

[Living and Surviving]

For an Eliasian Theory of Human Beings Acting in the Nuclear Age¹

Abstract: The whole of Norbert Elias's work is characterized by an attempt to overcome those effects of the Western thought development that are at the basis of knowledge specialization and of the consequent fragmentation of disciplinary items. Many are the examples: from the famous theory of civilization to the reflection on time; from the pages on the production and reproduction of social inequalities to notes on the human condition; from the considerations on death to the role of emotions in the dynamics of power and social action; not to mention those essays which specifically deal with the relationship between sociology and other human sciences. One can constantly see the attempt to carry on the analysis as close as possible to the concrete reality, through a vision of holistic knowledge where different disciplinary approaches and key concepts are interwoven. While keeping in the background those aspects which epistemologically emerge as milestones of the Eliasian approach - the refusal of dichotomous knowledge (nature/culture; individual/society; order/change; psychogenesis and sociogenesis); the need for a processual perspective in the analysis of social phenomena; the relationship between reason and emotion - the article deals with the issue of distinctive forms and figurations of human beings acting in a historical period characterized by the nuclear threat. The focus is on three closely related aspects, which bring out a kind of Eliasian theory of human acting, characterized by multidisciplinary elements and contributions. The first is that of the survival unit, a concept through which one can address the issue of motivations and of different modes of acting. The second is the role of power, or rather of changing power balance, in the determination of different forms of human interdependence. The third is the particular mode of acting that is a conflicting one, with specific reference to the distinctive form of conflict interdependence proper to the nuclear age.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, Theory of human acting, Survival unit, Power, Conflict, Nuclear age.

Eliasian sociology represents an original epistemological attempt towards the reformulation of analytical categories and "adapted" for the literature on social processes. There are many aspects and themes from classical sociology which Elias has tried to review, with more or less success. In this paper we will dwell on his treatment of those aspects which are linked to what can be termed as a sort of theory of action, linked to his more general reflections regarding the relation between the individual and society. In this regard, some concepts which are used in the sociology of processes are particularly relevant, namely: social figuration; power; survival units; conflict. The paper has two parts: in the first, we will summarise briefly the Eliasian categories of social action, and the relational form which is typical of human bonds. In particular, we will focus on the concept of figuration, on the idea of survival as logic of action, and on survival units, while highlighting those aspects connected to the idea of risk and to the Eliasian conception of power.

In the second part, we will focus on the figuration of armed conflict, paying particular attention to the nuclear conflict and the new challenges which this presents for the human race. We will look at the extent to which Eliasian sociology can stand the test of being applied to interdependencies in a nuclear era.

¹ Il saggio è frutto di un lavoro comune. Tuttavia, è da attribuirsi a Angela Perulli la prima parte: *Interdependencies and logic of action: fear, risk, survival*; e a Paolo Giovannini la seconda parte: *Interdependencies and conflicts in the nuclear age*.

I. Interdependencies and logic of action: fear, risk, survival

It is well known that Elias' work on social formations (groups, families or nation-states) is centred on the concept of social figuration. Elias uses this category to try to overcome the logical dichotomy which puts in contrast the individual and society: the internal dimension and the external dimension of human life, order and social change.

The concept of figuration is based on the premise that it is the chains of interdependences which human beings experience from birth as well as links with the previous generations, which permit them to develop as social beings. It is these chains, or figurations, which allow everyone to occupy a position, which changes with time and with variations of the figuration; the latter being driven by the individual's characteristics and at the same time, by other people's characteristics.

The figuration is thus an interconnection of actions by a group, made up of human beings who are interdependent from each other². They are the actors who carry out actions within certain social and biological limitations. In fact, concrete people (with their own biological, cultural, social, psychological characteristics, their paths and aspirations) come into play in figurations – and not the individual conceived in the abstract. People act in accordance with more or less formalised rules, which they themselves interpret and can contribute to reinforcing or changing. Every single individual pursues his own purposes and inevitably acts within limits established by the historical, geographical, social settings conditions in which he is born. These reflect the past (of the individual or of the group) which inevitably accompanies him/her, and the future, towards which he/she is directed. These limits are also present in the social habitus³, which links various individuals of the figuration, and which represents the communal element shared by the different individuals, as well as the shared norms and rules that the individual internalizes as his/her own.

The dimension of power is central to the concept of social figuration. This is seen by Elias in relational terms (Heiland, Ludemann 1991). In the figuration there is a “unbalanced power ratios” representing the changing capacity to influence (promote/limit) the choices, actions, desires etc. of others. In fact, Elias underlines the misleading use of the reified concept when talking about power: «We say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket. This use of the word is a relic of magical-mythical ideas. Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of *all* human relationships» (Elias 1970: 74).

The problem of power is, according to Elias, one of the central problems for sociological work.: «The necessity for doing this, is connected with the obvious difficulty of examining question of power without becoming emotionally involved. Another person's power is to be feared: he can compel us to do a particular thing whether we want to or not. Power is suspect: people use their power to exploit others for their own ends. Power seems unethical: everyone ought to be in a position to make all his own decisions. And the mist of fear and suspicion which clings to this concept is understandably transferred to its use in a scientific theory. [...] A more adequate solution to problems of power depends on power being understood unequivocally as a structural characteristic of a relationship, all pervading and, as a structural characteristic or neither good nor bad. It may be both» (Elias

2 Elias speaks of interdependencies and not of interactions to emphasize that on one side we are never in a position of isolated actors who then interact with others but we are interdependent with others since birth and, secondly, that the mutual influence is not only among those who have the possibility of direct interaction but also among those who are indirectly linked through “chains of interdependence”. A similar distinction is also present in Boudon who speaks of “interaction systems” and “interdependence systems” (1991).

3 As is known, the habitus recalls the «social personality structure» or «stage and pattern of individual self-regulation» (Elias 1987: 163). It refers to what one has acquired during the process of socialization, and what is common to a great part of individuals who are living in a certain historical society: «each individual person, different as he or she may be from all others, has a specific character that he or she shares with other members of his or her society. This character, the social habitus of individuals, forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the distinguishing features through which an individual differs from other members of his society» (Elias 1987: 163-164). As known the concept of habitus has been also developed by P. Bourdieu. On the relationship between the two sociologists see De Chauv 1994 and De Jong 2001. See also the correspondence Elias/Bourdieu in *Deutscheliteratur Archives in Marbach*.

1970: 93)⁴

Power ratios are what explain the course of interdependencies among human beings. To a large extent the direction in which a figuration flows depends on the interplay of actions and reactions, to which we alluded above. The greater the extent to which the chances of power are distributed in a reciprocal way among many people, the more difficult it is for any one individual to control the whole figuration, or to anticipate the consequences of their own and other people's actions. Elias also points out that these change in line with the different "game models" (on one or more levels, bipolar or multi-polar, etc.).

The fact that power is a relational concept also means that there is a mutual recognition of the power ratios between those who are part of the figuration. Those who are in a relatively more powerful position are there thanks in part to the recognition of their power given to them by the others. This is also highlighted in the research on *Established and outsider*, in particular in the charisma/dishonour group dynamic that distinguishes the two groups (Perulli 2008). But, as we shall see, it also represents an important element for the theme that we will develop in the second part of this paper.

The power unbalanced is also closely connected to the conflictual dynamics present in the figurations. The assumption that different subjects (be they individuals, groups, or states) of the figuration are endowed with an unbalanced potential of power not only puts them in a position of more/less reciprocal influence, and thus of more/less capacity of influencing other people's actions, and more generally to influence the development of the figuration; it also implies that in the game of interdependencies, conflicting relations are anything but marginal. In fact, Elias, following Marx, Simmel and Weber, claims that conflicting dynamics have the capacity to become drivers of change. In this, it is important that there is not an excessively unbalanced power ratios between the subjects which are interdependent on one another – which could bring about the complete or almost complete annihilation of one of the contenders – but also not a too evenly balanced distribution of power, so that subjects can keep each other in check⁵. As we will underline later on, the implications for integration and cohesion of conflicts with external subjects are another point of contact between Elias' thought and the "conflict theorists".

If human beings live embedded in figurational flows, and if these flows are driven by the continuous change of interdependencies, we still have to understand if it is possible to point to a final point or a direction of the figurational flow. Also if there are final points for the direction taken by the different subjects who are part of the figuration, and what relations there are between these and the figurational flow. Here we risk deviating from our main theme (see Van Krieken 1989: 199). But it is nevertheless worth remembering that Elias is well aware of what in sociological language has been identified as "unattended and unplanned effects". In Elias it is in fact clear that if the figuration is something different than the mere sum of the interactions and interdependencies (in that it has its own "invisible" order which unites individual and collective elements), then the direction and the end destination of the figurational flow cannot be mechanically assumed to be the sum of the individuals' final destinations. However it is exactly from the individuals' goals that it is necessary to start. The individual in fact acts and reacts based on his own goals, linked to his concrete, everyday experience, and his own plans. And it is the sum of individual goals which gives life, in an unplanned way, to society⁶.

The search for survival is central to the determination of individual purposes. This presents itself not only in biological terms (although these are also important), but also in terms of the survival of communities, places, social groups, cultures, ways of life, customs.

Human beings who live and participate in social processes, and who find themselves confronted by certain

4 Unbalanced power sources are different and historically changing, involving in peculiar ways the elementary functions of interdependencies: the economic one, the management of violence, and those related to knowledge. (Elias 1970: 100-103).

5 See *The Genesis of the Naval Profession* (1950-2007) and in particular the "royal mechanism" figuration (Elias 1939), also stressed in the second part of *The Civilizing Process*. This analysis recalls the Simmel's *tertius gaudens*. See also the discussion about game models in *What is Sociology?* (1978: 80ff)

6 The first essay of *The Society of Individuals* ends significantly up with the sentence «From plans arising, yet unplanned / By purpose moved, yet purposeless» (Elias 1991: 64). See Mennell 1977.

events, are often motivated by survival instincts, both biological and – as indicated above – also cultural and social. This is reflected also in the literature on the transformations of contemporary societies, where the categories of fear, risk and survival have become more and more recurrent⁷. The category of risk is closely linked to that of power. In modern societies the concept of risk replace that of *fortune*, «but is not because agents in pre-modern times could not distinguish between risk and danger. Rather it represents an alteration in the perception of determination and contingency, such that human moral imperatives, natural causes, and change reign in place of religious cosmologies. The idea of chance, in its modern sense, emerges at the same time as that of risk» (Giddens 1990: 34). As Giddens pointed out, danger and risk are related, but are not the same. Risk presumes danger, although not necessarily awareness of danger. «A person who risks something courts danger, where danger is understood as a threat to desire outcomes. Anyone who takes a ‘calculated risk’ is aware of the threat or threats which a specific course of action brings into play» (Giddens 1990: 34). We can be unaware of danger, and thus we can also be unaware of risk. Risk is not a question of individual action, or rather individual action can happen inside “environments of risk”. The conflicting dynamics between groups can be easily conceptualised in terms of “environments of risk”. In this sense, there are two dimensions in which the literature, through the concept of risk, can become interesting: the first, is the collective one, of the environment of risk (how and if the relational dynamics between social figurations and inside them can be seen in terms of environments of risk); the second is the individual one (how, inside the defined environment of risk, individuals react, feeling more or less danger). In the second part of this contribution we look at human action inside an environment of extreme risk and what this can mean for all the involved parts.

Survival units

We thus act and react by virtue of the fear that our world will disappear, and the risk that we perceive relative to our own survival. And it is precisely in answer to different survival needs that individuals have in history created changing “survival units”, i.e. particular forms of social unions between individuals (families, tribes, states, etc.). It is worth dwelling on this concept, before going on to look at conflict in the nuclear era.

First of all, it is necessary to say that – even though Elias assigns to survival a very wide and many-sided meaning – when he talks of the survival unit the semantic field of reference seems to narrow. In *What is sociology?* (1978: 138ff.) we find a definition of the concept in the paragraph deals on *political ties*: he refers to a peculiar form of affective ties that characterize forms (like the state or tribes) of strong common identification and that enjoy a particular priority compared to other figurational bonds (1978: 138). Even though the form taken in different historical epochs vary considerably, it is possible to retrace some common features.

In the first place, the peculiar relation that they have with physical violence. «These units all seem to have exercised comparatively strict control over the use of physical violence in relationships between their members. At the same time, they have allowed, and often encourage, their members to use physical violence against non-members» (1978:138)⁸. «This survival function, involving the use of physical force against others, creates interdependencies of a particular kind. It plays a part in the figurations people form, perhaps no greater but also no more negligible than ‘occupational’ bonds. Though it cannot be reduced to a function of ‘economics’, neither if it separable from it» (1978: 139)⁹.

Secondly, the peculiar integrating function which they take on (at different levels of the social development process), i.e. «it knits people together for common purposes – the common defence of their lives, the survival of

⁷ As is known, in contemporary societies the category of risk is often implicated. See Giddens 1991; Luhmann 1991; Beck 1992.

⁸ See Tabboni (1989: 398).

⁹ See the peculiar links between danger, fear, involvement and detachment, we identity-they identity and survival units in Elias (1983a: 8-11).

their group in the face of attacks by other groups and, for a variety of reasons, attacks in common on other groups. Thus the primary function of such an alliance is either physically to wipe out other people or to protect its own members from being physically wiped out» (1978: 138). We will discuss later how and if this integration function can be maintained even in the face of the risk of nuclear conflict. The integration function is strictly linked to their capacity to act as a source of collective identity, of creating a clear delimitation between those who are part of the collective and those who are not. Elias writes: «The integration plane of the state, more than any other layer of we-identity, has in the consciousness of most members the function of survival units, a protection unit on which depends their physical and social security in the conflicts of human groups and in cases of physical catastrophe» (Elias 1987: 186).

Thirdly, the fact that they have a character both of a defensive and offensive nature raises some questions¹⁰. Can the role of defense and attack unit be ascribed to man's natural instincts? Is therefore violence and violent conflict a constant in human relationships? We will come back to this point. For the moment it is worth underlining the fact that in the history of humanity, moments of disintegration have always translated into armed conflicts. But this does not necessarily mean that human beings have by nature "aggressive instincts". What is, according to Elias, part of man's biological characteristics is an "alarm reaction" in the face of risk and fear. However, what provokes this reaction, what starts violence and the violent conflict is and remains a problem of a social nature¹¹.

Finally, the aspect of relative stability that they assume over time. In fact it is striking that they are defined as units, and this opens up the space for a reified use of such a category. There are elements that clash, as noted above, with one of the cornerstones of Eliasian sociology. In fact, Elias is careful in maintaining the dynamic character of the internal interdependencies within the survival unit, underlining the close relationship observable between the form taken by the survival units and the level of social differentiation/stratification present in a given era and location (Elias 1983b: 119-120). It would thus seem that there is a difference in the homogeneity, depending on the observed level of interdependencies. If we take the figuration formed between survival units, the elements which differentiate them one from another are in the foreground, and in the second level there are the internal differences within the survival unit. Thus they are more easily considered as real units, as a relatively homogeneous group (that has a sense of "we", that shares the purpose of defence/offence; but if one consider the relations and the other figurational interdependencies that are inside the survival unit (cities, families, professions, etc.), then the unified character fades away, and one see the changing imbalances of power and of positions which are maintained within the unit.

The characteristics discussed above could make one think that there is a close identification between survival units and political units, with survival being understood exclusively as that which can be guaranteed through political actions. However, the fact that survival units have progressively taken on the traits of figurations characterised by political interdependencies, is related to the differentiation process associated with the intensification and multiplication of interdependencies¹² (here too Elias echoes Simmel and the latter's attention to the importance of the numerousness of social relations), as well as to the more general process of civilization (see Mennell 1989: 217ff). In fact, Elias, in line with his emphasis on processes, explicitly criticises the idea that one can think in terms

10 «Since the potential of such a units of attack is inseparable from their potential for defence, they may be called 'attack-and-defence units' or 'survival units'» (Elias 1970:138).

11 «As an example of a biological universal, Elias once again cites the 'alarm reaction', the automatic response to experienced danger which puts the organism in a higher gear, preparing for 'fight or flight'. This is a well-researched reaction pattern which broad outline *Homo sapiens* shares with many other species. It can easily give rise to the notion of an inborn aggressiveness. In fact, Elias point out, this automatic preparation for fast and energetic action in response to danger is far less specific than the concept of 'aggressiveness' suggests. It has to be distinguished clearly from human beings' long-standing custom of settling inter-tribal or inter-state conflicts by reciprocal killings» (Mennell 1989: 219).

12 «From small bands of 25 to 50 members, perhaps living in caves, humans coalesced into tribes of several hundred or several thousand members, and nowadays more and more into states od millions people. Their changing size has changed the structure of these social units. The means of control – of external as well as of self-control – required for the survival and integrity of social unit of thirty people are different from the means of control required for the survival and integrity of a social unit formed by millions of people» (Elias 1983b: 109).

of spheres of social action which are rigidly separated. The observable separation is a result of the progressive complexity of the interdependency links, of the progressive specialization of the functions inside them, and of the corresponding course taken by the integration process¹³. The interdependencies have to be also considered in different areas: «If, instead of traditional model of 'spheres', one of increasing or decreasing functional differentiation and integration is used, an immediate advance is made. It leads to a sociological conception of society, displacing the extremely artificial image of society as a hotchpotch of adjacent but unconnected spheres, of which first one and then another is singled out as the true driving force behind social development» (1978: 141-142). Thus, we are presented with interconnections between “economic” functions, violence management function¹⁴ and orientation functions linked to knowledge - and to the overcoming use of magical instruments of orientation (Elias 1983b: 112-13)¹⁵.

Another element to consider is what relations the survival units have with other figurations. In this case it is again necessary not forget the processual and interdependent character. The fact that we talk about “a more elevated degree of integration” makes us think that they are in interdependent relations even with figurations that are situated at a different level of integration. This would make what Elias writes on the multipolar playing models on more than one level applicable to these units (1978: 80) and would put in a more complicated light the relation between the survival which these units deal with, and the survival in which other forms of integration are interested.

This relation is tackled by Kaspersen and Gabriel who assign to survival units the role of key figurations (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008: 374). According to them, the key role can be ascribed to some characteristics which are typical of these particular figurations. In the first place, the fact that they existed before the individuals which shape them. Even though they maintain their relational and processual character, and even though they are subject to changes over time, the individual finds himself born in one of them. He has no choice. «Whether we like it or not we are all born into a survival unit. It is a fact that human beings cannot escape. We are not members by decision, volition or consent. [...] The survival unit is a figuration which in a Hegelian sense is a ‘community of fate’. Since we all are born into such a structure these survival units are figurations with some form of primacy» (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008: 376). This characteristic is reinforced by the clear (“natural”) definition of their limits. The survival units exist only in relation to at least one other survival unit. This would mean that a game model of at least two (Elias 1970) in which the two entities are defined in relation to each other, and where the sense of belonging clearly establishes who is part of “us” and who is not¹⁶. A “we” is in turn observable in figurational terms¹⁷, consisting of figurations with a minor integration level. According to the authors, these characteristics confer a

13 Following Elias it would be possible to identify the “survival groups” through some elementary functions they play: 1) «the provision of food and other basic wherewithal of life»; 2) «the control of violence or [...] the function of conflict management in its two aspects: control of violence within a group and control of violence in the relationship between different survival groups. [...] one has to distinguish between stages of social development where the same persons who perform economic functions also perform violence control functions [...] and stages of development where economic function on the one hand and conflict management functions on the other are performed by different people – that is, by specialists. [...] The emergence of social specialists in violence control is a good example of the interwovenness of the changing patterns of the way in which these vital functions are performed in human societies». (Elias 1983b: 111)

14 «Specialists in violence control can emerge in a society only if its members produce more food than is needed for the survival of food producers and their families. However, in the long run, the regular production of surplus food requires a comparatively high level of physical security for the producers of food. It requires the effective protection of whatever it is – livestock, fertile acres, rich fishing grounds – against marauders. In their development, advances towards specializations of economic and of violence control functions are reciprocal» (Elias 1983b: 111)

15 See also *An Essay on Time* (1984).

16 «We can observe survival units in relation to other survival units and therefore there is a demarcated figuration with primacy in his sociological perspective. New forms of survival units emerge and old forms decline. Social life is organized around survival units and they demarcate themselves against other units» (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008: 376).

17 «The survival units are demarcated by other survival units and not just by the members of the survival unit itself. Their very relationship constitutes survival units» (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008: 377).

larger degree of autonomy to those units compared to all the other figurations, contributing to establishing their primacy over the others. We will see if all this holds for the analysis of the conflict in the nuclear era.

II. Interdependencies and conflicts in the nuclear age

Norbert Elias certainly has an extraordinary capacity for summarizing and interpreting – using his conceptual skills – the best from the inheritance of the social sciences (and not only) which he imbibed in the course of his (long) lifetime. He demonstrates this once again when tackling the theme of conflict, and especially when analyzing that particular dimension of conflict which is war: its role in many types of figuration, how it is linked to the idea of survival, through which processes it stays alive, and with which consequences for types of action and social relations. Drawing on several analyses with which he was very familiar, and starting with those by Marx and Engels on the origins of the division of labour¹⁸, as well as the ones developed by Simmel in *Der Streit* (1908), Elias claims that conflict starts when «groups of human beings» (1978: 24 ff.) come into contact, either because of the natural movement of populations, or because of demographic growth. This “contact” is the first part of a process which has various phases, more nuanced and perhaps more restricted in primitive societies, and more articulated and extended in modern societies. Elias – almost certainly drawing on the work of his teacher and friend Karl Mannheim – identifies «regularity [and] recurrent sequences» (1985: 117) in this process, which, for the sake of brevity, we will refer to as the reality of our time.

Initially, the contact between groups (or, today, between nation-states) is accompanied by a situation of generalised “crisis”, which can originate at the time of searching out the other side (for example, for economic domination or for territorial expansion), but also as a consequence of the confrontation that inevitably is created when contact with the other side is made. It is in this initial phase that a new figuration is born (due to the objective interdependence that is established between the two subjects, as discussed in the first section of this paper), and that the sides that come in contact assume the functions of survival units. Both in fact feel an abrupt sense of “insecurity” and of discomfort, sense the impending “menace” of destruction, and come together to confront it. Elias (1978: 25-27) claims that the persistent historic incapacity to rationally resolve the problems of social cohabitation, leads to the elaboration of “imaginative explanations” of the situation which has been created, with the aim of equipping the group ideologically in preparation for the probable conflictual outcome, defining enemies and objectives – which may be invented or unrealistic, but in any case capable of mobilizing people and even to bring out the most hidden (and sometimes most atrocious) impulses of human action towards those who are portrayed as threats, either external and or internal to the group (1978: 28). The almost inevitable outcome of this process is “conflict”. This takes the form of a struggle between different “dreams” or faiths¹⁹; sooner or later brings onto the field the full force and the weapons it possesses; quite clearly showing the guiding role and manipulation of the ruling classes and of the neuralgic centres of the respective survival units, until we arrive – with the “outcome” of the conflict – to a new social figuration, which leads a change in the nature of interdependencies and even of the distribution of power between the two sides, but also within their internal figurations. Finally, new “borders”, real or symbolic, are established. The relative (and always temporary) “pacification” that follows is usually accompanied by the disappearance of the survival units, but also by a general weakening of this function even in the winning side, and – on the emotional-affective level – a fading of the sense of belonging (*Seinsverbundenheit*) and of the We-image of the population.

Elias’ interest in the theme of conflict is constant throughout his work, but after 1980 – in his later work – a

¹⁸ Elias 1970: 139. See in particular Marx, Engels 1846; Marx 1867.

¹⁹ Cf. Weber (1919), who speaks of “struggle between demons”, i.e. between different visions of the world, as a constant feature of the history of societies.

not insignificant part of his writing focuses on “inter-state conflicts” and on the perspectives that these open up²⁰: and it is on these aspects to which we now turn.

Elias reflects especially on three processes to which he had been a witness and observer during the decades following the Second World War: 1) the cold war which, with its long and hard “confrontation” between the United States and Soviet Union, lasted, until 1989, albeit with decreasing intensity; 2) the tendency to set up supra-national bodies, with specific attention to the uncertain process of European unification; 3) finally, the new and serious menaces to the very survival of humanity which emerged for the first time with the availability for superpowers of powerful nuclear weapons. As we will see, these are three processes which are closely inter-related, and to which we can perhaps add another (to which Elias also draws attention), namely the “revolts” of the environment which are taking place with ever increasing intensity and frequency, whether in the form of natural disasters or pollution, desertification or the destruction of forests²¹. For the sake of brevity, I will deal with these only briefly in the third point.

The cold war

After a brief period of relaxation following the Second World War, the two superpowers USA and URSS began a long and dangerous confrontation. Elias interprets this in his own way, defining it as a contrast between different «national belief systems» (1978: 29-30)²², which had taken the place of the more traditional class conflict. The new figuration that dominated the world scene presented a clear bipolar profile, which maintained a long precarious balance of power between the two blocks, founded on mutual threat. The international arena was dominated by the two superpowers, which lead blocks of nations linked by strong interdependence ties, nations that have lost almost completely their function of survival unit. But with an internal contradiction, that will make its effects be heard on several occasions, and which will explode resoundingly after the dissolution of the Soviet empire. We refer to that lag, which Elias refers to more than once (we will see it even when talking about the European events), between loss of the survival functions on the part of the satellite states in favour of the respective superpowers, and on the other hand conservation of other elements of a nation-state: a sense of belonging, a We-identity, a history and a culture built up over time, sometimes a different language or faith. These are all elements which were at the origin of the uprisings in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia in the Soviet block, but also in the anti-American movements of the 1960s, and which – after the fall of the Berlin Wall – led to the rapid disintegration of the Soviet Union and the re-emergence of many nation states within it, which Elias could not see, but which are broadly compatible with his interpretation (tendency towards supra-national integration, but always with possibility of disaggregation and reemergence of separate parts of sub-national units: we will return to this in point 3).

The conflict with the USA and the USSR as opponents lasted for more than a quarter of a century, but took the form of the continual threat of conflict which was not realized, apart from in some of the peripheries of the empires²³. Elias thought (fortunately wrongly) that sooner or later we would come to an armed conflict

20 Some authors, like Haferkamp (1987), come to argue that this is a new and distinct phase of development of the thought of Elias. Menell (1987) does not agree with this assertion. He argues that in Elias the interest for interstate relations is simply complementary to his earlier interest in the infra-state relationships.

21 «The balance of power between humanity as a part of natural universe and the non-human levels of the universe has been gradually changing. In the last two centuries it has reached a stage where the balance of power, at least in the terrestrial orbit, has definitely changed in favour of humanity. The diminishing threat to humans within the terrestrial context shows more starkly the unyielding dangers which humans as groups and individuals constitute for each other and for themselves. They bring once more into focus the circular interdependence between the social level of danger and fear and the level of involvement in knowledge. Once more, the dangers which humans constitute for each other stand out in clear relief» (Elias 1984: 24).

22 In our opinion, this is a clear application of the general principle we discussed above, that see the conflict also in term of struggle between “dreams”.

23 More than once Elias argues that the central (or main) survival units have always favored the formation of buffer zones to protect their neuralgic centers and, if anything, to “test” in those peripheries the strength and the ability to use violence by the opponent (cf.

– even though both sides were aware of the «magnitude of the danger» (1985: 119) represented by a nuclear confrontation (we will take up this point later on).

It is interesting to follow Elias' reasoning. Firstly, the “compelling forces” is not in the weapons themselves – not even in those as terrible as nuclear weapons – but in the “human interweavings” (Elias 1970: 25): because they are «responsible for the development and eventual use of scientific weapons of war» (*ibidem*) and the “machines” are simply the instrument through which threats are made and limits are established (Elias 1970: 24-25). The “escalation” or arms race is explained in the following terms: a continuous attempt to guarantee oneself the capacity of defence and offence against an opponent that follows the same objective. It is a clear example, we think, of how mutual hostility and threat establishes a stringent and binding interdependence between the subjects in conflict – until, as was the case with the USSR, it leads to economic ruin and social disintegration²⁴. Secondly, resorting to war as an instrument of conflict resolution is almost inevitable. There is a strong cultural restriction in action which has always prevailed in history and that – according to Elias – even today pushes towards war even when there is an awareness that it could result in self-destruction. The «bipolar struggles for hegemony» between USA and USSR is a perfect example of «the regularity with which such a figuration is impelled towards a military resolution» (Elias 1985: 118), not only because of the strength of a century-old tradition of resorting to physical violence and war, but also because only on then do we reach the last and deciding test of the balance of power²⁵. Finally, according to Elias, the latent or threat of conflict between superpowers, causes a process of polarization which – on the one hand simplifies the world by forcing almost all states to take side in one or the other field (ideological, political, economic, military) – and on the other, penetrates with greater or less force inside the individual societies, splitting them in two (Elias 1970: 170): thus, «the intermeshing of the two main forms of social violence, those between states (“war”) and those within the states (“revolution”)» (Elias 1970: 171) becomes completely evident. Here Elias refers mainly to the poorest and less advanced countries of the world, where the close global interconnection and the interdependencies which are tighter and more intricate than ever before, lead to revolutions and «petty wars», carried out (as we have already indicated) «as representatives of the opposing great powers» (Elias 1970: 202). But perhaps even in European nation states – and Italy in particular – similar patterns can be observed: consider for example the various “revolutionary” attempts of the second postwar period (for example, the aftermath of the attack on the head of the Communist Party Palmiro Togliatti in 1948); and particularly to the rigid polarization of society and of the Italian political environment from 1947 through the 1960s, with the Communist party and the Christian Democrats allied respectively to the USSR and USA, and an Italian society that remained divided for a long period, internally antagonistic, with a harsh formation that remained unaltered until the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989.

Europe

Elias draws attention more than once – in his later work – to the integration processes which nation states participate in, such as the creation of bodies and supra-national entities of a sectorial character and – albeit with much more hesitation – of a general character. But it is the European integration process which is most relevant here. It could be argued that what happened in the long period of the cold war prepared the ground for the subsequent processes of inter-state integration. The loss of the functions of the survival unit of the nation states in favour of the superpowers, which characterized those decades, makes the loss of sovereignty that occurs with the institutionalization of supra-national and European bodies (from Nato to the EEC, and to the Parliament and the

Elias 1985: 117).

24 In order to understand the nuclear menace Elias suggests «to seek a more realistic explanation of the social entanglements which lead to a gradually escalating exchange of threats between groups of people» (Elias 1970: 24). Cf. also Giovannini 1991: 144-145.

25 «I know of not» – Elias says (1982: 118) – «a single case in the development of humanity in which such a conflict between the two strongest military powers at the top of a hierarchy of states did not lead sooner or later to a war, to resolution of smouldering conflict by force of arms».

European Commission) easier and less obvious.

There is however another side to the coin, to which Elias continuously draws attention, and which actually helps us gain a deeper understanding of the difficulties and delays which plague the European process of unification, and can even be seen in the “simple” elaboration of common strategic approaches in the economic and financial fields – as we are now clearly witnessing in this period of crisis. The obstacle to the creation of European bodies endowed with real governmental capacities is to be found, says Elias, in the fact that – there has only been a brief history of loss of national sovereignty in the second postwar period – but there a long history which still ties the citizens of European states tightly to their own nation-state. While it is true that the nation state has lost its primary function, the possibility and capacity to use physical violence for defensive and offensive purposes, it is also true that it has had the function of survival unit for centuries, and around it the social habitus has been modeled, a We-identity has been formed, and the We-image elaborated. All this is rooted in the memory, a strong memory, of national and local stories, of old wars, but also of less numerous, but not less vital fights for survival in which inferior levels of social units have played strategic roles, for example the pre-nation states, the Renaissance and medieval cities, the class and status of belonging, the work and living places, down to the clans and the original ancestral families. Every passage is experienced as a communal death, or a nullification of memory, a loss of significance for all the suffering felt within and in the name of former survival units (Elias 1987: 196-199). We could draw the conclusion, in Elias’ terms, that configurations and survival units, even though they are disappearing or losing strength and presence, still somehow and in some measure survive in the present in the form of memory. And this – as we shall see in the last paragraph – can constitute breeding ground for processes in which supra-national integration take on a reverse path, creating new figurations, reconstituting survival units that had disappeared, from the “sediment” of feelings of belong to a nation, territory, religion, family (Elias 1987: 18-19, 167, 169-170).

Humanity in the face of the nuclear threat

Elias’ reflections on the confrontation between the USA and USSR leads the author to tackle a new issue, namely the consequences of a possible conflict leading to the catastrophic outcome for humanity of a nuclear war. As we have already noted, for Elias war is part of the human condition, and is the unfortunately predictable outcome – and possibly inevitable outcome – of reciprocal hostility between human groups, of the desperate search for security, and of the enormous constrictions of social institutions. According to Elias, men do not want war, but are ready to go to war, and to fight to the death (1987:186), using all means at their disposal, including nuclear weapons. Nuclear conflict is perhaps an unthinkable conflict, as Bion Talamo (1991) claims, but not an impossible one. The logic of the arms race, continually spirally in the search for security, creates a situation which is more and more difficult to control, both within the blocks²⁶ and between the blocks, which on several occasions are just a step away from using the nuclear threat²⁷. The growing threat of nuclear destruction leads to an increase in anxiety and insecurity among the populations, and not only among those which are directly involved in the potential conflict – and this, undoubtedly, is a new fact. At the psychological level and in mass culture, there are various reactions, including fear, and taking refuge in private life and narcissistic tendencies (Lasch 1979), a “decline in the public figure” and in participation (Sennett 1974), but also in the production of new fantasies and feelings. Elias writes (1987:75):

They [human beings] are less able to deal adequately in thought and deed with problems facing them the more their lives are threatened, in the area of these problems, by uncontrollable dangers, tensions and conflicts, and dominated by the resultant fears, hopes and wishes. And they are less able to withstand the dangers, conflicts and threats to which they are exposed, the less objective they are in their thoughts and actions, the more susceptible to feeling and fantasy.

²⁶ Between 1962 and 1976 sixty-one accidents have been numbered as a result of intra-allied disputes: cf. Weede 1989.

²⁷ See, for example, the Cuban missile crisis occurred in October 1962.

At this level of fantasy and utopia, the idea of humanity emerges and matures, and of a world state which until now had not emerged in the consciousness of men, and which only the nuclear threat and the threat of global destruction brings to light. The nation states, and even the superpowers, are asked to guarantee security, which however appears less and less credible in the eyes of those requesting it. The real threat of destruction beyond boundaries leads to a loss of faith in the old survival units and opens the path for the search for new ones.

The processes of change which took place at the end of the Second World War and in the decades of the cold war have made this search less utopian. First of all, the creation of supra-national bodies and coordinating organs of various forms and sizes are clear evidence of a trend – albeit still weak and still reversible – towards a possible global state. Secondly, the tragic possibility of an armed conflict between the two superpowers and the destruction or disappearance of one of them provides also a glimpse of a world governed by one victorious superpower. Thirdly, the process of civilization, with the progressive distancing from the use of violence, is on the one hand culturally compatible with the clean death and distance characteristic of the nuclear era (for those commanding and those carrying out orders), and on the other brings out a more pacific world society, or at least make it culturally and politically more difficult for the traditional superpowers to talk about war²⁸, thus weakening their function of survival unit and paving the way for the assumption of responsibility for world security by a new pacific and inclusive unit²⁹.

Here we face a dilemma in the interpretation developed by Elias: if he presents aporias and contradictions in the analysis of what follows after the emergence of such a terrible nuclear threat, or if – as we are convinced – one can talk of a reformulation of Elias' theory given the new and previously unforeseeable annihilation of the whole of humanity. What are these possible aporias? Elias asserts more than once that humanity – faced with the nuclear threat – sets itself the task of creating a new social order, which overcomes the antagonisms between state and superpowers, and thus make conflict inevitable. The old survival units lose their main function, which would be taken over by a global pacific state, to protect humanity which is threatened by total destruction (Elias 1987: 202ff; 2000: 445-446). The author puts forward these hypotheses with some caution, probably aware of the partial contradiction in the complex architecture of his thinking. He talks in fact of «the whole of humanity, which now constitutes *the last effective survival unit*» (Elias 1987: 202, our italics), within a process in which «the function of the *effective survival unit* is now visibly shifting more and more from the level of the nation states to post-national unions of states and, beyond them, to humanity» (Elias 1987: 195 our italics). A process which, however, even if it should succeed, would unfold for generations and would perhaps need «some centuries» to be completed (*ibidem*: 203). The postponement in time however does not eliminate the possible contradictions, the first of which is the hypothesis that a survival unit (humanity) which is not in a relationship of inter-dependence (and conflict) with any other survival unit would emerge: a situation which loses the relational aspect, i.e. the central aspect of the definition of humanity as a survival unit. However, some arguments can be made in defence of Elias. Firstly, as the author himself hypothesized looking far into space (Elias 1987: 204-205), the world state could have defence functions and offensive functions regarding an extra-terrestrial enemy, with which it could establish a relationship of conflictual inter-dependence to justify its function of survival unit. And hypothesis within hypothesis: this “enemy” could be non-existent and just an invention in order to legitimise the function of the survival unit, a practice which is not unknown in history³⁰. Secondly, all processes, including that of creating a single survival unit, contain elements of reversibility. This implies two things: a) that world integration can be accompanied

28 Here one can hear the echo of Pareto's analysis on progressive cultural inability of Western democracies to resort to the use of strength in international disputes, which is likely result in their decline in favour of new powers equipped with the “faith” to the usefulness of violence and war (cf. Pareto 1916).

29 Robertson 1992. More prudent, but in this same direction, the position of Linklater (2011: 9-20). He argues that is not so much the threat of nuclear war but rather the process of civilization to put pressure on societies to be more in tune with respect to each other's interests and more likely to resolve their conflicts not through war but through negotiations.

30 The invention of the enemy has a strong chance of success among the masses: one can recall the famous episode of the alarm launched by radio by Orson Welles in 1938 in New York announcing the invasion by alien troops that panicked millions of Americans .

by another type of national disaggregation, which could remove the survival function from global humanity and give it to sub-global social units; b) that even within the global society there will be a continual production of other and new figurations, which would maintain the situation of conflictual interdependence within the global state-society. The latter would no longer have an external enemy, but could have one or more internal enemies capable of threatening its survival³¹. Thirdly, one could hypothesize that the new figuration of world society would inevitably continue to have conflictual interdependencies centred on environmental issues. While it is true that in Elias' theory nature and society are inseparable and in some ways indistinguishable, it is also true that survival today (and this is even more true in the world state) is linked to the capacity to confront what we inappropriately (from Elias' point of view) call "natural" disasters: pollution, desertification, deforestation, etc., and these could in some way provide justification for the function of a global humanity survival unit³².

In our opinion, Elias finds himself facing a radically new problem: the threat of nuclear destruction and the end of humanity. Elias is conscious of this novelty, and at the same time ready – as a social scientist – not to neglect or disguise the messages which are coming from social reality³³. It is this, in our opinion, which represents a qualitative leap in Elias' theory, which cannot proceed with the schemes build in his study and interpretation of the pre-nuclear society. If it is true that there cannot be one single social figuration (humanity in itself contains many figurations), it is however possible that – in the new conditions – there would be only one survival unit (Kaspersen, Gabriel 2008: 383). Certainly, the difficulties and slowness of this process are evident. Elias claims for example that in order to proceed in this direction it is necessary to create "a new worldwide ethos", which for the moment is only discernible in its "initial forms", but which could assert to an ever greater extent as a value in itself³⁴. The creation of this ethos is helped also by the process of individualization which has been happening for some time, and which promotes a greater attention to individual rights and from there, it is a short step to human rights, and a new sensibility towards "common humanity" (1987: 151-155).

Elias' thus develops a variation on this theoretical structure, hypothesising the existence (or rather the possibility) of a single survival unit at the global level, which would contain within it both intra-state and inter-state relations and processes. The use of violence for defensive and offensive purposes – i.e. conflict – would only take place in a limited way within the borders of the survival unit (Elias 1987: 204-205). This would be the case at least until new units take shape and come to life within the unit, as a consequence, for example, of a disaggregation process which is always possible³⁵, and which brings back "normality" to Elias' theory of interdependencies and conflicts as drivers of the figurational process.

(Traduzione di Emily Gubbini)

31 Humanity can be «threatened by [...] sub-groups within itself" (Elias 1987: 204).

32 One can note that, in his last works, Elias tended to use some "environmental" examples to speak about fears and threats of people and survival functions (see e.g. 1985: 195). In the same sense it is possible to register the increasing use of military expressions as "enemy nature", "hostile environment", etc. .

33 As he stresses several times, history sometimes experiences some "breakthroughs", of which the scientist must indeed take into account (1985: 125-126).

34 He quotes the case of Amnesty International (1985: 151).

35 In this regard, Kaspersen, Gabriel (2008: 380) hypothesize the possible existence (or coexistence) of simple survival units into multiple survival units.

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