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[Beyond Epistemological Ambiguities]
The Political Relevance of Elias Today[1]

"In einer ganz bestimmten Richtung…"

The sociology championed by Norbert Elias refers to a certain conception of social change. Considered in a very long-term perspective, unplanned social processes do not only seem to be structured but also "ordered". Throughout centuries, these processes are more precisely to be seen as having followed in a definite way (*in einer ganz bestimmten Richtung*, in Elias 1939 II: 444) the undetermined logics of social interdependencies of different kinds, demographical, military, economic, cultural ones. If one considers for example the Western history, for the five last centuries these dynamics have given the "direction" (or "orientation") for at least one aspect of the social and political development. Always increasing, growing and more and more complex, the interdependencies have led to always enlarging and more or less inner pacified social and political units (Elias 1939 II: 330-32).

Of course, the civilising process has neither a beginning nor an end. But does that mean that the social history of West European societies, which constitute the first field of investigation of Elias's sociology, has neither "meaning" nor any kind of "finality"? To the reader, and despite Elias's more or less explicit but forceful defence on such a subject, it is not so evident as expected to answer the last question by the negative. Of course, the civilising process, strictly speaking, particularly refers to the development of stronger and more even but also more and more nuanced self-restraint. To that extent, it would ever remain fragile, uncertain. The civilising process could – and actually did in some respects – be quite easily reversed by the fears, for instance by those caused by the wars or by the only risk of war (Elias 1939 I: 424n; 1939 II: 462). Therefore the civilising process as described by Elias is, of course, not linear and involves major de-civilising spurts. Nazism in general, and the holocaust above all, can even be considered as a "breakdown of civilisation", the worst if not the only one, that has been developing inside or at the fringes of the German and European civilising processes themselves (Elias 1996: 299-402). Nevertheless, beyond more or less profound regressions, the very powerful trends of monopolisation of power led by interdependencies throughout the ages would consist in processes that could not be stopped, even by the most destructive conflicts (Mennell 1998: 246-50). The outcome of the growing concurrency between modern states is, at the opposite, to be closely correlated with wars. As one of the results, a kind of negative integration of humanity as a whole can be described as objectively "inescapable" in the twentieth century, especially after that the nuclear weapons have been invented: "It is the whole of mankind which now constitutes the last effective survival unit" (Elias 1991: 226).

Referring to many passages of several texts from diverse periods, one could then wonder if social history, from a macro socio-political standpoint at least, does eventually not tend towards something like an "end", which is neither necessarily a happy nor, at the opposite, a tragic one. Even more evidently, formulating a hypothesis about the existence of an "end" is not based on the idea that global history has an "aim" that would be given by a "natural order" or a divine will, or that would be planned by human reason. It could only mean that history seems to find something like a relative ending at the point where interdependencies have become actually and definitely global. A related but different question would be to examine whether and to what extent "civilisation" can be considered as a "regulating ideal" revealing, in a Kantian manner, a possible horizon among others for the long-term unplan-

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ned social processes in general and for the civilising (and de-civilising) processes studied by Elias in particular. Here I am using the word "civilisation" in the strong, normative and positive significance that the term sometimes received in Elias's writings (see Elias 1996 for example). It refers then, not only to relative and progressive pacification and "detachment", which remain quite neutral concepts, but rather, briefly, to the idea of a widening circle of mutual identification between human beings as human beings (see Mennell 1998: 248-9; Linklater 2004).

There is nothing absurd in these two hypothesises regarding history of thought and modern and contemporary political philosophy. However, they seem to be hardly compatible if not totally conflicting with the "reality congruent" sociological approach that Elias theoretically and empirically advocated with a remarkable consistency, mainly by focusing on retrospective understanding explanation of long-term social processes in delimited periods of times and geographic areas. The next section therefore aims at pointing some of the hesitations or tensions that, inside Elias's sociology, deeply mark its major epistemological ambitions in my reading.

Elias's epistemology: beyond dichotomous thinking?

I have been told that Elias would have been highly irritated by the word epistemology in itself, moreover when used to characterize a part of its legacy as I have awkwardly done (Delmotte 2007). It is not surprising. If methodological work – and this is naturally its intention – can at some point serve the practice of the historian directly, it is indeed, by enabling him once and for all to escape from the danger of being imposed on by a philosophically embellished dilettantism. Only by laying bare and solving *substantive problems* can sciences be established and their methods developed. On the other hand, purely epistemological and methodological reflections have never played the crucial role in such developments.

Norbert Elias did not write that sentence but he could have done. Max Weber (2011: 114-5) did and some may find it a bit ironic considering the criticisms often formulated by Elias towards Weber's sociology, in "The Society of Individuals" (1991, written in 1939) or in *What is Sociology?* (1978) for instance. Nonetheless the fact remains that Weber's words actually express one of the criticisms that Elias will address later to Karl R. Popper, one of his favourite enemies, to whom he reminded, in his introduction to *Quest for Excitement*, the primacy of the scientific discovery in itself over the "logic" of scientific discovery (Elias and Dunning 2008).

And yet it has been said and repeated that Elias's sociology is deeply marked by a major feature that could be summed up by the will of refuting all kind of dichotomous thinking, and there is a true epistemological perspective. In other words, Elias's sociology gives itself the goal of overtaking the classical antithesis (notably individual/ society; history/structure; nature/culture) through a comprehensive approach of a new type, involving a refoundation of our categories of languages (Elias 1978). To this respect one can easily observe in his work at least two major ambitions that are so intimately correlated that one can say that they make one. Both of these ambitions are well known. The first would consist in studying individuals and society together in the frame of a relational perspective that would be able to overcome traditional quarrels between individualist and holist approaches. The second would be studying social processes of different kinds together through a long-term socio-historical approach that would avoid any kind of evolutionism or determinism. I would add that the topic of "involvement and detachment" summarises a third major ambition, partly dealing with the question of objectivity and neutrality of scientific knowledge and specificities of social sciences, in which objectivity cannot be naïvely considered as immediate, given once for all, socially and historically invariant (Elias 2007).

About the first, that is to say the individual/society dilemma, I argued elsewhere that Elias's sociology doesn't avoid completely going back to some moderate holistic and nuanced determinist options (Delmotte 2007: 162-170). I agree on that hypothesis with Pascal Michon who sees into that issue a major *point de rebroussement* in Elias's thought (Michon 1996: 75). In Elias's approach, "society" is of course nothing else than made of networks of individuals, interconnected or linked together by multiple chains of interdependencies. Nevertheless, that society or figuration gives at least a frame (although a moving, evolving one) which is already there when we are born and that we can modify, or interact with, only in a second time and only (very) secondarily or even only unconsciously. The question is not to know whether Elias nevertheless brings that way a convincing solution to the individual/society dilemma. What I would like to underline here is rather that such a move backward has to be considered as

a more or less minor auto-contradiction regarding one of Elias's major ambitions, although it is maybe, in a way, a necessary compromise when a "reality congruent" sociology is aimed.

Considering the third question, the one of involvement and detachment, I think that reading Elias, in the shadow, a quite hard positivist vision of scientific objectivity paradoxically remains. To my mind, there is something like a "gap" between his sociology of knowledge, on the one hand – where involvement and detachment evolve together through a true dialectical relationship (Corcuff 2002) – and, on the other hand, his "epistemological" more or less implicit normative assessments, where "pure detachment" sometimes appears as a surviving ideal that is opposed to any involvement and is at the end of the day unreachable excepted by physico-mathematical disciplines. Such an allegation is evidently exaggerated and deliberately provocative. There is no doubt that Elias's sociology is first of all made of nuances and that these nuances precisely make it precious. Elias's thought nevertheless contains slight contradictions, for some maybe due to the confrontational relationship fostered by Elias towards (idealist) philosophy and more broadly to a derived conception of normativity in social sciences (Elias 1994). Such minor discrepancies are not to be confused with maybe more substantial hesitations, for instance those we can find in analysis about Nazism and holocaust, about the degree, the significance and the explanation of the breakdown of civilisation in the perspective of a sociology of civilising and de-civilising processes. However that may be, both contradictions and hesitations are also precious if, thanks to these stimulating imperfections, Elias's sociology firmly allows us to think with and against itself, and moreover out of any kind of orthodoxy.

What about my second point, now, that concerned Elias's conception of history and changing societies? Once again, it simply couldn't be a matter of denying some evidences. First, civilising and de-civilising processes in Elias's view have no final explanatory principle, not even *en dernière instance*, as one can find some in Marx's historical materialism, for instance. Second, Elias's sociology never confused civilising processes with "progress" (nor de-civilising processes that they interact with, with "decline"). There is neither determinism nor evolutionism to that extent. At the same time, I have already suggested that Elias's historical sociology more or less explicitly assumes that complex, blind and long-term social processes are partly led by powerful trends, nearly "mechanisms", that is to say interdependencies of many kinds, if not the logic of differentiation itself. As a result small social units have been continuously integrating into larger and larger and more and more complex entities and the modern Western state model is only to be considered as a step or stage. This vision has therefore no problem to describe the «inescapable» integration of «humanity as a whole» (Elias 1991: 226), despite partial and temporary u-turns, that are fairly envisioned, or despite the reject of outsiders and "maladjusted" communities in the fringe of this global "objective" integration, an integration which can, so doing, involve disintegrative and de-civilising spurs.

Thinking politics with Elias today

To many respects, post-national political integration and Europe offer a perfect field to test how much Elias's thought is an art of synthesis that overcomes fairly well dichotomous and evolutionist thinking, always in a stimulating way, if not always completely. First of all, Elias's propositions and intuitions avoid too commonly reified notions, force to question *socio-historically* some major concepts (such as "community", "democracy", "legitimacy" or "feelings of belonging") and give tools to continue to do so.

The particular relevance of Elias's "political sociology" can be easily demonstrated through the question of political and social integration of people in nation-states and in European Union. Very few contemporary sociologists indeed have dealt with links, differences and similarities between different levels of integration in a long-term diachronic approach. Moreover, Elias never considers "politics" as a sphere but is at the opposite always attentive to the changing conditions impacting on the other aspects of the social life that are linked to politics (including more generally manners and *habitus*, ways of acting, feeling and thinking). For these reasons, Elias demonstrates, through his all work indeed, how useful can be historical sociology to think European integration and post-national citizenship in general and, more particularly, to question the role of emotions and we-feelings in the legitimization processes of political communities.

Thinking nation state and Europe with Elias

That Elias addressed very early, since the '1930 and the *Prozess*, the relationship between nation states and democracy is a first striking element to keep in mind. That question became indeed much later *the* core question in political theory in European studies, that is to say: Is the link between nation belonging and democratic citizenship "necessary" or, on the contrary, is it "contingent" and is it possible to conceive real living democracy beyond the nation state? At the end of the day, it appears quite obvious that Elias's propositions and intuitions contribute to enforce sociologically and in a critical way the political and philosophical conceptions articulated by the post-nationalist authors. I think mainly about the "constitutional patriotism" championed by Jürgen Habermas fifteen years ago (1996; 1998). At the same time, his sociology never pretends pronouncing definitely on the question to know whether a post-national democracy – a citizenship beyond nation belonging – can, and not only *should*, exist in a near future.

It is much more evident that Elias's originality mainly lies in considering the issue of social and political integration in the European Union *and beyond* through a socio-historical perspective of long length. To this respect, Stefano Bartolini's *Restructuring Europe* (2005) constitutes an important recent contribution to long-term diachronic approaches of the European integration, going back to the initial conditions of emerging and development of the first modern states. However, Elias also invites to reset the problem in an all-embracing comprehensive perspective, broader and more integrative than the one we can find in that important book, that doesn't really consider social development out of the political (institutional) "sphere".

Elias's sociology, for example, strongly insists on the importance of affects for all kinds of socializing processes and collective identities, including political identities, whereas "emotions" have long been a blind spot for political scientists in general and for European studies in particular. His writings also emphasize the persistence of a "national habitus" as a particular way of self-identification (Elias 1991) and not only stress the differences *between* the multiple national *habitus* in Europe and elsewhere (Elias 1996). Finally, Elias points out the importance of (established-outsiders) relations between communities to define communities themselves throughout generations (Elias and Scotson, 2008; Elias 1994) and centuries (Elias 1996).

These different elements force to reconsider legitimating processes (and democracy deficit) through a sociological perspective that does not only take into account strictly "political" matters (institutions, procedures, actors and discourses). In my view, Elias's political sociology is then highly relevant to think about "resistance" to Europe in terms of lack of belonging or identification (Delmotte 2008). In other words, Elias's forceful suggestion is to investigate "euro-indifference" in a sociological and historical perspective, which has been often neglected till recently by the literature on Euro-scepticism. By the way, such a comprehensive or global approach is particularly successful in avoiding to confusing questions and answers. Focusing on (emotional or political) indifference doesn't mean to make this indifference the only nor even the main explanatory factor.

Moreover, Elias's writings always remind us not to turn observations and "facts" into norms or values that aim at legitimating political or ideological conceptions. It sounds evident and yet it is not at all on such a subject. In other words, Elias never suggests normatively that people would only have to transpose their feelings of belonging to a European scale (or beyond) to fill the gap between the "real" survival unit, defined by highest level of interconnectedness, and subjective "we-units", that remain current nations. On the one hand, he rather underlines that feelings of belonging that characterize any kind of nationalism are always exclusive, at least potentially, and, for that reason, are to be considered as unable to fit the specificity of a post-national integration, that would or should be more self-detached (1991: 208; 226-8). On the other hand, he argues that the development of national democracies was not first of all a matter of feelings, belonging and so on, but first of all a consequence of the functional democratization that entailed a more even political and social representation and participation. «The more complete integration of all citizens into the state in the European multi-party states has really only happened in the course of the twentieth century. Only in conjunction with the parliamentary representation of all classes did

all the members of the state begin to perceive it more as a we-unit and less as a they-group» (Elias 1991: 207-8). In this conception, democratization *preceded* indeed identification at the national level, in a constructivist approach of political communities and identities that appears undoubtedly original, or at least pioneer, in the field of European studies.

Questioning the role of emotional identification or how classics may help

More concretely, Elias's historical sociology of affects could contribute to a better analysis of the emotional dimension of the processes of identifying with political communities. At the same time, it is highly relevant for a definition of the limits of validity of a theory of emotions when political identities are concerned. Of course, Elias's process sociology, Weber's concepts of "communalization" and "societization" (*Vergemeinschaftung* and *Vergesellschaftung* in Weber 1922) or Georg Simmel's conflict theory (1908) do not offer a ready for use framework to consider the role of feelings in politics today. As a beginning, rediscovering classics can nevertheless be helping to draw some guidelines. I have already mentioned some of them.

First and foremost, an historical perspective highlights that the gap between European integration and the people's identification with European Union is nothing new in the history of modern political communities: Democratic national integration occurred several centuries after the emergence of the first sovereign states. Elias suggests furthermore that this gap or "delay" could be linked to the lack of *demos* presently observed at the European level, but not necessarily to the democratic deficit, whether this deficit is considered as a problem or not (Moravcsik 2002; Follesdal and Hix 2006). The works of Elias (but also Weber's one) also invite us to consider all together the processes of vertical integration or identification *with* the European Union, on the one hand, and the horizontal integration processes that establish some links between Europeans *in* the European Union, on the other hand. From that starting point, one can try for example to identify what may or may not help to legitimize Europe or European policies "from below". In my view, revisiting Elias, Weber or Simmel thus could shed new light on the recent debates on the potential impacts of democratization and politicization of the EU (Bartolini 2006; Hix 2006).

In few words the "generalist" classics may help to fill a theoretical gap concerning the relative role of feelings as far as European political identities and legitimization processes are concerned, if one considers the relative inadequacy of the notion of identity used in researches mainly influenced by social psychology and in-groups/out-groups theories (Duchesne 2008). Nonetheless it appears that recent researches rarely addresses the roots of European identity and nearly never investigates the role of emotions and feelings, while both quantitative and qualitative research shows the value of this topic (Belot and Bouillaud 2008).

Finally, historical sociology invites us to maintain a certain distance from the way the European Union portrays itself and its history (Déloye 2008). Elias's writings may more precisely help to explore break and continuity between two sets of questions, that is to say the questions that relate to political discourse (citizenship), on the one hand, and the questions that relate merely to emotional identity (patriotism), on the other hand. The process sociology contributes indeed in studying both aspects together into a diachronic and comprehensive perspective that never separates them arbitrarily. At the same time Elias's political thought always avoids to confuse both fields. Elias reminds us that cosmopolitan empathy and global solidarity – and «sense of responsibility for imperilled humanity» (1991: 228) – remains minimal. Most of the time (national) feelings and (community) belongings rather contribute to separate people. And yet, if people do need myths, they do not to rule their social life, Elias says in his autobiography.

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