociological theory of knowledge and the sciences underlies Linklater's recent writings, even if that is not immediately apparent on a cursory reading. This article spells out some of the 'Eliasian infrastructure' that may not be familiar to many of Linklater's readers. It also discusses ways in which common misunderstandings of Elias's ideas may lead to parallel misunderstandings of Linklater's. The article concludes by asking whether, even if Linklater's vision of the growth of 'cosmopolitan responsibility' may prove correct in the long term, we may nevertheless be experiencing something of a (possibly short-term) reversal towards 'cosmopolitan irresponsibility'.

## Keywords

Andrew Linklater; Norbert Elias; Civilising Processes; Cosmopolitan Responsibility

The most obvious and distinctive, indeed remarkable, feature of Andrew Linklater's projected trilogy – of which we now have two thirds<sup>1</sup> – is his unabashed emphasis on the significance of the work of Norbert Elias for the study of world politics. 'Remarkable' perhaps in view of Steven Pinker's assertion that 'Norbert Elias is the most important thinker you have never heard of.'<sup>2</sup> That, surely, is an exaggeration: Elias's early *magnum opus* first published in 1939, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, is now a famous book.<sup>3</sup> In a 1997 straw poll among members of the International Sociological Association the book was ranked seventh in a list of what respondents considered the most

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew Linklater, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Andrew Linklater, *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Hereafter, these books will be cited as *PH* and *V&C*.

<sup>2</sup> Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (London: Allen Lane, 2011), p. 59n. Having spent much of the last forty years promoting knowledge of Elias's work, I found Pinker's observation mildly discouraging.

<sup>3</sup> Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press [UCD], 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 3]), pp. 13–57. (Elias's book was originally published in 1939, in German, in two volumes, as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, by the émigré publisher Haus zum Falken, Basel, in 1939. Note that previous English editions were published under the title *The Civilizing Process*.)

important works of sociology in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, it is probably true that among International Relations scholars – apart from those who are now familiar with Andrew Linklater's writings<sup>5</sup> – Elias may not have been an author whose work has seemed immediately relevant to their concerns. Very likely they will know only of *On the Process of Civilisation*, and perhaps *The Court Society* (see V&C, pp. 216–22).<sup>6</sup> Yet there is much more of Elias's *oeuvre*.<sup>7</sup> So, in this article, I shall try to sketch some key points about Elias's broader thinking in order to alert readers to ideas that underlie Linklater's recent writings and perhaps to avert some likely misunderstandings.

But first, a few introductory notes about Elias himself. The trajectories of Elias's career and of his reputation are extremely unusual. The vast majority of his many books and more than one hundred essays were written – or at least published – towards the end of his long life (1897–1990), and since his death his reputation has grown rather than (as is the posthumous fate of so many scholars) diminished. One peculiarity is that Elias's thinking seems to be more readily appreciated not by mainstream sociologists but by social scientists working in the interstices of various disciplines, including Andrew Linklater and some of his colleagues in International Relations.

Elias gained his doctorate in Breslau in 1922 as a philosopher, but moved into sociology when he went to Heidelberg in 1925, and thereafter emphatically identified himself as a sociologist. But the meaning of the term 'sociology' seems to have shifted in recent decades. For Elias, sociology was not just one discipline among the many social sciences, but an all-encompassing vocation, a calling, the task of which – he used to speak of *meine Aufgabe* – was to improve 'the human means of orientation'. That was to be achieved through 'theoretical-empirical' research – no theory without empirical evidence, no empirical investigation without theory – into all aspects of the human condition. The main task of sociology was synthetic – making connections – not 'analysis' as so many sociologists term it. Elias had great (and unfashionable) admiration for Auguste Comte, and in effect followed Comte in seeing sociology as 'the queen of the sciences'. In that sense too, Linklater is a sociologist, as I have been trying to convince him for the last decade or more.

## Linklater, Wight, and Elias

Linklater's central concern is to develop further Martin Wight's notion of 'systems of states',<sup>8</sup> and to draw on Elias's 'process sociology' in doing so. He noted that while state-formation processes were a keystone of Elias's writings, Elias 'had paid little attention to international societies of states ... He did not see them as particular forms of social and political integration with distinctive standards of restraint.'<sup>9</sup> The complementary lacuna in Wight's work was that he

<sup>4</sup> See {<http://www.isa-sociology.org/en/about-isa/history-of-isa/books-of-the-xx-century/>} accessed 23 February 2017. Admittedly, the number of respondents was small, and the poll probably not representative of the opinions of, in particular, American sociologists.

<sup>5</sup> Before Linklater, the Dutch scholar Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh was an early advocate of the relevance of Elias to IR; see especially his book *The Nuclear Revolution and the End of the Cold War: Forced Restraint* (London: Macmillan, 1992); cf. *PH*, 178.

<sup>6</sup> Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2006 [Collected Works, vol. 2]).

<sup>7</sup> Elias's Collected Works were published in 18 volumes by University College Dublin Press, 2006–14.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Wight, *Systems of States* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> V&C, p. xi. This seems to me to be not entirely true of Elias's later works, notably Elias, *Humana Conditio: Observations on the Development of Humanity on the Fortieth Anniversary of the End of a War* (8 May 1985), in *The Loneliness of the Dying and Humana Conditio* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 6]).

noted how the idea of civilisation had influenced common understandings of the permissible and the forbidden in world politics. But his works do not contain a systematic analysis of the *impact of ideas* of civilisation on international societies. Shared cultures or civilisations were described a background conditions that facilitated the development of societies of states rather than as processes ... that unfolded over many centuries.<sup>10</sup>

This remark deserves a good deal of unpacking. For a start, the social scientific concern should not be just with 'the impact of ideas', as if ideas were something fixed in the 'background', but with how those ideas came to be socially generated over past time.

Secondly, it would seem that Wight, unlike Elias, made no radical break with the mainstream Western intellectual tradition concerning the role of ideas, beliefs, and 'values' in history. It is a tradition with its roots in religion. Johan Goudsblom<sup>11</sup> has labelled it 'Augustinian', and traced it from St Augustine<sup>12</sup> through major philosophers such as Descartes to Max Weber,<sup>13</sup> from whom it entered modern sociology through the mid-twentieth-century Harvard theorist Talcott Parsons and thus into everyday political clichés about 'our shared values'. Goudsblom sees Elias as a representative of what he calls the minority 'Lucretian' tradition, which he traces back to the classical thinker Lucretius, who attributed religious belief to people's ignorance of principles underlying life on earth. This might in ordinary parlance be called a more cynical viewpoint. Elias has often been criticised for not paying sufficient attention to the supposed role of religion in his theory of civilising processes. Actually, he said quite a lot about religion, mainly in passing remarks, but he did not accord religious *beliefs* any independent role in the civilising of behaviour. On the contrary, he remarked that

Religion, the belief in the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God, never has in itself a 'civilising' or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as 'civilised' as the society or class that upholds it.<sup>14</sup>

Elias recognised that religious *organisation* may have played a part in exerting civilising pressures; he treats princes of the church as no different from secular princes in the feudal power struggles out of which processes of state formation arose. And, by extension, a similar argument can be applied to the role of secular belief systems in the formation of modern states-systems.

In short, Wight was undoubtedly correct in seeing that 'the idea of civilisation had influenced common understandings of the permissible and the forbidden in world politics', and indeed it comes with considerable baggage, dichotomising people, cultures, and histories as 'civilised' or 'uncivilised'. As more recent writers than Wight, such as Brett Bowden,<sup>15</sup> have shown in more detail, the concept has been deployed throughout modern times to justify all manner of interventions and sociopolitical engineering.

Yet the weaponisation of the idea of civilisation plays no causal part in Elias's theory of civilising processes; it is just one *result* of a long-term intergenerational process. The kernel of the theory is a

<sup>10</sup> V&C, p. xii, emphasis added.

<sup>11</sup> Johan Goudsblom, 'Christian religion and the European civilising process: the views of Norbert Elias and Max Weber compared in the context of the Augustinian and Lucretian traditions', in Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley (eds), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 265–80.

<sup>12</sup> St Augustine, *City of God* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).

<sup>13</sup> Most famously, Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1930 [orig. pub. 1904–5]).

<sup>14</sup> Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 195.

<sup>15</sup> Brett Bowden, *Civilization and War* (Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2013).

changing *balance* in the steering of people's behaviour and feelings between what in German Elias called *Fremdzwänge* ('external constraints' or, better, constraints *by other people*) towards *Selbstzwänge* (self-constraints). Thinking nice thoughts does not come into this. For Elias, the key underlying process is that people have gradually found themselves bound together in longer chains and more complex webs of interdependence. In small and relatively isolated 'survival units', such as early foraging groups, people may be subject to intense social constraint, but it is exercised largely face-to-face through others whom they know. As survival units grow in scale, as trading networks become longer, as towns and states and now states-systems emerge, the constraints change in character: they may arise as the consequences of actions of people who are quite unknown to us, at many removes down social chains. To summarise a very detailed argument, in complex societies there arises a 'social constraint towards self-constraint', increasing pressure for the exercise of foresight in navigating one's way through an often opaque web, and a greater necessity to attempt to anticipate a burgeoning array of unanticipated consequences. The result is changes in people's 'habitus', which Elias defined (far more simply than Pierre Bourdieu)<sup>16</sup> as 'second nature' – that is, all the aspects of our behaviour and feelings that we have actually learned, but which have become so deeply habituated that they feel even to ourselves to be 'innate' and unlearned. Since it is *learned*, habitus is by its nature *shared*: groups of people from families to nation states may exhibit shared traits in their social habitus.<sup>17</sup>

This is especially relevant to the question of long-term trends in violence, central to Linklater's *Violence and Civilization* as it is also to Elias, who regarded the gradual monopolisation of the legitimate use of violence over growing tracts of territory as being fundamental to all the other interwoven processes such as the spread of commerce, bureaucratisation, urbanisation, taxation, and monetarisation:

if in this or that region the power of a central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of affects and the standards of the drive-economy are very gradually changed as well.<sup>18</sup>

Elias suggests that the tilting of the balance between external and self-constraints in the habitus is most effectively achieved by steady, consistent, and calculable pressure rather than through more extreme threats and fear. This sounds plausibly like effective child-rearing, but here the process is meant to apply in larger social units and in the internal pacification of more extensive territories, in the formation of states and perhaps also of systems of states.

It is important not to misunderstand the argument about changing social habitus. It is not that people and collectivities come to behave like zombies. The old Parsonian 'structural-functionalist' consensus

<sup>16</sup> In the English-speaking world, the term 'habitus' is often assumed to have been introduced or invented by Pierre Bourdieu, but although unknown in English it was in fact in common use in French and German sociology before the Second World War. Elias used it in his early writings in German, but only began to use it in English after it had been brought into the language by Bourdieu's translators and became fashionable in the 1990s.

<sup>17</sup> For a necessarily subtle discussion of the subtleties of differences in national habitus, see Elias, *Studies on the Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013 [Collected Works, vol. 11]), especially pp. 1–48. See also my own cautious remarks: Stephen Mennell, 'National character, History of', in James D. Wright (editor-in-chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 16 (2<sup>nd</sup> edn, Oxford: Elsevier, 2015), pp. 237–40.

<sup>18</sup> Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, pp. 195–6. An alternative, less literal, translation would refer to 'the standards of emotion management'.

model of the 1950s and 1960s tended towards depicting people as ‘internalising’ the social values of their society and then smoothly reproducing them in their behaviour and feeling without, apparently, experiencing any internal conflict or discomfort. No, both Elias’s *Fremdzwänge* and *Selbstzwänge* continue to operate in the steering of behaviour, and the balance between them may change or fluctuate over time. To put it more directly, what one can get away with still matters: and that applies at every level, from sexual relations to international relations. One has only to think of American foreign policy since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the atrocities it has permitted the US to commit.

One final concept introduced by Elias, and employed by Linklater<sup>19</sup> should be mentioned: ‘functional democratisation’. Elias thought that longer and more differentiated chains of interdependence meant that power differentials diminish within and among groups because incumbents of specialised roles become more interdependent and can thus exert reciprocal control over each other. If true, this would tend to foster wider ‘circles of mutual identification’<sup>20</sup> with fellow human beings, and a higher ‘standard of civilisation’ even in world affairs. But there are many contrary indications: within a globally interdependent world, there appear to be developing new inequalities and concentrations of power that make it more, not less, possible to ignore the fate of great tracts of humanity. For, as Karl Deutsch remarked, power is ‘the ability to talk instead of listen [and] the ability to afford not to learn’.<sup>21</sup> Linklater perhaps does not probe this question with quite his usual scepticism.

### Some Eliasian infrastructure

What Linklater has achieved in his synthesis of the thinking of Martin Wight with Elias’s ‘process sociology’, it seems to me, is a form of historically grounded realism – but realism in the philosophical and generally social scientific sense, rather than how the word is used in IR theory. Linklater has not merely seized upon the theory of civilising processes for which Elias is most famous. On the contrary, he has read and absorbed the whole of Elias’s opus, and there are therefore deeper Eliasian foundations – beneath the more obvious Eliasian surface – to *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* and *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems*. Let me now sketch some of this infrastructure, with a view both to deepening readers’ appreciation, and avoiding possible misunderstandings, of Linklater’s work.

One obstacle to appreciating Elias is undoubtedly the word ‘civilisation’ and the idea of ‘civilising processes’, and by extension it may also impede the reception of Linklater’s ideas. Most sociologists have been educated to associate the word ‘civilisation’ with Eurocentric or ‘orientalist’, especially Victorian imperialist, conceptions of inevitable social process. *On the Process of Civilisation* begins with a long discussion showing how *civilisation* in France and *Zivilisation* (and *Kultur*) in Germany gradually acquired precisely these unfortunate ethnocentric connotations, especially among the upper classes of the time. Then, however, Elias goes on to use the terms in an altogether separate and more technically social scientific sense: he is studying *why* these connotations arose in the course of specific long-term processes. The first part of his book is in effect concerned with the ‘emic’ meanings

<sup>19</sup> Linklater, *PH*, pp. 203, 229, 247–8.

<sup>20</sup> Abram de Swaan, ‘Widening circles of identification: Emotional concerns in sociogenetic perspective’, *Theory, Culture and Society*, 12:2 (1995), pp. 25–39.

<sup>21</sup> Karl W. Deutsch, *The Nerves of Government: Models of Political Communication and Control* (New York: Free Press, 1962), p. 111.

of these words, but subsequently he uses them in an 'etic' sense. I have borrowed the terms 'emic' and 'etic' (which Elias himself does not use) from anthropology; they derive originally from the distinction between *phonemics* and *phonetics*, phonemes being units of meaning in any particular language, while phonetics makes possible the transcription of the sounds used in any language into a single standard grid, the international phonetic alphabet. For example, ethnobotanists might study the way in which a small linguistic group of people classifies the plants found in their environment, but then 'translate' the native classification into the standard modern Linnaean 'scientific' system of classification.<sup>22</sup> Late in life, Elias admitted that his use of 'civilisation' and 'civilising process' in these two distinct ways had caused confusion, but said that he had tried to find another term to express the technical sense, and failed to find one.<sup>23</sup> To be civilised is to be polite and good mannered and considerate towards others; clean and decent and hygienic in personal habits; humane and gentle and kind, restrained and self-controlled and even-tempered; reluctant to use violence against others save in exceptional circumstances; to be refined in one's cultural tastes. It is indeed difficult to think of an alternative concept that would express all that, although just recently I have begun to think that the everyday term 'deferred gratification' (everyday among social scientific folk, that is) captures a lot, though by no means all, of it. The important point is that all those qualities have to be learned, not only by every individual born into whatever society, past, present or future, but that, according to Elias, the learning is also a long-term social process, as prevailing social standards change from generation to generation. Elias believed he could demonstrate a dominant tendency running through several centuries of European history, towards these standards becoming more demanding and taking a longer period of 'growing up' to be successfully acquired by individuals. But he certainly did not believe that such processes were peculiar to Europe. And he always recognised that, far from being inevitable, such trends could quite easily slip into reverse: *decivilising* processes were common enough, if usually shorter in duration.<sup>24</sup>

A second obstacle blocking appreciation of the significance of Elias's ideas particularly in mainstream sociology is that, especially over the last half-century, sociologists have largely performed what Elias called 'the retreat of sociologists into the present'.<sup>25</sup> The Comtean vision of their discipline is less appealing than the aroma of large research grants to be gained for research on contemporary social problems and for the accumulation of data useful to policymakers. Sociologists have to make a living. That is not to say that their research is entirely devoid of theoretical ideas, but they tend to quarry 'theorists' for a Meccano set of handy concepts with which to decorate their findings.<sup>26</sup> Elias does not so readily provide them with those handy bits and pieces. He did not multiply fancy-sounding entities, as for example his friend Pierre Bourdieu did. For this, I think there are two significant reasons.

<sup>22</sup> Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1968), pp. 568–604; Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, and Marvin Harris (eds), *Emics and Etics: the Insider/Outsider Debate* (London: Sage, 1990). Alternatively, one could say that Elias is implicitly (unfortunately not explicitly) making a distinction between what Alfred Schutz termed 'first-degree' and 'second-degree' concepts. See Alfred Schutz, *Collected Papers, Volume II: Studies in Social Theory* (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1964), p. 14.

<sup>23</sup> Norbert Elias, 'What I mean by civilisation: reply to Hans Peter Duerr', in *Essays II: On Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 15]), pp. 8–13.

<sup>24</sup> See Norbert Elias, *Studies on the Germans*; Stephen Mennell, 'Decivilising processes: Theoretical significance and some lines for research', *International Sociology*, 5:2 (1990), pp. 205–23; cf. *PH*, pp. 172–5.

<sup>25</sup> Norbert Elias, 'The retreat of sociologists into the present', *Essays III: On Sociology and the Humanities* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 16]), pp. 107–26.

<sup>26</sup> See Chris Rojek and Bryan Turner, 'Decorative sociology: Towards a critique of the cultural turn', *Sociological Review*, 48:4 (2000), pp. 629–48.

First, Elias practised what has been called ‘concept avoidance’.<sup>27</sup> Of course, that cannot be taken literally: all thought involves concepts. But Elias seems consciously to have deterred the Meccano-like use of his ideas by expressing key ideas in a variety of different words. He did not want them to set hard, making it easy to break off a word here and a concept there, precisely because his enterprise was synthetic – showing how things were connected. More important, he criticised the tendency to use *static* concepts to describe *processes*. This tendency is prevalent in everyday speech; following the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,<sup>28</sup> Elias traced it to the pressures exerted by the grammatical structures of ‘Standard Average European’, where processes are conveyed by the use of a static noun plus a verb. In everyday speech we say ‘the wind is blowing’, even though the wind *is* the blowing; if there is no blowing, the wind does not exist. Elias inveighs against the prevalence of this tendency towards ‘process reduction’<sup>29</sup> in a scientific, especially social scientific, context, where it is more problematic than in everyday speech. This led Elias to develop a comprehensive, processual sociology of knowledge and the sciences.

The rejection of static conceptualisations and the emphasis on process are linked to Elias’s war on philosophy. Elias rejected philosophers’ claims to ‘legislate’ on the procedures of the sciences, natural and social. As yet, it is still quite radical to be dismissive of philosophy and philosophers. Social scientists, while getting on with their own work, still defer to philosophers’ views on the nature of the social scientific enterprise, and the bits and pieces they borrow are often – to use Elias’s contemptuous term – ‘philosophoidal’. Philosophers are a powerful ‘established’ group within the prestige hierarchy of academic disciplines;<sup>30</sup> indeed, in the medieval university, ‘philosophy’ was the umbrella term for the ancestral forms of the modern sciences. Out of this philosophical protoplasm each of the sciences evolved in turn – first physics, chemistry, biology, and then the humanities and social scientific disciplines: economics, political science, history and philology, anthropology, sociology, and so on. Arguably, what is left behind as ‘philosophy’ is an empty husk, interesting for historians of ideas but little else.

Elias saw philosophy as the continuing source of static conceptualisations and false dualisms in social scientific thinking. His dispute with the central tradition of Western philosophical epistemology dated from a battle with his doctoral supervisor, the neo-Kantian Richard Höningwald, in Breslau in the early 1920s.<sup>31</sup> Elias’s argument – which he developed continuously over the next seven decades – was that the stream of philosophical thought that runs from Descartes through Hume and Kant to Popper – was preoccupied with how *the individual*, in the singular, knows what he or she knows. It involved such byways as Kant’s hypothesis of *a priori* categories like space, time, causality, and the ‘categorical imperative’ being ‘hard-wired’ into the human brain from birth. Elias set out to strip all traces of such transcendentalism out of the social sciences. He maintained that this was simply – or

<sup>27</sup> Peter R. Gleichmann, ‘Zur zivilisationssoziologischen Begriffsbildung’, in J. Diederich et al. (eds), *Sozialer Wandel in Westeuropa* (Berlin: Universitätsbibliothek der Technischen Universität Berlin, 1979). Something similar characterises the symbolic interactionist tradition; see Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969), pp. 153–70.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1956).

<sup>29</sup> Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology?* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2012 [Collected Works, vol. 5]), pp. 107–10. (In German, Elias used the term *Zustandsreduktion*, but after I discussed it with him, we decided to turn the idea around and translate it into English as ‘process reduction’.)

<sup>30</sup> Norbert Elias, ‘Scientific establishments’, *Essays I: On the Sociology of Knowledge and the Sciences* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2009 [Collected Works, vol. 14]), pp. 107–60.

<sup>31</sup> See Norbert Elias, *Interviews and Autobiographical Reflections* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2013 [Collected Works, vol. 17]), pp. 10–14.

not so simply! – the wrong starting point. Rather than thinking in terms of the single *homo clausus* ('closed person'), we need to think about *homines aperti* ('open people'); all human knowledge and thought, including even the rules of logic,<sup>32</sup> has developed within *groups*. It is, to echo a famous definition of culture, 'learned, shared and transmitted', but also added to through experience and experiment, from generation to generation.

It followed that there was not just one single and eternal 'logic of science', as decreed especially in Elias's lifetime by Karl Popper.<sup>33</sup> Elias refused to accept the philosophers' authority to pass judgments on scientific procedure and the limits of knowledge. This refusal is consistent with Elias's diagnosis of the conduct of philosophers as representatives of a powerful scientific establishment. His response is not to allow the philosophers to dictate the vocabulary and assumptions of the argument, in this case on the status of a transcendental 'theory of science'. In short, Elias is not prepared to play the game according to the philosophers' rules, because in so doing one unwittingly reinforces their authority.

Instead, one must study the sciences sociologically. In his writings on the sociology of knowledge and the sciences, Elias points out that classical physics – so often taken in the past as the template for all the sciences, which had the effect of breeding 'physics envy' among social scientists – was based on the study of timeless, reversible spatial relationships between the objects of investigation. It was associated with 'billiard ball causality' and was in effect only 'three-dimensional'. (Modern physics has outgrown this model.) The biological sciences were immediately 'four-dimensional' – their theories always involved *time*, and the study of developmental processes that are generally *irreversible*. His novel idea was that the social sciences necessitate process theories in *five* dimensions: space, time, and *experience*. That is not to say that social scientific theories are *reducible* to subjective experience, but merely that people's experience of the spatial and temporal processes in which they are entangled is an essential component in any explanation of the dynamics of such processes.<sup>34</sup> And social processes, unlike most biological ones, are in principle *reversible*. Some processes, such as the division of labour, seem in broad view to have proceeded in essentially the same direction over many millennia, yet even in that case there are instances of reversals, sometimes on a large scale as in the collapse of the pre-conquest empires of South and Central America.<sup>35</sup>

Although Linklater does not directly mention these aspects of Elias's work, they underlie his consistently processual pattern of thinking,<sup>36</sup> and his careful avoidance of static polarities or dualisms. The important point for IR theory is to recognise that compelling social processes may be 'blind' and unplanned, but they can still be structured and proceed in a discernible direction in the *longue durée*, underneath a turbulent and chaotic-seeming *histoire des événements*.

There is a connection between Elias's theory of knowledge and the sciences and his theory of civilising processes, but it is not obvious until it is pointed out. Elias argues that all advances in the

<sup>32</sup> Norbert Elias, 'Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and "the question of the logical unity of humankind"', in Katie Liston and Stephen Mennell (eds), *Supplements and Index to the Collected Works* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2014 [Collected Works, vol. 18]), pp. 53–106.

<sup>33</sup> See my paper 'Elias and Popper', presented at a colloquium on 'Norbert Elias: Sociologue de la connaissance et des sciences', Centre Alexandre Koyré (EHESS), Paris (19–20 January 2017), available at: (<http://www.stephenmennell.eu/docs/pdf/EliasPopper.pdf>) accessed 23 February 2017.

<sup>34</sup> Norbert Elias, 'Figuration', *Essays III*, pp. 1–3.

<sup>35</sup> See Joseph A. Tainter, *The Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

<sup>36</sup> Extending even to his use, for example, of Elias's ugly neologism 'courtisation' (*V&C*, pp. 221, 423, 438).

stock of human knowledge, from the earliest making of tools to modern science and technology, involve a ‘detour via detachment’.<sup>37</sup> That means that we need to stand back and relatively unemotionally work out the solution to whatever problem we are facing, to exercise foresight and emotional self-constraint.<sup>38</sup> This is especially difficult to achieve in understanding social processes, and perhaps particularly in understanding international relations where the form of emotional involvement called patriotic fervour so often intrudes. That is why the term ‘detachment’ is one of the most pervasive in Linklater’s recent writings.<sup>39</sup>

The capacity for making a detour via detachment is not primarily an individual, psychological trait, though of course some people may have it more than others in the same situation. People who in their daily lives face high levels of fear and physical danger will find it more difficult to achieve the necessary levels of emotional detachment. The slow rate of growth of the world’s population of *Homo sapiens sapiens* over many millennia is one index of the levels of uncertainty, unpredictability, and danger that long prevailed in their everyday lives – disease, famine, natural disasters, wild animals, and especially other people, among other things. That is why the earliest stages of the accumulation of human knowledge proceeded so much more slowly than in recent centuries. High levels of everyday danger foster emotional involvement, fantasy, and ‘magical-mythical’ thinking. The diminution of everyday dangers helps to bring that under control. Processes of state formation, associated with the monopolisation of violence and internal pacification of larger territories, play an important part, but so later does the formation of autonomous institutions under state protection capable of offering protection in turn to knowledge producers: the Royal Society in London and similar organisations elsewhere were created only decades after the Catholic Church – which for centuries exercised an *armed* monopoly in Western Europe of the means of orientation – had burned Giordano Bruni alive and looked quite likely to do the same to Galileo. Detours via detachment, and an increasing protection of new knowledge from the intrusion of heteronomous values (such as those of religious and political authorities) are essential for increasing the ‘reality congruence’ of humanity’s pictures of the world. But it has been a slow, if accelerating, process. In particular, the capacity to form relatively ‘reality-congruent’ theories in the social sciences has lagged – again relatively – behind the growth of knowledge in the natural sciences, owing to their permeation by highly affective, especially political, judgements. And, *since the pacification of international relations lags behind the internal pacification of states*, detours via detachment are more difficult and highly affective thinking is more prevalent internationally.

Linklater’s work obviously rests on a central plank of Elias’s theory of civilising processes: the recognition that there are in principle connections between ‘macro-level’ processes like state formation and ‘micro-level’ processes of formation of people’s consciences, habitus, or ‘social character’. But it is not a matter of just recognising those connections in principle – the connection has long been recognised<sup>40</sup> – but also of *demonstrating* through theoretical-empirical investigation how the link operated through a long period of European history. State formation was central to Elias’s writings, because he followed Max Weber in *defining* a state by its relatively effective

<sup>37</sup> Norbert Elias, *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 8]), especially ‘The Fishermen in the Maelstrom’, pp. 105–78.

<sup>38</sup> Increasing pressures habitually to exercise foresight and self-constraint are an important component of civilising processes in the technical sense. See Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, pp. 418–22.

<sup>39</sup> Linklater, *V&C*, pp. 14, 17, 88–90, 211–222, 282, 299, 430.

<sup>40</sup> For example by the (mainly American) ‘Culture and Personality’ school of anthropology; see Harris, *Rise of Anthropological Theory*, pp. 393–463.

monopolisation of the legitimate exercise of violence.<sup>41</sup> Linklater, like Elias, does not assume that state formation is a single driving force. State-formation, the division of labour, and lengthening chains of social interdependence, the growth of towns, trade, and money all intertwine and reinforce each other. Towns and trade and the growing use of money generated taxes that helped support military machines that conquered more territory. An elaborate social division of labour and an adequate supply of money were necessary for the support of complex and permanent administrative apparatuses. But at the same time, the internal pacification and increasingly orderly administration of larger and larger territories were necessary conditions of economic growth. This is not an abstract matter: it comes down to questions such as how much long distance trade could develop when merchants were in constant risk of their lives on the road, and how big towns could grow if food supplies had to come from farmers a few miles away in territory controlled by a rival lord with whom one's local lord was constantly in battle. And all this links in turn with the proposition that longer chains, more complex webs, of interdependence exert pressures on people that change their habitus and their conscience in the direction of greater habitual control over short-term impulses and emotions; the growth of these capacities then feeds back to facilitate more complex organisation, and so on. Thus the various elements in the process interweave and support each other. But always bear in mind the other side of the coin: that the internal pacification of steadily growing territories went along with inter-territorial wars on a steadily increasing scale. In processual perspective, the study of International Relations is inseparable from the study of internal pacification processes. Any attempt to separate out one strand as the 'first cause', or to represent history as a sequence of static 'stages', distorts the essentially processual character of social reality.

So much for elements of the Elisian foundations on which Linklater's theses about IR rest. Nevertheless, I think there are several respects in which Linklater's trilogy of books may be misunderstood in ways that exactly parallel some traditional misunderstandings of Elias.

## Misunderstandings to be avoided in reading Linklater (as well as Elias)

### I. Are Linklater's and Elias's theses Eurocentric?

Elias's *On the Process of Civilisation* has repeatedly been criticised for being 'Eurocentric', and voices have been raised to the same effect about Linklater's *Violence and Civilization*. Both of them are indeed mainly about Europe, or at least 'the West'. Linklater has much more than Elias to say about the age of imperialism and today's global world order. Not that Elias overlooked the broader dynamics of world power. His sociology was always strongly international in focus. As he remarked in 1980:

It is less possible than ever before to separate what goes on inside a state, and especially the distribution of power within a state, from what takes place between states, in particular their power relationships. Wherever one looks, one comes across the interdependence of intra-state and inter-state processes.<sup>42</sup>

Linklater is extending that insight by his project of synthesising Elias with Martin Wight's comparative approach to the history of the 'Western states-systems'. But to write a book based on evidence drawn (mainly) from European history does not necessarily make it Eurocentric. In Elias's

<sup>41</sup> Weber defined a state as 'an organisation which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence'. See Weber, *Economy and Society*, 2 vols (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978 [orig. pub. 1922]), Vol. I, p. 54.

<sup>42</sup> Elias, *Essays III*, p. 40.

case, and I would suggest also in Linklater's, the propositions they derive from that evidence are much more general in scope, and point to processes that appear to operate in many other parts of the world. It is therefore beside the point to allege 'Eurocentrism'; what needs to be done is to *test* whether or not they work beyond Europe, and that can only be done by further research. Investigations have already thrown light on some parts of the globe beyond Europe. One may mention Eiko Ikegami's study of the pacification of the Samurai warriors in Japan.<sup>43</sup> Or, more recently, Roderic Broadhurst and his colleagues' study of civilising processes in post-traumatic Cambodia.<sup>44</sup> Or my own study of how Elias's ideas apply to the history of the US.<sup>45</sup> Admittedly, the US is generally viewed as an offshoot of Europe; Louis Hartz spoke of it as a 'fragment society' that broke off from Europe in the early modern period but retained many of its characteristics.<sup>46</sup> A balancing view is expressed by Charles Jones, Hispanist and IR scholar, who argues that the US is considerably less like Europe than Europeans (and many Americans) are inclined to believe, and more like Latin America – for example in its levels of internal violence, racism, religiosity, and environmental irresponsibility.<sup>47</sup> What I found was that most of the *part-processes* identified by Elias in Europe were at work in the course of US history, but that they intertwined in ways and in sequences that produced somewhat different outcomes, different 'flavours' of habitus.<sup>48</sup> That is to be expected: Elias always saw the need to adjust and refine his theory in the light of further research,<sup>49</sup> and perhaps the same prove to be true of Linklater's thesis when it is tested on non-Western, or global states-systems. Indeed, the various part-processes of habitus-formation did not unfold uniformly within Europe, whether between countries or between strata within a country.<sup>50</sup>

On the other hand, when in discussing the possibility of a 'global civilising process' Linklater says, 'The civilising process was not a series of separate tendencies within different states ... It spread from the French court to other court societies' (*PH*, p. 175), he skates a little too close to representing the global process as diffusion from Europe. Elias rather stressed the possibility of 'separate tendencies'.

## II. Does Linklater's thesis, like Elias's, rest on Freudian foundations and over-generalise about human psychology?

Central to Linklater's argument, as to Elias's, is the proposition that more complex and larger-scale webs of interdependence exert pressures on the people caught up in them more habitually to exert

<sup>43</sup> Eiko Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995).

<sup>44</sup> Roderic Broadhurst, Thierry Bouhours, and Brigitte Bouhours, *Violence and the Civilising Process in Cambodia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). See also Georg Stauth, 'Elias in Singapore: Civilizing processes in a tropical city', *Thesis Eleven*, 50:1 (1997), pp. 51–70; and Stephen Mennell, 'Asia and Europe: Comparing civilising processes', in Johan Goudsblom, Eric Jones, and Stephen Mennell, *The Course of Human History* (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), ch. 7, pp. 117–34.

<sup>45</sup> Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*.

<sup>46</sup> Louis Hartz, *The Founding of New Societies: Studies in the History of the United States, Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).

<sup>47</sup> Charles A. Jones, *American Civilization* (London: Institute for the Study of the Americas, 2007).

<sup>48</sup> For example, it has been suggested that the high level of gun ownership and gun violence in the US is in part explained by the fact that political democratisation had taken place there before an effective state monopoly of the means of violence had been established. See Pieter Spierenburg, 'Democracy came too early: a tentative explanation for the problem of American homicide', *American Historical Review*, 111:1 (2006), pp. 104–14.

<sup>49</sup> When colleagues like me pointed out details that seemed not to fit into his theory of civilising processes, Elias always responded, in the best scientific spirit, 'Then, Stephen my dear, we must do more research.'

<sup>50</sup> See Elias, *Studies on the Germans*.

'self-constraint' over themselves. This is not a question just of 'more self-control'; people in smaller-scale societies are known to have been capable of extraordinary stoical self-control.<sup>51</sup> As noted above, it is a matter of tilting the *balance between* 'external constraints' and 'self-constraints', though both continue always to play a part in the steering of behaviour. The self-constraints become more internalised, and operate more automatically in more circumstances, and are embodied not just (to varying extents) in individual people's personalities but also in the prevailing social standards of behaviour and emotion management. Increasing pressure to exercise foresight, to see further down longer chains of interdependence, and a widening of the circle of human sympathy, are components of Elias's theory, as they are also in Linklater's vision of a growing 'cosmopolitan responsibility' in international relations.

But are these *universal* processes? Freud was accused of overgeneralising from the psychopathologies of Europeans, or even perhaps of *fin de siècle* Viennese, and a similar accusation has been levelled at Elias, because in his earlier work especially he sometimes uses Freudian terms such as 'superego formation'. Linklater makes only fleeting reference to Freud (V&C, pp. 232, 343), but could his reliance on Elias imply a reliance on Freud? I think not. For one thing, in a paper written at the very end of his life, Elias made explicit what had been his implicit processual remodelling of Freud.<sup>52</sup> He recast the principal Freudian entities (id, ego, superego, and many more) in processual terms, ridding the theory of all trace of inherent 'instincts'. What is retained, and what I think is indispensable, is the idea of the steering of conduct always involving a tension between impulses and impulse controls – *both of which* are socially shaped, not inherent.

The relevance of this to Linklater's thesis is that it does not involve the pursuit of law-like eternal principles of the sort that Waltz tried to set out as the basis of his 'neorealism'.<sup>53</sup> There is no psychologically-based 'aggressive drive', nor is there any inherent boundary of mutual identification – so nothing analogous to Freud's model of a conflict between Eros and Thanatos. As in Elias, changes in habitus are explained through a sort of evolutionary selection mechanism:<sup>54</sup> he pointed out, for example, that an ability readily to give vent to aggression had survival advantages among medieval warriors, but impetuous aggressiveness was already a disadvantage on early seventeenth-century battlefields, and on busy modern roads the survival advantage rests with those who are best able to restrain their impulses and exercise habitual foresight.<sup>55</sup> Linklater's work abounds in historical illustrations of this principle.

### III. Do Linklater's and Elias's theses imply 'inevitable' progress?

If Linklater is not seeking eternal verities, he is certainly pursuing something more than old-fashioned 'one damn thing after another' unstructured historiography. As Elias pointed out in his discussion of

<sup>51</sup> See Elias's remarks about Native American warriors' endurance of pain, in *An Essay on Time* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2007 [Collected Works, vol. 9]), pp. 128–30; and about monastic asceticism, in *On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 119.

<sup>52</sup> Norbert Elias, 'Freud's concept of society and beyond it', *Supplements and Index*, pp. 13–52.

<sup>53</sup> Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1979). For a fuller discussion of Waltz in relation to Elias, see John M. Hobson, 'Reconfiguring Elias: Historical sociology, the English School, and the challenge of international relations', *Human Figurations*, 1:2 (2012), available at: (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0001.206/-reconfiguring-elias-historical-sociology-the-english-school?rgn=main;view=fulltext>) accessed 25 February 2017.

<sup>54</sup> Elias, however, always restricted the word 'evolution' to (irreversible) biological processes, and spoke of 'development' in (reversible) social processes.

<sup>55</sup> Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, pp. 406–7, 447.

'the problem of inevitability',<sup>56</sup> one may not be able exactly to predict the future, but one can establish the 'immanent order of change'<sup>57</sup> and at least throw light on the likelihood of changes in some directions rather than others. The study of 'figurational dynamics', 'the structure of processes', or 'sequential order' can perhaps be translated into conventional philosophy of science as involving the study of 'tendency statements', which Gibson defined as 'statements about what would always happen in the absence of interfering conditions'.<sup>58</sup>

Elias's incautious early remark that the elimination contest between (medieval European) states 'proceeds like clockwork'<sup>59</sup> was misleading: the image is not of the steady uniform ticking of a clock, but more that of a clockwork toy that proceeds in one direction until it hits an obstacle or falls off a cliff. Above all, though, potential reversibility lurks through Elias's, and Linklater's thinking:

The armour of civilised conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today.<sup>60</sup>

Yet we may still ask whether, even if Elias's civilising processes and the long-term trend that Linklater finds in international relations are not 'inevitable', might Linklater still be a bit too optimistic about the present and future?

### Today: Cosmopolitan *irresponsibility*?

Elias's early work is often misunderstood: Sir Edmund Leach was typical of many in arguing that at the very time that Elias was formulating his thesis, 'Hitler was refuting the argument on the grandest scale.'<sup>61</sup> Elias was not naïve: he had fought in the First World War, then witnessed the violence and instability of the Weimar Republic and the rise of Hitler. The point of *On the Process of Civilisation* is really the fragility of the veneer of 'civilisation', not a celebration of its inevitability. His later work is overtly pessimistic in tone: he feared the nuclear annihilation of humanity.<sup>62</sup>

As already remarked, Elias made clear that the internal pacification of more extensive territory went along with bigger wars between neighbouring territories, and why that was so. Johan Goudsblom has called this 'the paradox of pacification'.<sup>63</sup> He quotes the old adage that 'if you want peace, prepare for war', but remarks that it is equally true that if you want to wage war with some chance of winning, you have to see to peace within your own ranks. State formation involves the organisation of violence, and the paradox arises from the civilising constraints that that organisation entails. 'Organised violence is generally far more effective than unorganised violence. To be effective,

<sup>56</sup> Elias, *What is Sociology?*, ch. 6.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 145.

<sup>58</sup> Quentin Gibson, *The Logic of Social Enquiry* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960), p. 139.

<sup>59</sup> Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 297.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 576. Perversely, but quite characteristically, Elias tucked away this point, fundamental to his theory, in a long footnote about standards of cleanliness; in the definitive Collected Works edition, it is printed as an appendix, given the title 'On cleanliness and the crumbling of the armour of civilised conduct', *ibid.*, pp. 573–6.

<sup>61</sup> Edmund Leach, 'Violence', *London Review of Books* (23 October 1986).

<sup>62</sup> See, for example Elias, *Humana Conditio*.

<sup>63</sup> Johan Goudsblom, *Stof waar honger uit ontstond: Over evolutie en sociale processen* (Amsterdam: Meulenhoff, 2001), pp. 94–111. An English version of the argument, 'The paradox of pacification', can be found at: (<http://www.norberteliasfoundation.nl/network/essays.php>).

however, it requires a high degree of internal pacification. Those who participate in exercising it must not fight each other.' What does this mean in today's world?

As Nico Wilterdink has argued,<sup>64</sup> national elites until fairly recently had an incentive to take care of, to feel some degree of identification with, the lower orders in their countries, because they were aware that they might well be calling upon on the lower orders to serve as soldiers in wars. But in today's globalised world the mega-rich (and mega-powerful) who assemble annually in Davos foresee no such wars and, although they may identify closely *with each other* internationally, have no great reason to pay much attention to the needs of the more vulnerable strata within each country. Or, as Linklater puts it in his discussion of 'cosmopolitan responsibility':

Cosmopolitan theorists are engaged in the promotion of new patterns of 'conscience formation' at a time when widening global inequalities have the effect that the most affluent social strata have even fewer incentives to calculate the political costs of indifference to distant suffering; in that context, the capacity for emotional identification with those who are most seriously exposed to the adverse effects of 'organised irresponsibility' is further weakened.<sup>65</sup>

This goes some way to explain how some recent world-historical disasters, such as 'Brexit' and the election of Donald Trump – or before that, America's invasion of Iraq, and numerous other destabilising interventions worldwide – came to occur. But it is better to see the tension between 'cosmopolitan responsibility' and 'organised irresponsibility' in the context of another idea that has been important in Linklater's work: 'the duality of normative codes within the nation state'.<sup>66</sup>

In his original discussion of this duality, Elias wrote that:

However they may be organised, most of the sovereign interdependent nation states which together form the balance-of-power figuration in the twentieth century produce a two-fold code of norms whose demands are inherently contradictory: a moral code descended from that of rising sections of the *tiers état*, egalitarian in character, and whose highest value is 'man' – the human individual as such; and a nationalist code descended from the Machiavellian code of princes and ruling aristocracies, inegalitarian in character, and whose highest value is a collectivity – the state, the country, the nation to which an individual belongs.<sup>67</sup>

Both codes are characteristic, simultaneously, of modern states. The loose talk of 'our shared values' is obviously rooted in the bourgeois, egalitarian code, and Linklater (like Wight before him) sees the possibility of there growing out of it a global civilising process and a cosmopolitan sensibility. On the other hand it is certainly also true that, when they are able to, nation states will also behave in line with the more Machiavellian code stemming from the ancient world of princes; 'realist' theoreticians in International Relations are in effect dwelling mainly on this side of a duality and tension-balance. It is necessary to recognise that in the real world, as well as in IR theory, it is the tension-balance that should be centrally in focus.

<sup>64</sup> Nico Wilterdink, 'The internationalization of capital and trends in income inequality in Western societies', in Don Kalb et al. (eds), *The Ends of Globalization* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), pp. 187–200.

<sup>65</sup> Linklater, *Violence and Civilization*, p. 454. Here Linklater claims to be paraphrasing my own argument, in *The American Civilizing Process*, pp. 305–10, although I was thinking about the growing inequalities *within* states such as the US and the UK.

<sup>66</sup> Linklater refers to this idea in *V&C*, pp. 358, 393, 398, 434.

<sup>67</sup> Elias, *Studies on the Germans*, p. 169.

Which way the balance tilts in the actions of states, and now of systems of states, depends on the shifting power ratios that prevail among potential rivals and adversaries. To put it more plainly, it depends on what the leaders know they can get away with. If one is sufficiently powerful, to talk of shared values, human rights and the rest is a useful tool, but a more bluntly 'realist' view was Harold Pinter's memorable summary of US foreign policy as 'Kiss my arse or I'll kick your head in.'<sup>68</sup>

Detailed research may (or may not) reveal to what extent international leaders are conscious of the tension between what they say and what they do. There are reasons to believe that unequal balances of power, whether in international relations or social relations more generally, systematically and perhaps universally distort the reciprocal perceptions of the more and less powerful parties to them. In one recent essay, I explored this proposition through an examination of the Ukraine crisis of 2014 (and continuing), showing how America and its Western allies to a greater or lesser degree have raged against Russian 'aggression', while apparently quite oblivious to their own aggressive meddling in eastern Europe that provoked the Russian response.<sup>69</sup> This argument was derived from Norbert Elias's theory of established-outsider relations, one component of which is the tendency of more powerful groups to construct an image of themselves in terms of a 'minority of the best' – their most meritorious features – while stereotyping weaker groups in terms of a 'minority of the worst'.<sup>70</sup> The less powerful party in a very unequal power ratio typically sees and understands far more about the more powerful partner than the more powerful partner does about the less.<sup>71</sup> People throughout the world know a vast amount about the US, its constitution, its politics, its cultural products, its way of life in general. The perception is not reciprocal. It is as if we were sitting behind a one-way mirror observing them, but when they look in our direction all they see is their own reflection.

Madeleine Albright remarked that, 'If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.'<sup>72</sup> I would seriously question Albright's last assertion, about seeing further. As I have argued, the Americans' central historic experience is of their country constantly becoming more powerful relative to its neighbours.<sup>73</sup> This has had long-term and all-pervasive effects on the way they see themselves, on how they perceive the rest of the world, and on how others see them. Crucially, becoming *more* powerful relative to others is precisely *not* conducive to farsightedness, nor to more 'civilised' behaviour vis-à-vis other states.<sup>74</sup>

In contrast, it is widely agreed that the early twenty-first century may mark an historical turning point, after which for the first time in its history the US begins gradually to become relatively *less* powerful vis-à-vis its major rivals. *Ceteris paribus*, that ought to foster greater foresight in world affairs.

<sup>68</sup> Harold Pinter, *Various Voices: Prose, Poetry, Politics 1948–2005* (rev. edn, London: Faber and Faber, 2005), pp. 198–9.

<sup>69</sup> Stephen Mennell, 'Explaining American hypocrisy', *Human Figurations*, 4:2 (2015), available at: {<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/h/humfig/11217607.0004.202/~explaining-american-hypocrisy?rgn=main;view=fulltext>}.

<sup>70</sup> Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2008 [Collected Works, vol. 4]), especially ch. 7, 'Observations on gossip', pp. 122–36. Cf. Linklater, *V&C*, p. 230.

<sup>71</sup> The point was made by Hegel in his discussion of the master-slave relationship; see G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 111, and today it is a key point in postcolonial theory.

<sup>72</sup> Quoted by John Mearsheimer, 'Why is Europe so peaceful?', keynote address to European Consortium for Political Research, Potsdam (11 September 2009).

<sup>73</sup> Stephen Mennell, *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), pp. 311–14.

<sup>74</sup> A great deal of evidence that supports my hypothesis has been presented by Andrew Alexander in his study of US foreign policy since 1945, *America and the Imperialism of Ignorance* (London: Biteback, 2011).

The problem, however, is that while restraint and foresight dictate the pursuit of multilateralism, that principle clashes with all sorts of magical-mythical world views prevalent in America among the fantasists who think that the US can and should go it alone. Nation-centred identification stands in the way of power sharing and other concessions to others, which from the fantasists' point of view appear to involve a loss of status (also obviously important in Britain's vote to leave the European Union).<sup>75</sup>

Can foreign policy be coldly 'realist' (in the sense in which the term is used in IR) when *internal* public opinion and public knowledge is low in what Elias called 'reality congruence', and high in magical-mythical thinking? It is not just that among the American population there is an extraordinarily high incidence of belief in the supernatural,<sup>76</sup> though that is dangerous enough. Nor is it just that the superficial democracy of American public discourse, which accords a measure of respect and equality to uninformed opinion in defiance of scientific findings on climate change for example – uninformed opinion encouraged, incidentally, by business interests resisting the curbs on their short-term profits that would result from taking a longer-term view in the interest of the planet as whole. It is also that a mass of survey data shows that a large proportion of American citizens are profoundly and astonishingly ignorant of the 95 per cent of the globe's population that lives outside the frontiers of the US.

The 2002 *Security Strategy of the USA* amounted to a declaration of the US's right to intervene anywhere in the world in defence of its interests.<sup>77</sup> And it isn't just a matter of US *government policy*; as John Mearsheimer has remarked, 'Most Americans believe that their country has both a moral and strategic responsibility to intervene in the daily life of countries all around the globe.'<sup>78</sup> But most students of history and International Relations do not think that this can be achieved by a single superpower acting unilaterally. For one thing, if Elias is right, *steady, consistent* pressure is most conducive to the conversion of external into civilised self-constraint – something that appears to be true of national and international elites as well as children. It is true that the web of globalisation under American leadership is exerting subtler pressures. But then again, it seems likely that what was once the 'Washington consensus' model of vast persisting inequalities of economic and political power both *within* and *between* states would prove to be an unstable foundation for a civilised world democracy. Moreover, if the US's global hegemony is beginning (relatively) to diminish, one can predict from Eliasian principles that it will become a *more* dangerous force in world affairs.

My own tentative guess is that Linklater is probably right about the very long-term trend of international relations globally, but that we are likely to go over some big bumps in the road over the next generation or so. The fact that he is concerned with the conditions necessary for the emergence of something as morally-charged as 'cosmopolitan responsibility' may, however, mislead readers. He is not remotely an advocate of the philosophical idealist discourse about 'shared values' that has so bedevilled Western foreign policy – a hangover from American sociology of the 1950s into the more banal speeches of politicians today. *The Problem of Harm in World Politics and Violence and*

<sup>75</sup> This a good example of the 'drag effect of habitus' discussed by Elias in *The Society of Individuals* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2010 [Collected Works, vol. 10]), pp. 188–90, 196.

<sup>76</sup> See Mennell, *American Civilizing Process*, ch. 11, 'Involvement, detachment and American religiosity', pp. 266–93.

<sup>77</sup> United States Government, *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2002).

<sup>78</sup> John Mearsheimer, 'Why is Europe peaceful today?', *European Political Science*, 9 (2010), p. 389.

*Civilization in the Western States-Systems* show that it is necessary to study how such ‘values’ arise sociogenetically and psychogenetically; and to understand that, once they arise, they are not a free-floating driver of international goodwill and enlightenment, but rather stand on structural foundations that cannot be taken for granted.

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## **Biographical information**

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