

Sociology and International Relations: The Future?

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The disciplines of sociology and international relations (IR) have long followed rather different paths of development. The former's traditional focus was on understanding the dominant patterns of social change within national societies; the latter was largely interested in explaining relations between states, and with analysing other phenomena insofar as they influence international political dynamics. The two disciplines have moved more closely together in recent years. Sociological explorations of state-formation led to the investigation of military competition between states though not necessarily to a serious engagement with international relations as an academic discipline. Students of international relations have responded to those developments by absorbing elements of historical sociology within their frameworks of analysis as John Hobson's contribution to this issue will attest. But the number of scholars who specialise in exploring linkages between sociology or historical sociology and international relations, though increasing, still remains small.

The conviction that large stakes are involved in developing those linkages was one reason for the decision to devote a conference at University College Dublin in April 2009 to connections between process sociology and international relations. The organisers, Stephen Menzell, Robert van Krieken and Andrew Linklater, were mindful of Norbert Elias's call for higher-level synthesis in the social sciences that would include, amongst other things, an examination of the connections between relations within, and the relations, between states in a long-term perspective. Most of the papers that appear in this second issue of *Human Figurations*, were first presented at the conference where the aim was to consider some of the ways in which students of Eliasian, or process, sociology and of international relations could learn from each other's disciplinary perspectives.

What can process sociology offer the student of international relations in the way of greater methodological sophistication and, conversely, what might its advocates gain from an engagement with international relations? Elias wrote a great deal about international relations but without engaging at least explicitly with the core works in the field. Others, most notably Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh in his study of the role of the nuclear revolution in taming the great powers, paved the way for further research in the area. But the potentials for synthesis have yet to be exploited to the full, not least because Elias and process sociology are still largely unknown in the study of international relations (see the articles by John Hobson, Stephen Menzell and Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh in this issue).

Two points are worth stressing in this context. First, as Aurelie Lacassagne explains in her paper, and as Bernd Bucher points out in his analysis of the idea of the democratic peace, there has been a strong tendency in international relations to ignore the 'relational' and the 'processual'. Some approaches pay little attention to the processes that gave rise to state-formation and the international states-system in the first place. They take the existence of states for granted, and proceed to examine the nature of their relations with each other. The problem with the approach is that those relations are considered in isolation from broader patterns of social and political change. They do not consider the transformations of social existence that gave rise not only to states but also to particular types of states and to the related cultural and emotional changes in human experience. They do not analyse international relations in conjunction with an examination of the long-term patterns of change that formed the subject matter of Elias's major study of civilizing processes.

The second point is that explanations of the civilizing process often tended to advance a standpoint of international relations that is strikingly close to classical realism – or to the modern variant known as neo- or structural realism – too close to that position as Hobson argues later. But as he and other authors (see Menell) explain, despite some overlapping views about the nature of relations between states, there are major methodological differences between process sociology and structural realism. Process sociology may find a more congenial intellectual partner in the English School analysis of international society which has the merit of recognising the central importance of competition and conflict between states while emphasising that states are bound together by various rules and institutions that are designed to mitigate the effects of conflict and to promote cooperation in the condition of international anarchy. In Eliasian terms, the institutions that are fundamental to the society of states have a ‘civilizing’ purpose, that is, to control violence. For that reason, studies of their development and operation deserve to occupy a more central place in the intellectual synthesis that was promoted by Elias. Of particular importance is the relationship between conceptions of civilization and the struggles for power and prestige in international society (see the later discussions by Brett Bowden and Shogo Suzuki in this issue).

It will be apparent from the discussion thus far that Elias was not a conventional sociologist – to risk caricaturing the discipline – precisely because of a driving interest in synthesising developments across many fields of inquiry including history, sociology and politics as well as the biological sciences. The underlying purpose of his inquiry was to promote the study of very long-term processes of social change such as the development of European conceptions of civilization over recent centuries. In Elias’s later writings, the interest in long-term patterns was broadened significantly to include processes that have affected, or have come to affect, humanity as a whole. There was an appeal for very high levels of synthesis in the social sciences that are in the tradition of the great theories of history but free from the ideas of progress and historical inevitability that ran through the Eurocentric universal histories of the nineteenth century. There was an implicit invitation to students of international relations and many other disciplines to rise above narrow disciplinary concerns and participate in a larger quest to understand long-term transformations that included the overall unplanned movement towards higher levels of global interconnectedness. The closer interweaving of societies had created immense challenges for peoples who, in the main, continued to identify with their respective nation-states (see Delmotte on this, and the discussion of the global financial crisis in the papers by Reinhard Blomert and Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh).

The ambition to rehabilitate and reconstruct the ‘grand narratives’ fell out of favour in recent decades though there have been many valiant attempts to resurrect such approaches over the past 20 to 30 years (see *Human Figurations* 1:1). The challenges are clearly immense. The astonishing increase in the number of scholars, publications and specialist journals, sub-fields of investigations and related conferences has led to considerable advances in many fields. But with the benefits come many costs. At the PhD level and beyond, there are pressures to master the literature in specialist areas and little time to explore related ideas in cognate disciplines. As Stephen Menell notes in his paper, scholars have little choice but to work within those constraints although many succeed in combining research on a project of manageable proportions with an investigation into larger issues in their discipline and indeed across disciplines. One of the aims of *Human Figurations* and of this particular issue is to provide intellectual support and stimulation for those that are dissatisfied with excessive specialisation, and with what Elias called ‘pseudo-specialisation’ which may be understood as the quest for novelty at the expense of forging connections between different attempts to understand the human and its relationship with the non-human world. The objective is to encourage interdisciplinary inquiry and the quest for higher synthesis at a time when it is often difficult for the scholar to make much progress on his or her own – and when, as Elias maintained, it is increasingly necessary to create interdisciplinary research clusters that are committed to constructing and passing on conceptual frameworks

on which future scholars can build, in a collective endeavour, to understand very long-term patterns of human development.

The discipline of International Relations has the right to a prominent seat at that table because, throughout its relatively short history, it has been centrally concerned with problems of war and peace that have challenged human societies ever since they first emerged on this planet, and especially since the emergence of the first cities, states and empires in the Ancient Near East. The importance of the discipline is highlighted by Elias's emphasis on the need to understand peculiar features of human development including the astonishing journey, in only a few millennia, from small-scale societies with populations of a few dozen to the large states and transnational linkages that exist today. Of particular importance are the remarkable revolutions in people's capacity to inflict violent harm that led to the condition, as described by Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, in which the species could destroy itself unless it found a way of ending 'hegemonic wars' between the great powers. The challenges that may accumulate if societies cannot combat climate change must be added to that list of subjects for investigation, as must the problem of 'taming the financial aristocracies' (see the article by Reinhard Blomert in this issue). Closer links between process sociology and the study of international relations are needed to understand what human societies have accomplished in the way of taming violence both within, and in, the relations between independent political communities over the centuries and indeed millennia – and what they may be able to accomplish, as Elias emphasised, during the remaining period in which the species will survive on Earth.

Precisely because of such challenges, it is necessary to promote the analysis of long-term processes of change that have led to the levels of human interconnectedness that exist today. As noted earlier, the articles in this special issue contribute to that task by investigating questions of method and methodology but also by promoting deeper insights into the classical issues of war and peace, being mindful of Elias's claim that efforts to promote more detached, reality-congruent knowledge of developments affecting the species as a whole have repeatedly clashed with nationalist and other collective self-images that block the path to higher levels of international cooperation (see the articles by Florence Delmotte and Stephen Mennell in this issue).

As Elias maintained, the processes that bind people together in various figurations have usually been unplanned; they developed to a significant degree 'behind the backs' of the people involved despite their efforts to influence social directions and to secure favourable outcomes. In that context one of the purposes of the social sciences is to produce what Elias regarded as a more detached understanding of long-term patterns that could at some future point greatly expand the capacity of humans to regulate processes that are often in danger of spiralling out of control. Ideally, such knowledge would make it possible for them – to paraphrase Marx – to make more of their history under conditions of their own choosing.

Of course, large normative questions immediately arise about social ideals and purposes, matters that Elias did not discuss given their association with philosophy rather than rigorous social explanation. Those are issues that may be explored in future contributions to *Human Figurations*. The articles that have been collected here focus attention on the challenges that are involved in promoting cross-disciplinary, or 'post-disciplinary', analyses of patterns of social and political change that have been unfolding – though not consistently and in one clear direction – for many centuries and indeed millennia. It is hoped that their contribution to showing how the study of international relations and process sociology can advance that project will interest scholars in areas that are not represented in this special issue, that they will form a resource on which others can build, and that they will encourage intellectual exchange between different perspectives that leads to a deeper understanding of processes that have shaped, and are shaping, the whole of humanity.

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