

Abschiedsvorlesung

Realism and Reality Congruence: Sociology and International Relations

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Pity would be no more
If we did not make somebody poor;
And Mercy no more could be
If all were as happy as we

And mutual fear brings peace,
Till the selfish loves increase:
Then Cruelty knits a snare,
And spreads his baits with care.

*William Blake, The Human
Abstract
Songs of Experience*

Last year, when I was on the glide path to retirement, several Dutch and German friends asked me whether they would be receiving an invitation to Dublin for my farewell lecture, or *Abschiedsvorlesung* as it is called in German. I had to explain that we do not have that tradition in Irish and British universities. But Andrew Linklater and I had in recent years been discussing the relevance of sociology to international relations, and *vice versa*, so when Robert van Krieken arrived from Australia the three of us decided it would be a good idea to organise this conference in conjunction with Robert's inaugural lecture, thus providing a good excuse to invite people to Dublin. And it is pleasingly symmetrical that a conference that was prefaced by an *inaugural* lecture can be closed with something which, tradition or no tradition, can be regarded as a *farewell* lecture. I hasten to add, however, that I have no immediate plans for departing the scene or saying farewell to anything or anybody.

Looking back on our discussions over the last two days, but also taking a long-term perspective on the more than 40 years I have spent teaching sociology in various universities, I think there is a clear need for a higher-level, more comprehensively synthesising social science to overcome the increasingly rigid compartmentalisation of the various specialist social sciences, and the creeping Taylorism of specialisation *within* each of them. When in the 1830s Auguste Comte coined the word 'sociology' as a label for the highest rung in the his 'hierarchy of the sciences', he probably did not have in mind anything that closely resembled the specialist trade of sociology as it is institutionalised in modern universities. Sociologists today tend to see themselves as pursuing one technical speciality among several others, and don't see it as their role to synthesise the knowledge gained by all the social sciences – let alone the physical and biological sciences, of which Comte and a little later Herbert Spencer had a polymathic knowledge. Probably it simply is not possible any more. Nevertheless, it has always seemed to me that we cannot aspire to be competent sociologists without having *some* knowledge also of economics, political science, psychology, anthropology and (above all)

history. The study of international relations involves all of those, and I hope this conference has demonstrated new lines of synthesis between IR and sociology.

For a long time sociologists have tended to speak of 'society' and 'nation state' as if they were synonyms. One problem of how sociology developed in the universities across the world is that it has tended to form a series of *national* sociologies. That is true of most countries, and strongly so in the case of Ireland. That trend has been driven by what has often been felt as a moral obligation to do research that helped to solve the practical problems of the countries in which they lived; that has been reinforced in recent decades by the need to raise (and be seen to be raising) copious quantities of cash for research; and that in turn has led to a privileging of the kind of research that requires piles of cash.

One of the many things that attracted me to the work of Norbert Elias was that his sociology was always strongly international in focus. In his early work, he made clear that the internal pacification of more extensive territory went along with bigger and better wars between neighbouring territories, and why that was so. Goudsblom has called this 'the paradox of pacification'. He quotes the old adage that 'if you want peace, prepare for war', but remarks that it is equally true that if you want to wage war with some chance of winning, you have to see to peace within your own ranks. State formation involves the organisation of violence, and the paradox arises from the civilising constraints that that organisation entails. 'Organised violence is generally far more effective than unorganised violence. To be effective, however, it requires a high degree of internal pacification. Those who participate in exercising it must not fight each other' (Goudsblom, 2001: 104).

I want to use that as a prompt to turn to the remark by Norbert Elias that we chose as the epigraph for this conference:

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

I'm going to discuss this with particular reference to the foreign policy of the United States, drawing on but extending some of the arguments I advanced in *The American Civilizing Process* (Mennell, 2007: 2-7).

Walter Russell Mead has identified no fewer than four such traditions: the Jeffersonian principle that America avoid all 'entangling alliances', and not only refuse to rule over other nations, but refrain from meddling in their affairs altogether; the Hamiltonian tradition of maintaining an international system and preserving a balance of power, acknowledging equals in the world rather than seeking hegemonic domination; the Jacksonian, which defined America's interests narrowly and avoided intervention unless there was a very direct and immediate threat to them; and the Wilsonian, which attempted to spread American-style democracy across the globe, through international organisations (2001: xvii). Arguably, since 2001, American policy has breached all four traditions. The important point, however, is that all four traditions were formed in and had relevance to a world characterised by a much lower level of interdependence among humanity as a whole. And since the Second World War American foreign policy has generally been regarded as being directed by one or other form of 'realism'.

In its original form, associated with people like Hans Morgenthau, 'realism' involves the idea that power struggles between states can be reduced to attributes of 'human nature', which is itself seen as unchanging, and without history. Other variants, such as that associated with Henry Kissinger focused instead on the struggles for power, heightened as powers rise and fall, some comfortable with the order of the day, others

committed to overthrowing it because they regarded it as illegitimate. National players always pursue national self-interest. [1][#N1] In its crude form, this kind of rational choice theory is tautological, as Lord Macaulay (1889: 80) argued when reviewing James Mill's *Essay on Government* in 1829:

What proposition is there respecting human nature which is absolutely and universally true? We know of only one: and that is not only true but identical; that men always act from self-interest. ... But, in fact, when explained, it means only that men, if they can, will do as they choose. ... If the doctrine, that men always act from self-interest, be laid down in any other sense than this – if the meaning of the word self-interest be narrowed down so as to exclude any one of the motives which may possibly act upon a human being, the proposition ceases to be identical: but at the same time it ceases to be true. ... Nothing can possibly be inferred from a maxim of this kind. When we see a man take something, we shall know it was the object of his desire. But till then we have no means of judging with certainty what he desires or what he will take. [2][#N2]

Almost more pernicious is the assumption in classical realism that 'human nature neither does nor can change'. Yes, there are striking continuities in human history. Joop Goudsblom once juxtaposed two accounts of victorious armies burning villages and killing villagers. One was from the *Iliad*, the other from Winston Churchill's description of serving on the North-West Frontier at the end of the nineteenth century (see Jones, Goudsblom and Mennell, 1996: 62n). But some things do change, even for the better, and the view that powerful groups always are and always have been the same can serve as a moral escape hatch. There are other forms of realism or 'neo-realism'. For example, John Mearsheimer has advanced what is called 'offensive realism'. Mearsheimer's approach blames security competition among great powers on the hierarchy of the international system, not on some constant human nature. This is where so-called neo-realism or structural realism branches off on its own direction. Mearsheimer is influenced by Waltz though more inclined to argue that states are not just concerned with maintaining their security, with power a means to that, but with proving that Fulbright was correct about the arrogance of power. So Waltz who is closer to defensive realism does not go far enough for Mearsheimer. I think the latter's book is incredibly weak. Despite the fanfares most IR scholars I know think the same. But he is perhaps touching on themes that Elias discussed when referring to hegemonic intoxication and co. He argues that states are not satisfied with a given amount of power, but seek hegemony for security. He summed this view up in his book *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001: 35):

Given the difficulty of determining how much power is enough for today and tomorrow, great powers recognise that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to become hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.

This argument is not unlike Elias's account of the elimination contest that gave rise to a smaller number of more powerful states in the course of medieval and early modern European history. The constant conflict over territory between neighbouring warrior lords was not driven by some inherent or instinctive 'aggressiveness' or *Angriffslust*, much as feudal warriors appear to have enjoyed combat. Rather, Elias remarked, it is more nearly true to say that conflict produces aggression than that aggression drives conflict (although, in an ongoing *process*, both things are true). A thousand years ago, when land was the essential power resource, it was dangerous for the occasional peacefully inclined magnate to seek merely to hold on to his own small

territory while his neighbours slugged it out amongst themselves. The victor in that round of the contest, having conquered more territory, could then pick off his smaller irenic neighbour at his leisure. So Mearsheimer's thesis is highly plausible – but the difference is that in the modern, far more complex world, there is a far greater variety of important power resources. So the formulation of a 'realist' strategy for a state in pursuit of hegemony or simply greater relative power is correspondingly more complex and uncertain: how is national interest to be perceived and pursued? The central question that I wish to pose is whether we can conceive of 'realism' in international relations if there is a low level of reality congruence, and a high level of fantasy in the thinking of the people whose 'national interest' is being pursued, and in the perceptions of those with the power to pursue that 'national interest'? Let us therefore dissect this notion of 'national interest':

I. Dissecting 'national interest'

1

'State' vs 'nation': Mostly, social scientists accept Max Weber's definition of the state as an organisation that successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence (1978: I 54). Perhaps in part because of the ambiguity of the word 'state' in an American context, American sociologists and political scientists have tended to pay less attention to state formation than to what they call 'nation-building', and the concept of 'nation' is altogether more nebulous.

2

One reason for its being so nebulous is that it is rarely asked *who* defines what is 'the nation' (and by extension, the national interest). Sir Ivor Jennings (1956: 55) made the point vividly many years ago:

a Professor of Political Science who was also President of the United States, enunciated a doctrine which was ridiculous, but which was widely accepted as a sensible proposition, the doctrine of self-determination. On the surface it seemed reasonable: let the people decide. It was in fact ridiculous because the people cannot decide until somebody decides who are in fact the people.

3

By extension, next comes the question of how widely defined is the 'national interest'? How wide, in other words, is the extent of what Elias called 'mutual identification'? Does 'mutual identification' extend even to all people resident in the territory of a state? Does it extend to any people beyond its borders? That is likely to depend on the length of the chains of interdependence that connect people, but also on the power ratios associated with each link in the chain. On the whole, it seems likely that mutual identification will be greatest when the power balances between the interdependent people are relatively equal, and it will be most restricted where there are great inequalities of power – or very unequal interdependence, which is a different way of saying the same thing.

4

By further extension, over what time horizon is the 'national interest' defined? In answering this question, some of the same considerations apply as are involved in the time horizons over which businesses make commercial decisions. This is a matter of what economists call the 'rate of time preference'. Especially in an age when 'maximising shareholder value' has become the overriding criterion of success, the pursuit of profit involves looking at the present discounted value of a cash flow – discounted, that is, by the prevailing rate of interest. Markets have very limited time horizons. At historically normal rates of interest, businesses do not look very far ahead - anything beyond for example five years ahead represents nothing of value. [3][#N3] Given the dominant power of great corporations over mere governments today, that helps to foster short political time horizons too. But even if business played no part in politics, for governments *elections* provide a similar (if anything more severe) constraint on foresight. Elias thought spreading webs of interdependence would produce 'increasing pressures towards foresight'. But that depends on functional democratisation, or steadily more relatively equal power ratios.

5

Which brings us to American foreign policy: Madeleine Albright (in Mearsheimer, 2009) remarked that:

If we have to use force, it is because we are America. We are the indispensable nation. We stand tall. We see further into the future.

I would seriously question Albright's last assertion, about seeing further. As I have argued in my book, the Americans' central historic experience is of their country constantly becoming more powerful relative to its neighbours. This has had long-term and all-pervasive effects on the way they see themselves, on how they perceive the rest of the world, and how others see them. Crucially, becoming *more* powerful relative to others is precisely *not* conducive to farsightedness, nor to more 'civilised' behaviour vis-à-vis other states. Andrew Linklater and I have pointed to the significance of 'ambivalence of interests' in shaping behaviour in, for instance, the highly competitive world of the early modern court. [4][#N4] Courtiers were forced to realise that efforts to disadvantage others could rebound on the instigators by triggering responses that could endanger the social order on which all depended. Those whose lives were interwoven in the courtly circles reached a collective awareness of the need for self-restraint in their relations with those who were partners as well as adversaries, but throughout they were inclined to 'oscillate between the desire to win major advantages over their social opponents and their fear of ruining the whole social apparatus' on which their 'existence depends'. Reinhard Blomert has pursued the analogy between the absolutist courts of early modern Europe and the modern world order, speaking of George Bush Junior as 'the disobedient king-president'. 'Like the earlier territorial princes in France, whose transformation from knights to courtiers Elias described, the European middle powers lost their military autonomy and were transformed into bureaucrats of an interdependent new military system, NATO, which was dominated by the western superpower' (Blomert, 2003: 2) – the European states and much of the rest of the world were, to use a term applied to nineteenth-century Germany, 'mediatised'. Blomert's point is that, while they succeeded in taming the old warrior aristocracy, absolutist kings also became *bound themselves* to the observation of certain limits on their power vis-à-vis the less powerful. [5][#N5] In the hubris following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the USA lost sight of the ways in which it was itself similarly bound and that was why there was for a time an interest in the importance of multilateralism in the US. But George W pushed all that overboard on the assumption that the US could remake international order with the assistance of willing allies, as discussed in van Benthem van den Bergh's contribution to this special issue. Now of course everyone is back into multilateralism, at least as ideology.

In consequence, it is widely agreed that the first decade of the twenty-first century may mark an historical turning point, after which for the first time in its history the USA begins gradually to become *less* powerful in relation to its major rivals. *Ceteris paribus*, that ought to foster greater foresight in world affairs. The election of a more intelligent and rational President will no doubt help, though that does not in itself represent the turning point. That restraint and foresight dictates the quest for multilateralism though that clashes with all sorts of fantastic world views in the US – with the views of the fantasists think that the US can and should go it alone.

6

The reference to a more rational President draws attention to the fact that my argument so far has been almost in the mode of ‘rational choice’ theory. Or indeed an explanation of the type favoured by the various realist schools, which tend to depict national decision-makers as taking a cold, unemotional calculation of interests in dealing with other powers. But now let us bring in *emotions*. In discussing international relations, one of Elias’s favourite concepts – which he borrowed from Gregory Bateson – was the ‘double bind’. Particularly in *Humana Conditio*, he saw the USA and the USSR, with their allies and satellites, locked in an enduring double bind, both sides experiencing ‘hegemonic fevers’ marked by high emotion. Like most people, he was wrong about how long that standoff would endure. But he was right, surely, about the dangers of hegemonic fevers, which in the case of the USA persisted and were greatly exacerbated (as Al Quaeda intended them to be) by the attacks of 9/11. Uncertainty, insecurity and fear play a large part in foreshortening time horizons.

Here we must come back to ‘the interdependence of intra-state and inter-state processes’. Can foreign policy be coldly ‘realist’ when *internal* public opinion and public knowledge is low in what Elias called ‘reality congruence’, and high in magic-mythical thinking? The assumption is that it is necessary to understand and adapt now to the realities or be forced to do so at a later date but not before a great deal of pain has occurred. This also fits in with the ‘drag effect’ theme mentioned earlier. It is not just that among the American population there is an extraordinarily high incidence of belief in the supernatural, [6] [#N6] though that is dangerous enough – almost as bad as North Koreans with their bizarre views of magpies and owls. It is not just that the superficial democracy of American public discourse, which accords a measure of respect and equality to uninformed opinion in defiance of scientific findings on climate change for example – uninformed opinion encouraged, incidentally, by business interests resisting the curbs on their short term profits that would result from taking a longer-term view in the interest of the planet as whole. It is also that a mass of survey data shows that a large proportion of American citizens are profoundly and astonishingly ignorant of the 95 per cent of the globe’s population that lives outside the boundaries of the USA.

That needs to be explained, and the explanation I have offered rests upon the way in which highly unequal power ratios actually distort perception. One could perhaps come to this finding from reading Hegel’s discussion of the master–slave relationship, but in fact I came to it through Bram van Stolk and Cas Wouters’s (1987) study of women in a refuge for battered wives in Amsterdam. The less powerful party in a very unequal power ratio typically sees and understands far more about the more powerful partner than the more powerful partner does about the less. People throughout the world know a vast amount about the USA, its constitution, its politics, its cultural products, its way of life in general. The perception is not reciprocal. It is as if we were sitting behind a one-way mirror observing them, but when they look in our direction all they see is their own reflection. And if power imbalances distort perception, they most certainly also restrict the scope of mutual identification. And the possibility of realistic policy, accommodating the interests of others. Important I think is the idea of thinking from the standpoint of others, a term Elias uses though it was used by Kant.

Now, it may be said that the survey evidence documents the limitations of redneck voters in red states, but that American *elites* are different, as they are in most countries. But the two cannot be so easily separated. As we see constantly, the electoral system throws up crazy people whose knowledge of the wider world, or indeed of anything else, can hardly be described as congruent with reality, but could easily be described as magical–mythical. They are frequently elected to Congress, and sometimes they are elected or appointed to the executive branch. (I need only mention the name of Sarah Palin.)

Harold Pinter memorably summarised US foreign policy as ‘Lick my arse or I’ll kick your head in’. I have put that in a little more detached fashion when I described the 2002 Security Strategy of the USA as ‘the Dubya Addendum to the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine’ (Mennell, 2007: 211-212). [7],[#N7]. It amounted to a declaration of the USA’s right to intervene anywhere in the world in defence of its interests. And it isn’t just a matter of US *government policy*; as Mearsheimer (2009) remarks, ‘Most Americans believe that their country has both a moral and strategic responsibility to intervene in the daily life of countries all around the globe.’ A civilizing mission perhaps?

Make no mistake: the benefits would be enormous if the USA (or anyone else, for that matter) were to succeed in its declared ambition of achieving the internal pacification of the whole world. Those of us who live in relatively peaceful, secure and democratic societies find it difficult to imagine how much of the rest of humanity does not. The greatest evil they face is the lack of everyday security – vulnerability to violence and sudden death, as well as hunger and disease, dangers posed to them by other human beings as well as by natural forces. If they could be guaranteed a high and consistent level of security, of the kind we ourselves enjoy, then we might witness for the first time a true worldwide ‘civilising process’. And it isn’t just a matter of physical security. We are now all of us aware of how much we need a world central authority to impose curbs and regulations on the activities of the crooks and spivs whom we used to call ‘bankers’.

But most students of history and international relations don’t think that this can be achieved by a single superpower acting unilaterally. For one thing, if Elias is right, *steady, consistent* pressure is most conducive to the conversion of external into civilised self-constraint – something that appears to be true of state elites as well as children. Democracy cannot be dropped in high-explosive bombs from a B52 at 30,000 feet. It is true, on the other hand, that the web of globalisation under American leadership is exerting subtler pressures. But then again, it seems likely that what was once the ‘Washington consensus’ model of vast persisting inequalities of economic and political power both *within* and *between* states would prove to be an unstable foundation for a civilised world democracy. The rest of the world will inevitably resent being unilaterally dominated by a monopoly power, over the exercise of which it has effectively no democratic control. American anti-imperialists such as Mark Twain and Carl Schurz made this point a century ago. They said that the USA could not in the long term dominate the people of its colonies without giving them representation. They would either have to be given independence or made citizens and given the vote. Today’s American dominion is much more extensive. I wonder how the American electorate would take to the idea of all the 95 per cent of the rest of us having a vote in their elections! In these circumstances, American governments might gradually decide that, after all, the prudential course might be to make use of the structures of the United Nations. As the baton passes to China, assuming present trends continue for the next 50 years or so, similar questions will arise.

II. Sociology and international relations

All this brings me back finally to link what I have been saying about international relations to what I was saying earlier about the state of the discipline of sociology. Perhaps the most disappointing thing about

sociology is how very little impact it has achieved on how the person in the street and political leaders think about the world in which they live. Comte would have been disappointed too. The default setting for popular thinking and political discourse remains firmly psychologistic, not sociologistic. By that I mean that people still by and large ‘instinctively’ (as part of their deeply learned habitus) seek to explain social events – from minor political events to wars and revolutions – in terms of people’s motivations, rather than with any understanding of the longer-term ‘compelling processes’ in which we are all carried along willy-nilly. Examples are the Manichean rhetoric of the Bush administration or more recently Tony Blair’s assertion at the Chilcot Inquiry that the social collapse of Iraq after the invasion of 2003 was all the fault of the bad intentions of the Iranian rulers. It is strange to think that, back in the 1950s and 1960s there was prolonged and profound discussion of ‘the social bases of democracy’, by distinguished sociologists such as Seymour Martin Lipset. So far as I am able to discover, none of the neo-conservative sages – nor indeed anyone else in high places – seems to have been aware of that earlier literature. Had they read it, they would have been less likely to try to deliver democracy from the barrel of a gun, and might have done their homework on Iraqi society, for example.

This unfortunately points to not one but two failings in the contemporary discipline of sociology. One is that, apart from ritual genuflections to the Holy Trinity of Marx, Weber and Durkheim, few people seem to read research that is more than ten years old; perhaps this is due to the emulation of natural science models, but in consequence sociology often seems remarkably non-cumulative. The second fault, I think is what Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh many years ago called ‘the attribution of blame as a means of orientation in the social sciences’. [8][#N8]. You may have noticed that even I am not guiltless of that: we all feel angry at events like the invasion of Iraq or the collapse of casino capitalism. But to be too preoccupied with the attribution of blame is not the best way forward for the social sciences.

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Biography

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Notes

1. Interestingly Waltz (1979), in developing neo-realism, takes issue with Kissinger because his conception of world politics attached too much importance to national attributes – not human ones – and did not therefore understand the deeper structural forces that have shaped world politics over the millennia. [↕\[#N1-ptri\]](#)
2. Macaulay's argument is in essence the same as that with which Noam Chomsky famously demolished B. F. Skinner's behaviourist *Verbal Behaviour* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957); see Chomsky's review in *Language* 35: 1 (1959), pp. 26-58. Walz (1959) also criticised human nature explanations because at one and the same time they explain everything and absolutely nothing. [↕\[#N2-ptri\]](#)
3. Curiously enough, the historically exceptionally low interest rates prevailing during the financial crash of 2008-10 ought to promote longer time horizons for business, but that effect is offset by that of much greater uncertainty, insecurity and indeed fear in the commercial world. [↕\[#N3-ptri\]](#)
4. Andrew Linklater and Stephen Mennell, essay reassessing *The Civilising Process*, forthcoming in *History and Theory*. See also Elias's discussion of ambivalence in *The Civilizing Process* (rev. edn., Oxford: Blackwell, 2000 [*On the Process of Civilisation*, Collected Works, vol. 3, forthcoming]), p. 318. [↕\[#N4-ptri\]](#)
5. See Elias (2006, chapter 6, pp.127-157) on 'The binding of the king through etiquette and status chances'. [↕\[#N5-ptri\]](#)
6. See Mennell (2007, chapter 11) 'Involvement, Detachment and American Religiosity'. [↕\[#N6-ptri\]](#)
7. See *The National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 2002). [↕\[#N7-ptri\]](#)
8. An abbreviated version was published in English titled 'The improvement of human means of orientation: toward synthesis in the social sciences', in Raymond Apthorpe and Andras Krahl (eds),

Development Studies: Critique and Renewal (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1986), pp. 109–36. [\[#N8-ptri\]](#)

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