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Introduction

Being born into a certain generation affects the mindset: regardless of the different subsequent outlooks people adapt, all those born within a decade of one another will share certain social assumptions which impinge upon concepts of nationhood, empire and self. For example, Angus Calder reminds us that Churchill and the generation of British political leaders in the second World War «had all been in their thirties before the first World War had clouded the skies of the Empire on which the sun never set».

Highlighting the birth dates of both Conservative and Labour figures is a way of illustrating the continuities of mental landscape and its consequences in the wartime policy consensus. For example, Anthony Eden, the handsome “housewives favourite” Tory politician then in his forties who would later succeed the old warhorse Churchill. Born in 1897, he:

[H]ad been old enough to hear the Elgarian strains of national greatness at their loudest before the din of guns had drowned them. While the Conservative Party was emotionally committed to Empire for its own sake, Labour was intellectually committed to its mutation through self-government, into something less brazenly British...potentially an immense power for good in the world (Calder 1969: 99).

In 1956, Eden infamously ordered British troops in to defend “our” Suez Canal in Egypt against...the Egyptians. The social democrat Labour Party opposed this diehard imperial venture - which was to fail so ignominiously - but championed the British “Commonwealth” as an alternative post-imperial figuration: they only withdrew from empire slowly, implanting maximum ‘divide and rule’ within the new independent states as they threw off their shackles during Labour’s government of 1945-51.

Elias was born in the same year as Eden, to a liberal German-Jewish *petit bourgeois* family in what was then Eastern Germany, now understood to have been an occupied Polish town. Anyone who has visited the terrifying line of Teutonic fortresses running up Poland’s River Wisla through Touran, Nove and Grudziadz, climaxing at the magnificent castle at Malbork (Marienbad), will recognise the imperial interests wrapped up in the Prussian/German sense of nationhood ever since mediaeval times. Prussia in 1897 was, of course, the powerful engine of a newly united German nation whose success had so thoroughly militarised the outlook of its middle-class. As a sociologist the “German question” was unavoidably central to Elias’s generation - as it had been to the founding fathers of history and philosophy throughout the century.



Unification and civilisation

Marx had commented extensively upon how Germany's failure to unify the state through bourgeois leadership in 1848 had bred the *realpolitik* mentality – “unification by any means necessary”, above liberal notions of a more civilised and democratic path to nationhood. This was epitomised by the case of Mommsen, the renowned German classicist whose *History of Rome*, written in the 1850s, describes a heroic but defeated political struggle for democracy and freedom in Rome's late republic that was to transform itself into an autocratic empire. Despite his championing of liberalism and life-long opposition to Prussian militarism even he, in 1862, embraced Bismarck and approved the use of troops to ensure independence for his region of Schleswig-Holstein. Weber took a more consistently reactionary position: aiming to confound the power of Marxism – represented institutionally by Germany's growing Social Democrat party - and above all to justify the necessity of military state-making he christened Germany's a *sonderweg* or “special path” to the modern world of figurations of nation-states. His attitude was that of a previous generation to Elias who faced a personal nemesis with the national breakdown of “organised capitalism” in Germany through the 1914-18 war (Allen 2004). Elias strongly disagreed with Weber's political support for Kaiser and country, he was horrified by the experience of the war. This horror was confirmed personally, as a wartime ambulance driver in the midst of this terrifying new episode of barbarism on an industrial scale, and politically, as his country imploded in slow motion revolution and counter-revolution over the next twenty years.

In *The Germans* written later in life, Elias recalls seeing the corpse of a former Communist schoolmate «found in the Breslau city moat, tied up with barbed wire...murdered as politically undesirable by members of the *Freikorps*» (Elias 1989: 186). That winter of 1918-19 was pulling his country apart in all directions: Soldiers for and against the revolution of November 1918, the January massacre of the Communists – a tragic reversal of Russia's triumphant uprising, all political values seemed to be thrown to the winds – particularly by the transformation of the officially Marxist Social democratic party from being cast as “enemy of the people” to its new role as the only hope for rescuing the despotic brand of “organised capitalism” that teetered on the brink of collapse. Elias resolved to better understand this social whirlpool of modernity by using sociology's methods far more rigorously than he felt his so-called radical colleagues were doing: To steer a path between the *Scylla* of Bismarck and Weber and the *Charybdis* of the likes of Ebert and Kautsky. In the next decade he would observe at close quarters the drift of Heidegger into the first set of rocks and was in no doubt that this fascist danger was the greatest threat to a civilised society. He sought the key to understanding the current crisis by analysing long-term changes to European societies transforming from feudalism into modernity, a civilising process.

Throughout the 1920s he was also a witness to the stresses and strains placed upon the whole German constitution through the civilising process of interdependent European governance by a range of state leaders of the “advanced world” that was framed by the Versailles treaty and formation of the League of Nations. A recent account describes the scene and the attitude of French negotiator Leon Bourgeois: «the French idea was an enlarged defensive alliance against a revived Germany. Bourgeois proposed that only a thoroughly reformed and disarmed Germany could be admitted to the League» (Steiner 2007: 43). This way of thinking was, in Steiner's opinion, not the stab in the back that so many later apologists for German expansionism were to claim: but rather probably the least bad compromise available without even greater political instability, while certainly no lasting solution to this dramatic crisis of war and revolution. International cooperation between the rulers of self-interested state regimes will always favour the most powerful, specifically the “victors” and “punish” the defeated. The British therefore «institutionalized the system of colonialism... [and had] placed the partition of the German and Turkish empires high on their list of priorities»



(Steiner 2007: 44-43). This process of regulating other people's territories - allegedly in the international interest, whatever that may be - was always going to be seen as a "civilising offensive" by the "losers", who would, inevitably resent and resist it. Elias claimed the Allies «allowed Germany an army of 100 000 instead of 400 000. This meant a radical reduction of the officer corps...Where would they go? The voluntary associations of the *Freikorps* were the answer». The military remained a post-Versailles menace to German democracy: «Alluding to the Russian Revolution and the danger of its spreading, it had the support of countless middle class and noble supporters» (Elias 1989: 189-190). The American League of Nations delegate House's speech on the matter sounds like a self-fulfilling prophecy of doom:

[I]f after establishing the League, we were so stupid as to let Germany train and arm a large army and again become a menace to the world, we would deserve the fate which folly would bring us (Steiner 2007: 48).

Robert Fisk recalls the irony that the British called World War One «The Great War for Civilisation» (Fisk 2006: xvii), with medals struck to commemorate its uplifting mission. To make further cross-generational and international comparisons, if Weber's attitude reflects the bellicose imperialism of a Churchill then Elias, his opponent, is more like his wartime cabinet colleague and Labour leader Atlee – a reserved advocate of a totally different set of values than his predecessor: a representative of a more consensual set of international and national relations, which rising complexity and interdependency necessitated in place of Empire and War. However, Elias certainly didn't see himself as a social democrat. He had grown up in an era of economic crisis, revolution and war where the party of German social democracy (the SPD) was making policies that were, to his eyes, reprehensible. In 1914 they infamously voted for war credits and fell in with the Kaiser's war drive. By 1915 «the ever-lengthening lists of the dead and missing "fallen on the field of honour", sounded the death-knell of the illusions which the Social Democrats encouraged in 1914» (Broue 2006: 59). In 1917, when a democratic revolution overthrew the Tsar – surely the very goal social democracy was created for – the SPD paper, ironically entitled "Forward" warned:

The mad hope of seeing events like those in Russia could cost the lives of hundreds of thousands of men on the battlefield. (Broue 2006: 93).

In 1918, it had appeared to make war upon itself: a Communist Party led by its most famous left-wingers, Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg, emerged from its left flank, whilst its right became the embattled government of a country defeated in war – whose soldiers and citizens were emulating neighbouring Russia's revolution of the previous year. In 1919 it crushed the first wave of the German Revolution: SPD leaders ordered the Nazi-prototype *Freikorps* groups of soldiers to assassinate Liebknecht and Luxemburg. The party's right wing leader President Ebert had bred this proto-Nazi monster, provocatively proclaiming to defeated troops in a tirade of bellicose denial: «I salute you, who return unvanquished from the field of battle» (Steiner 2007: 11). Elias attributes this to «the high dependency of the Weimar government on the semi-autonomous army...These two groups, represented by Ebert and Groener, formed a kind of alliance» (Elias 1989: 219). The centre of the party, led by Karl Kautsky, also split away from this reactionary leadership, forming the USPD. The only certainty in German politics, it appeared, was uncertainty - with little hope of the new state surviving the stresses and strains upon its *res publica*. Elias' summary, recalling these years in 1984, was ominous:

On the one hand there was a very powerful working class movement, above all in the Social Democrats and the trade unions, with a circle of intellectuals at the universities and elsewhere, and on the other hand the massive block...of the middle and upper classes, which were opposed to the Social Democratic Party with a bitterness that is hardly imaginable today...The right were only too conscious of their power and one could see the balance of power gradually inclining in their favour (Elias 1994: 42).



Little wonder then that Elias became fixated with why certain European nations' development – although at times as bellicose and imperialist as Germany's – had led to such different state formations with more stable parliamentary forms better able to survive the early 20th century. Long-term trends incorporating the warlike feudal classes in the diplomatic machinery of the court clustering around the absolute monarch seemed to have been a “civilizing process” in France as he showed in *The Court Society*. He described the civilising process (TCP) literally, demonstrating the use of reforming social etiquette between members of the dominant classes, which in itself creates the new *habitus* or lifeworld of values. These courtiers understood that absolute power lay with the king so they courted it. TCP is therefore socially progressive, Elias believed in the possibility of progress, in the long-term. By citing d'Holbach in the books closing statement he shows he shares his enlightenment values - and certainly doesn't disagree with the mainstream view that upholds the French revolution as the model for progress in modernity. The implication was that a similar process had pacified and unified the “national interest” in Britain following parliament's neutering of the monarchy via 1688's “Glorious Revolution”. By drawing Britain into the research field of comparative Western European state-making Elias, like Weber, revisits the “Britain, France, Germany” triangle to analyse the transition from feudalism to capitalism: Like Marx, he casts his own nation as the outsider – the exception to the civilising process:

Germany – itself only recently risen – after 1870 – from an often humiliating, low-status position among the established European nation states to a position of relatively great power. Its consciousness of status and identity was therefore particularly insecure and vulnerable compared to that of other long-unified nations (Elias 1994: 124).

The patterns of the *sonderweg*, i.e. modern Germany's state formation processes, has certainly oscillated between low and high status in the league table of most powerful European states, as the table of historical periods below illustrates:

<i>Era of rising status</i>	<i>“humiliating, low-status position”</i>
1870 – 1914	pre. 1870
1919 – 1941	1919 – 1929
1960 – 1990 (West only)	1945-1960
1990 – now (united)	

By contrast, in England and in Britain, Elias hails “the genesis of the naval profession” to explain how the technical advances in 17th and 18th century navies demanded a shift from the dull compulsion of commanders demanding the crew's obedience, to the more advanced mentalities of dynamic co-operation between officers and crew necessary to manage these complex machines. This in turn bred the type of entrepreneurialism that so effectively exploited overseas colonies and led to subsequent British commercial and imperial success (Elias 1950).

Germany's dilemma of state instability conferred by much-delayed unification, and subsequent lack of ability to absorb the social pressures of industrialisation within long-established institutions along French or British lines affected other European states also. If sociologists were to avoid backing military forces as the only available glue to hold the nation together they needed an alternative strategy. Weber had backed the Kaiser's war drive in Germany and subsequently Croce backed Mussolini in interwar Italy. Elias certainly



did not share Weber's positive evaluation of Germany's *sonderweg*. He may not have welcomed Germany's perilous circumstances of December 1918, but recalled «the feeling of being defeated was balanced by the good fortune that the Kaiser had gone» (Elias 1994: 29).

Gramsci, like Elias, sought an alternative and saw his country's extremely uneven development – «too full of feudal remnants» - with its accompanying preservation of pre-modern social structures across much of the peninsula, as a barrier to the leadership of social movements by the working class which he felt was necessary to defeat fascism and make the new order he encouraged among the Turin factory workers (Callinicos 2007: 164). He joined the Communists, despite tactical differences with the likes of Bordiga, whereas Elias never tied himself to the evolving figurations of either social democracy or Communism. When asked whether «you had a special aversion to partisan feeling», he replied:

I hated the disguise, not the partisanship, I was partisan myself... All my friends were of the left, and in this confrontation I sympathised thoroughly with what the left did in the struggle and I did my best to help. But the left's ideology was unrealistic (Elias 1994: 44).

However, looking at these trends in an international context, the striking point about the German and Italian journey from bourgeois democracy to fascism between the wars is that they shared many features with a number of European countries: The scenario where organised capitalism faces militant opposition from workers and their new social democratic parties, whilst military rulers threatened and sometimes executed a bloody reaction, emerged in Hungary and Britain in 1918-19 as well as Germany and Russia. In the late 1920s and early 1930s populist social democratic governments threatened to transform Austria, France and Spain and were repressed by military invasion and civil war. The interwar decades were an era of unstable states and their international relations: This attempt at the liberal government of Europe collapsed – They were «The Lights that Failed» (Steiner: 2007). Organised capitalism, administered by state leaders determined to overhaul domestic economies and international relations - in order to prevent future wars and revolutions - ultimately failed so to do. This view of the period as one of war, revolution and collapse in international relations due to extremes of economic instability, is now sufficiently self-evident as to be in the mainstream of history.

Weimar: promise and tragedy

Elias was well aware growing up in Weimar that «those who talked before 1945 about a German *sonderweg* were more often inclined to endow this with a positive value». Eley and Blackbourn demonstrate how the autocratic cast of the industrial magnates – running their factories and 'company towns' with brutal discipline, sacking and evicting workers – appeared to vindicate their approach of maximising profitability through an authoritarian stance, denying the working class both trade union representation and voting rights for as long as feasible. For the Wilhelmine regime:

Germany's special superiority was often defined vis-à-vis England. Treitschke was not alone in his dismissive view that the English confused soap and civilization (Blackbourn, Eley 1984: 3).

Even though the defeat of World War One marked the end of the Kaiser's personal rule, the strong military element within the body politic continued, as Elias describes above. Moreover, even amongst support-



ers of the parliament and social democracy, the belief that their country, with its “superior” culture would carve out a distinctive modernity - more advanced than the Allied powers - carried on into the Weimar years. Eric Weitz describes how «[t]he hyperactive vitality of Weimar culture, of its music, theatre, film, photography, derived its intensity from the act of revolution, from the psychological sense of engagement, the heady enthusiasm, the notion that all barriers had been broken and all things were possible» (Weitz 2007: 26).

This elation was understandable given the rapidity with which the old order was cast aside, and the dynamism of the new expanding economy of the 20s, buoyed up by American loans as their banks sought out profitable investments for the bulging pockets of US corporations. Weimar even survived the first fascist upsurge of the early 1920s, the Kapp putsch:

[H]eavily armed troops marched on Berlin and declared the Social Democrat government overthrown. The Social Democrats themselves simply fled. But the militant workers started to arm themselves, the trade unions declared a general strike, and Kapp and his supporters were ousted. Only then did the Social Democrats return, to re-impose ‘law and order’ with rigorous methods (Dewar 1989: 98).

So in 1919 and 1920 the SPD government and the German communists were fighting one another. This was the fruition of the development of “the great schism” within the German working class - «the dissolution of the Erfurt union of revolutionary and reformist forces under the pressure of a changing world» (Schorske 1983: 6).

By 1923, the economy collapsed – the middle class were “proletarianised” in a mind-boggling surge of inflation. In March the conversion rate was 240 deutsch marks to the British pound, by the summer 265 000 and by December 15 billion! (Dewar 1989: 105). For the growing Communist Party (KPD) and the mass of social democrat supporters, if not their parliamentary leaders, this crisis beckoned in capitalism’s bankruptcy – literally. Communist International leader Zinoviev claimed, «in Germany events are developing with the inexorability of fate...the Proletarian revolution is knocking at Germany’s door» (Broue 2006: xxiv); leading to Walter Benjamin’s caustic comment that «nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current» (Clement 2009: 418-9), epitomising a fatalistic optimism. Elias’ critique was similar, «the partisanship of the left was ...prone to untrue idealization and ideologies». They tragically underestimated the threat of fascism:

The Social Democrats and the unions believed – like my father – in the constitutional state...I went to a trade union to speak about my understanding of the situation...‘Gentlemen, what measures have you taken to defend this fine union building if you are attacked?’ The answer was a deep silence...they had never thought of such an event (Elias 1994: 17-44).

Elias in Marxburg

This was in Frankfurt in 1932, when Elias as assistant to Karl Mannheim taught in the sociology department at Frankfurt University. This was located in the “Marxburg” – that is, the ground floor of the famous Institute of Social Research building, which the university rented. The imminence of the Nazi takeover led him to clear the department of any incriminating papers as a precaution: Within a few days the SS called at his home and drove him down to the building where, he later discovered. «The Nazis were digging, they had the idea – just as in a detective story – that there must be an underground passage between the [SPD] *Volksstimme* and Horkheimer’s Institute» (Elias 1994: 48-9). These incidents are both a testimony to Elias’



partisan feelings and remind us of his close relations with the “Frankfurt School”. He was particularly friendly with its co-founder, Adorno. When, in 1938, Elias was casting about for sociological allies to review his *magnum opus* on *The Civilizing Process*, many of his contemporary academics seemed to share a benign faith in social democracy or socialism emerging out of the chaos of the day, whilst for the rest and the right this was all symptomatic of, in Spengler’s phrase, “the decline of the west” – a descent into the maelstrom that called for tyranny and authority to seize the ring of power from bankrupt democracy. His best hope it appears may have been his colleagues in the Institute for Social research at Frankfurt – who had long been declaring their interest in Elias’ central research question: How the process of civilisation emerges through time – the sociology of knowledge. Horkheimer wrote, in his programmatic preface to the first volume of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1932:

Among the problems of social research stands foremost the question of the relationship between the separate cultural spheres, their dependence on each other, the regularities in their transformation. One of the most important tasks for the resolution of this question is the construction of a social psychology meeting the requirements of history. Its promotion will be one of the journal’s special tasks (Schottker 1998: 50).

Elias wrote from London to Walter Benjamin, in Paris, in 1938 to solicit a review for his book *On the process of civilization* in the journal. He will have known that Benjamin was a noted founding influence upon both Horkheimer and Adorno, and had probably read his recent work, such as the article on Edward Fuchs published in the journal the previous year, and felt that here was someone prepared to analyse his discussion of civilisation¹. By importuning Benjamin, a German-Jewish sociologist in exile like himself, Elias was breaking with his normal habit of researching independently and not citing the many sociologists and historians who influenced his thinking: He was declaring an allegiance. In the course of their brief exchange of letters, at Benjamin’s insistence, he alludes to some of the events, debates and philosophies within German society of the previous century: The failed 1848 revolution, the triumph of Prussian militarism, empire and war, defeat – more revolution in 1919 and 1923 and still greater bloody reaction. This storm of social progress and disaster was accompanied by the evolution of Marxism and social democracy from banned advocates of revolution to legal boosters for “progress”. From the bitter-sweet promises of Edward Bernstein that “social evolution” inevitably raised up the working class to a better future, to the ‘left opposition’ within the SPD’s leadership - Karl Kautsky: He defended a brand of Marxism which was little better than Bernstein’s – Brown to his Blair. This ‘pope of Marxism’ supported the German war drive and opposed the Spartacist uprising, in his hands the creed had become a worthless dogma.

Benjamin had joined the Communists in the mid-20s, but by the mid-30s he was an open critic of an emerging Stalinism, its current show trials and the dreaded Nazi-Soviet pact to come. His principled revolutionary opposition to capitalism made him both a “Marxist opponent of progressivism” and a “Romantic advocate of materialism”: Adorno described him as «standing apart from all tendencies» (Lowy 2005: 2). He could see the kernel of fatalistic Social Democratic progressivism within the mindset of German Communists: convinced that Weimar’s capitalist crisis would inevitably usher in its progressive nemesis, many of them believed in the slogan “after Hitler, it will be us”. Margaret Dewar recalls how the KPD party cells collapsed in precipitative fashion upon Hitler’s coup in 1933, leaving the bulk of the membership and their supporters demoralised and looking for an explanation of what had gone wrong (Dewar 1989: 151). At

¹ The other name Elias tells Benjamin he would consider for reviewing his book is Eric Fromm, the pioneering Marxist psychoanalyst who worked with the Frankfurt school in its US exile.

their victorious election the Nazis were still outnumbered by the combined votes of the SPD and the KPD, and yet these parties of the left proved powerless to resist. Elias therefore, despite admiration for Marx, was disillusioned with “all methodological debates”: He had heard the case for Marxism in various forms for most of his adult life now – an inevitable by-product of the *habitus* for a sociologist living in the cockpit of western capitalism’s greatest and most long-term crisis in Germany from 1914-33. He appealed to Benjamin to rather regard practice as “the test of history”:

It seems to me, that better than all methodological debates - of which, I am sure in this respect you and I have very similar views, we have had more than enough in Germany – is practice, the concrete research which we are all dedicated to (Schottker 1998: 56).

Unfortunately, Benjamin chose to see Elias’ lack of commitment to “methodology” as a form of idealism. So, even though he described TCP as “gripping”, he declared himself unwilling to review the work. This was more of a misunderstanding rather than a real difference of opinion with Elias’ way of thinking: We were deprived of a later response by Benjamin’s tragic suicide whilst pursued by the Nazis in 1940. An idea of his traumatised state of mind at this “midnight of the century”² is provided by his 1938 writings on Baudelaire and the Paris of the Second Empire:

The resistance that modernity offers to the natural productive élan of an individual is out of all proportion to his strength. It is understandable if a person becomes exhausted and takes refuge in death. Modernity must stand under the sign of suicide, an act which seals a heroic will that makes no concessions to a mentality inimical toward this will. Such a suicide is not resignation but heroic passion (Benjamin 2003: 45).

Besides his disagreement with the teleology of progressivism in its social democratic and communist colourations, Elias was drawn back in his late work *The Germans* (1989) to a long-term analysis of what other writers have called «the peculiarities of German history» (Blackbourn, Eley 1984). Given the momentous nature of the «rapid socioeconomic change which the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies referred to as the “great transformation” from feudal agrarian *Gemeinschaft* to industrial capitalist *Gesellschaft*» (Dale 2009), how did nineteenth century England avoid the class strife and revolutionary upsurge that Germany, Italy and the Hapsburg Empire experienced in their newly industrialised cities some fifty years later? Historians of mid-nineteenth century England note how leading Liberal politicians like Russell, Grey and Macaulay shifted from opposition to regulation in the name of *laissez faire* to voting for the Ten Hour Bill which finally limited working hours in 1847. Their reasons were outlined in the influential voice of the enlightened ruling class, *The Times*, which thundered:

A town of manufacturers and speculators is apt to leave the poor to shift for themselves, to stew in cellars and garrets...Something of a central authority is necessary to wrestle with the selfishness of wealth (Hammond, Hammond 1947: 216).

This reform prevented even greater social *anomie* and reinforced the power of state regulation to tame the market’s anti-social workings: By contrast, the German pattern of combined and uneven development imported a specific national dynamic into relations between the classes of rulers and the ruled: However, the alliance of “iron and rye”, which united industrialists and landowners in an authoritarian regime of limited suffrage, accompanied by serf-like working conditions in the mines and fields, could not prevent Germany’s metal factories breeding class struggle and communist methods as surely as those of St Petersburg

² The phrase was coined by Victor Serge to describe the twin political triumphs of Fascism and Stalinism.

and Glasgow. In this revolutionary era, political extremes gained support precisely because the conditions for class compromise and consensus were not present – ‘the centre cannot hold’ to use Yeats’ phrase from ‘Easter 1916’. Consent and co-option was ruled out, in Geoff Eley’s words:

In Germany the different factions of the bourgeoisie each had their own reasons for doubting the advantages of democratic change, but their common and justified assumption was that greater parliamentary powers would redound to the benefit of the SPD, by that time the largest single party. The existence of a radical workers’ party publicly committed to revolutionary socialism – a factor conspicuously missing in Edwardian Britain – more than anything else forestalled the chances of a ‘Gladstonian coalition’ (Blackbourn, Eley 1984: 122).

Schorske attributes the SPD’s existence to the fact that in 1848, «the working class, small though it was, made its debut on the political stage simultaneously with the revolutionary bourgeoisie...[who] recoiled from the revolution they had conjured up» (Scorske 1983: 1). By contrast, in Britain, the Chartists’ challenge faded away that year, leaving the Whigs and Tories unchallenged (Postgate 1955: 124-5). The reference to Gladstone recalls the ideas of Karl Polanyi’s *The Great Transformation* which described how social progress contains a “double movement” whereby state regulation “spontaneously” rescues markets from destroying social bonds «the demolition of society» (Polanyi 1945: 78). These successful British reforms, according to Polanyi, prevented the extremes of alienation that could have bred a revolt from desperation or seen the whole society slip back into a decivilising barbarism. Like his fellow-exile and contemporary Polanyi, whose friendship with Lukacs and Mannheim in pre-war Budapest suggests a further tie between the ideas and outlook of these two sociologists, Elias believed that long-term trends of rising interdependency and state formation would civilise the relations between different figurations. Polanyi explored both socialism and Marxism whilst tending towards a left-liberalism whilst in Hungary, before graduating leftward towards “guild-socialism” when in the Red Vienna of the late 1920s and 30s (Dale 2009). Elias comes across also as both an admirer of his father’s liberal bourgeois outlook, whilst himself being of a generation who needed to move beyond this viewpoint in his formative years of “storm and stress”. Regretfully, he found himself agreeing with Mannheim’s devastating demolition of both Max and Alfred Weber’s rationalism at the 1928 Sixth German Congress of Sociologists (Kilminster 2007), which concluded: «Understanding of the antithetical character of valuations and ideas rooted in antithetical being-situations was lacking...in liberals and democrats» (Elias 1994: 115).

Conclusion

This paper has aimed to situate our understanding of Elias within the cockpit of history which was post-Wilhelmine Weimar Germany. Real events – war, revolution, bourgeois republic and counter-revolutionary putsch, and real political forces - social democracy, communism³, liberalism and fascism – civilised and decivilised various constellations of classes or figurations. These short-term events were related to how states were formed, divided and reformed over longer periods under their specific national condi-

³ Elias saw Marx as a «colossal figure» and stated emphatically «the central role played in German sociology in the 1920s in the argument over the work of Marx and the materialist conception of history». He criticised the «actually existing Marxism» of the Soviet Union, where he recognised that the ending of bourgeois private property (industry) had not in itself made the state less authoritarian or empowered the people – «a massive increase in the power of state rulers, as compared to their widely dispersed subjects» (1994: 119-146). This concurs with Trotsky’s account of the rise of the Stalinist bureaucracy in *The Revolution Betrayed*, and even more with Cliff’s pathbreaking (1948) *State Capitalism in Russia*.



tions. This idea underpinned his *magnum opus* *The Civilizing Process* in 1938 and was still being reinforced in his later work, where he once again returned to the antinomies of his homeland in his 1989 work *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the 19th and 20th Centuries*. «Every future sociological theory», he wrote, «will contain at its core a theory of long-term social processes» (Elias 1994: 119).

As Marx predicted in 1845's *The German Ideology*, Germany's opportunity to forge a united nation through bourgeois revolution in 1848 failed – lacking the will to defeat the military forces of reaction illuminated its special path. The militarised landowning class instituted the nation state and the modernisation and advance of capitalism that followed in its wake was legislated by diktat rather than through the parliamentary methods of Britain's "Gladstonian coalition". This distortion of the "norms" of state formation processes was, in Elias' analysis, doomed through its inbuilt instability. Like a doctor diagnosing the patient, Elias pronounced Germany's development damaging to its health, liable to violent eruptions at the extremes of its body politic – ultimately leading to the "decivilizing spurt" of the Third Reich.

Germany today is hailed as one of the most stable European states, with its powerful industrial economy being the engine room of European growth, surrounded by its sickly neighbours prone to recession and austerity. Once again there is a mismatch – its economic power dwarfs its political influence in a continent of nation states. Germany's leaders point to this high-tech manufacturing power as a model for its ailing neighbouring economies, one they cannot follow. A common currency amongst uncommon conditions may result in a return of 'the German question' in future years.

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