Reconfiguring Elias: Historical Sociology, the English School, and the Challenge of International Relations

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Introduction: Reconvening Elias within the liminal world between Historical Sociology and IR

I first became interested in the work of Norbert Elias in the late-1980s, and drew extensively on his approach in my first book, *States and Economic Development* – as was explicitly stated in Weiss and Hobson (1995: 26, and 255, fn. 8). Although I turned to consider the critique of Eurocentrism in Historical Sociology/World history and International Relations around the turn of the millennium, I have more recently found myself on a path that wends its way back gradually to the Eliasian field. That said, though, two qualifications are noteworthy. First, the 2-volume set that was presented in *The Civilizing Process* has remained in my top 5 favourite academic books – alongside Michael Mann's epic first volume of *The Sources of Social Power* (1986), Felipe Fernández-Armesto's masterpiece, *Millennium* (1995), and Brian Schmidt's masterly revisionist historiographical book on IR theory, *The Political Discourse of Anarchy* (1998).[1],[N1] I recall fondly my initial reading of Elias' first volume (*The History of Manners*), and laughing out loud in a Melbourne café to myself. And volume 2, as already mentioned – though dealing with a subject matter that is not so amusing of course – also formed the basis of my approach to the rise of the state as well as the rise of Western capitalism (supplemented with his superb book, *The Court Society* (1969/1983)).

This by way of introducing my reader to my long-standing interest in Elias; something which has been directly rekindled by my interest in Eurocentrism and the imperial politics of the civilizing mission (Hobson 2004, 2012). But rather than make the links between this and Elias's approach to the civilizing process – fascinating though I find this – I shall instead ply an alternative path by reconvening as well as reconfiguring Elias in the mirror of International Relations (IR) theory. For while I am in this personal genealogical mood I want to place Elias in a wider context, locating his ideas and approach within my own sojourns into the space where historical sociology (HS) and International Relations meet and sometimes collide; a journey that I began as a student back in 1986 when I was fortunate enough to have taken Michael Mann's MA Sociological Theory class at the LSE before I entered the world of IR when I began teaching it in 1992 at La Trobe University in Melbourne. For it is in the vortex of these two disciplines wherein we can encounter as well as *reconfigure* Elias to hopefully productive ends.

The essential argument of this article is advanced in four sections. In the first part I set out six founding principles or axioms of Elias's complex ontology. The second section then reveals the basis of neorealist IR theory by considering the six principles of Kenneth Waltz's approach, which produces a vision that constitutes

the diametric opposite to that of Elias's. But as I explain in the third section of this article the problem is that a good deal of what Elias has to say about the international realm dovetails with the conception laid out by Waltz and other neorealists (e.g., Gilpin 1981; Mearsheimer 2001). Accordingly, I argue that there is a contradiction lying at the heart of Elias's theory; one that I believe requires urgent attention. To be more specific, the problem here is that a Waltzian neorealist approach invokes a highly reductive ontological conception of the international. This might not necessarily impact Eliasian integrity given that the international constitutes only a part of Elias's overall spatial ontology, since domestic 'national level' factors are also important in his explanation of social change. But the problem with implicitly deploying a neorealist approach to the international is that such a conception trumps or ontologically subsumes the complex ontology of Eliasian HS, thereby jeopardizing the six principles that inform Elias's theory. More confronting still, is that the pure form of neorealism is explicitly ahistorical as well as asociological, leading therefore to a negation of everything that Elias supposedly stands for. Equally, we could invert this by noting that a proper Eliasian approach could be developed to produce an alternative non-realist conception of the international, thereby drawing on Elias to reconfigure Eliasian studies so-to-speak.

Having revealed all this in the second and third sections, I turn in the fourth and final section to consider how Eliasian integrity can not only be rescued but can be enhanced by drawing on the English School theory of IR. Nevertheless, I should point out that there is a range of potentially productive 'partnerships' between Eliasian HS and IR theory. Still, whichever way we seek to 'rescue' Elias from the neorealist cul-de-sac matters less than my major claim which is that Eliasian historical sociologists would do well to, and indeed should of some urgency, engage with IR theory. [2] [#N2] For when a historical sociological theory engages with the international – as Elias's does – so it becomes imperative to engage with IR theory. To delve a little deeper here by way of introduction it is worth noting that my own preference would be to develop Elias in *non-Eurocentric* global-sociological terms and to locate his idea of the civilizing process in the context of world politics. But that is for another time. The key point is that I have chosen to explore some of the affinities that exist between Eliasian HS and English School IR theory in part because this provides a means to escape the impasse that currently exists as a result of Elias's implicit drawing on a neorealist conception of the international, as already noted, and in part because I think that the politics and intellectual temperamentality of English School theory would appeal to many Eliasians. And finally I am also motivated to pursue this line because it complements the argument that is pioneered in Andrew Linklater's seminal book, *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (2011). Here it is worth noting that Linklater is a world-leading IR theorist who has in the last decade turned to a serious study of Norbert Elias and has searched for ways of marrying Eliasian HS with English School theory. If nothing else, the present article will at least provide a backdrop to Linklater's important project.

The 'six principles' of Eliasian historical sociology

I should preface my subsequent discussion by explaining that one of the principal themes that first attracted me to Elias' sociological approach is the ontologically complex conceptual foundations of his historical sociological theory, evidenced particularly in his notion of 'figurations' that is outlined in his classic text, *What is Sociology?* (Elias 1978). As noted already, I drew from this – in addition to his two-volume project *The Civilizing Process* – in order to explain the rise of European capitalism and state-formation in the 1995 book I co-authored with Linda Weiss. But by the early 1990s, having begun lecturing in International Relations, I soon came to realize that IR was starting to turn towards sociology, especially historical sociology, in order to rethink some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that had been bequeathed by the hegemonic theory of IR – neorealism. And for myself in particular, Elias's sociological approach appeared to provide an excellent foundation for the basis of an alternative *non*-realist theory of IR. This I felt was necessary because I

soon learned that neorealism suffers from the very same problem that Eliasians and Weberians criticise Marxism and liberalism for: namely a reductive ontology. Here I shall specify six core Eliasian principles that in aggregate ontologically differentiate the approach from neorealism (with the latter considered in the following section).

First, of course, Elias's key problematique as an historical sociologist is to reveal the social sources of long-run change through time. This, of course, is a hallmark of Eliasian HS and has been developed in a variety of excellent ways by his leading followers (see e.g., Goudsblom, Jones, and Mennell 1996). Nowhere is this clearer than in Elias's celebrated analysis of the civilizing process, which relates the social journey from a feudal order in which the public and private realms converge into the modern world where the private and public are institutionally differentiated or separated. Thus we move from a social order where it was deemed to be appropriate to blow one's nose on the table-cloth or urinate against someone's house in public to a world where table-cloths are strictly out of bounds to a diner's nose and where the diner, should he feel the call of nature, would exit the room and meet such a call in a confined private space known as the lavatory. Or, as the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* makes clear, we move from a world where the process of governance is parceled out to the nobility who reside in the provinces to one where rulers gained monopoly governance powers in part by reversing the centrifugal process where political power gravitates to the margins, such that the nobles are sucked back into the centre not least through their relocation into the rulers' court society that exists at the centre. In sum, what is important here is Elias's critique of Marxism (and by implication neorealism) for what he calls the problem of 'process reduction'. Here he is critical of those theories that search for eternal or immutable laws of motion. In strong contrast to the approach developed by Kenneth Waltz, Elias insisted that history is not subject to repetitive and changeless patterns and symmetries (Elias 1978: 113–16) but is better understood as an 'imminent order of change' (Elias 1978: 149). Nevertheless, it is also true that one of the key claims he makes in *The Civilizing Process* is that there is a very high probability that groups which are responsible for their own security will tend to engage in 'elimination contests', whereby we witness a steady monopolization of the means of violence in fewer and fewer hands. [3][#N3]

Second, Eliasian HS is marked by its preference for ontological complexity. Here his conceptualization of 'figurations' is key. It is worth noting that it finds its parallel in Gary Runciman's notion of the *systact* as well as Michael Mann's extraordinary work on the *promiscuousness* of actors and the partial ontological autonomy of the four sources of social power – ideological, economic, military, and political (Mann 1986: esp. ch. 1; Runciman 1989: esp. 20–27). Or as Elias put it, speaking of the 'problem of power':

> To simplify the problem, a single form – perhaps the military or the economic form – of the many possible sources of power which can be accessible to people is often taken as *the* source of power, to which all forms of the exercise of power may be traced. But this simply conceals the problem. The difficulties encountered in reflecting on problems of power stem from the polymorphous nature of [the] sources of power (Elias 1978: 92).

His refusal to specify one source of power as primary links Elias back to Weber as well as to the likes of Runciman and Mann of course.

This leads directly onto the third inter-related principle, wherein actors such as states (as in neorealism) or classes (as in Marxism) are not conceived of as self-constituting billiard balls that are locked into head-on conflicts but take on polymorphous figurational properties. As with the multiple sources of power, so actors entwine and retrack each other (see esp. Elias 1978: 79–99, 140–2, 154). Once again it is this that ultimately

marks out the novelty of the work of Elias – as well as Max Weber and other neo-Weberians such as Mann (1986, 1993: esp. 2, 542, 725) and Runciman (1989).

Fourth, the Eliasian approach breaks down the international-national divide, as societies are socialized in part by the international realm through state competition and war. And this, of course, became a key theme of neo-Weberian theory associated initially with Theda Skocpol's *States and Social Revolutions* (Skocpol 1979). Above all, in effectively doing away with the great divide between the national and international realms, so Elias provides the means by which neorealism's international structural determinism can be overcome. Moreover, Elias focuses specifically on the notion of *inter-societal relations*, where societies overlap and are constituted through these multiple overlaps. They are, therefore, spatially promiscuous and are socially interdependent (Elias 1978: esp. 168–72). [4][#N4] Thus as Linklater points out (2011: 182), for Elias societies shape the international and vice versa (see also Elias 1991: 138ff). [5][#N5]

Fifth, the Eliasian approach combines structures and agents and in privileging neither so it offers up a type of structurationism – though one that does not necessarily dovetail with Anthony Giddens' (1984) formulation. [6][#N6] The Eliasian expert, Robert Van Krieken summarized this point well in his excellent book *Norbert Elias*:

> Elias did not merely provide another solution to the problems of structure and agency and conflict versus consensus which have occupied the majority of sociologists for many decades. He argued for ways in which we might dissolve them as problems altogether, by avoiding the conceptual errors associated with the direction sociological thought took in being structured by Parsons' formulation of the so-called 'Hobbesian problem of order' (van Krieken 1998: 5).

Sixth and finally, Eliasian HS offers a means to go beyond the highly materialist approach of Waltzian neorealism, where not only are social factors ignored but so too are issues of identity, norms, and numerous socio-psychological dimensions of actor behaviour. As is well known, of course, the civilizing process is one that envisages a broad reconfiguration of the socio-psychology of individuals in society. Thus the civilizing process is one that transforms the communal, unrestrained aspects of social life into one of self-restrained individualized behaviour. So, as already noted, while in feudal society males think nothing of urinating openly in public, [7][#N7] sometimes against the walls of someone else's home, so we move into modernity whereby individuals retreat from visibility into the private and hidden sphere of the lavatory and would in the main recoil in shame and embarrassment were they to be caught in the act in public. Or again, using the most well-known example, individuals in feudal society were not concerned by the possibility of being run over by, or colliding with, a vehicle when they travelled from A to B, but instead kept constant vigil in case of being attacked and robbed by private maurauders and bandits. By contrast, in modern society the car-driver is not so much concerned with being attacked or robbed but is centrally concerned to maintain self-control so as not to collide with another car or vehicle (see e.g., Elias 1995: 21ff). Thus the civilizing process, which propels and governs the development of modern society out of its feudal predecessor, leads to greater interdependence between individuals on the one hand and a concomitant intensification of self-restraint and societal pacification on the other. Again, to return to Linklater's insightful discussion, an Eliasian account of world politics must *inter alia* focus on socio-psychological/emotional, normative and identity-based processes as well as changes in material forces (Linklater 2011: esp. ch. 5). Here Elias's emphasis on norms dovetails with conventions of what constitutes 'appropriate' behaviour; something which is centred around his discussion of manners and which becomes a key socializing principle of societies over time. And, of course, the 'logic of appropriateness' is a key concept that is developed and deployed by constructivists (e.g., March and Olsen 1989); an idea that has been applied at the international level by constructivist IR scholars since the late

1980s (e.g., Wendt 1987, 1992; Finnemore 1996; Klotz 1995). Bringing together much of this Linklater suggests that the Eliasian approach to world politics should

> aim for a higher level of synthesis that integrates various 'levels of analysis' [national, international and global]; and it should transcend them by considering domains that have been central to process sociology: namely developments in collective emotions that include attitudes to violence, cruelty, humiliation, exploitation and other ways of inflicting violent or non-violent harm on the members of other societies (Linklater 2011: 194).

These six fundamental claims will, of course, be familiar to an Eliasian audience. And they clearly establish Elias's credentials as a complex-ontological historical sociologist. However, the problem which emerges here is that when Elias discusses the international he often does so in ways that are highly reminiscent of neorealism's conception. And this in turn threatens the very integrity not only of his complex ontological theory but, more damning still, his status as an historical sociologist. To reveal this I shall now turn to a summary discussion of the key neorealist in IR – Kenneth Waltz.

The perils of Waltzian neorealism and the challenge to Eliasian historical sociology

In 1979 Kenneth Waltz's seminal text, *Theory of International Politics*, was published and soon became the defining book of the discipline of IR. By the 'defining book' I mean this in a positive and negative sense; positive in that some adhered to his approach or at least to various aspects of it, and negative in that many non-realist theorists used the book as a foil against which they developed their own alternative theories. In particular, Waltz was critical of classical realism and sought explicitly to construct what turns out to be the purest form of neorealist theory (often termed 'Waltzian neorealism' or sometimes 'structural realism'). [8] [#N8] What primarily concerned Waltz was his desire to create a highly 'parsimonious' theory of international politics (IP); one that would explain the conduct of IP through a single causal variable. Interestingly, while many in HS assume almost axiomatically that complexity is inherently superior to parsimony – especially Eliasians and Weberians – Waltz inverts this 'common sense' and argues that the more one moves away from parsimony, the more one moves towards 'description' and away from 'theory'. And this has proved to be an extremely powerful argument against those who would seek to move away from the hegemony that ontological reductionism enjoys in IR.

What ultimately led Waltz to search for ontological parsimony was his assumption of (what might be called) the historical 'continuity problematic'. What primarily struck Waltz is the high degree of continuity of outcomes that allegedly marks IP down through the millennia. As he put it, '[t]he texture of international politics remains highly constant, patterns recur and events repeat themselves endlessly. The relations that prevail internationally seldom shift rapidly in type or in quality. They are marked by a dismaying persistence' (Waltz 1979: 66). This refers to his observation that IP is, and always has been, a realm of conflict between states or 'political units', whether these have been empires, city-states or nation-states. The key that unlocks Waltz's theory involves understanding the theoretical move that is required to meet and explain such 'continuity'. To explain continuity, Waltz is forced (or chooses) to construct a theory in which there are a minimum of explanatory variables, which themselves are subject to little change or transmutation. Thus 'parsimony' or 'elegance' is proclaimed to be the fundamental property of Waltzian neorealism since it is precisely this which enables him to explain the continuity of IP down through the millennia (Waltz 1979: ch.

1). To create such a parsimonious (narrow) theory, Waltz insists that the empirical complexity of the 'real' world must be simplified and ontologically reduced down to one key factor; this being what he calls the 'international political structure' (IPS). And it is this that becomes the sole determining variable of international politics (Waltz 1979: chs. 3–5).

In this way Waltz compresses realism into a highly parsimonious theory that is differentiated from its ontologically much looser classical realist predecessor; an approach that he castigates for its emphasis on the *domestic properties* of nation-states in the making of international politics. Bracketing or cutting out the domestic realm is *the* crucial move. And this is so because the key thing about the domestic realm is that it is constantly changing and yet the structure of IP never changes. Thus if one was to explain the whole through the aspects of its parts, then this would logically lead to a view of the international system as one that is constantly changing – thereby contradicting the very 'static property' that he sees as a fundamental property of the international system. Still, this is not to say that domestic factors are entirely irrelevant, as I explain below (following my discussion of the 2nd tier).

Waltz's discussion of the IPS is tied in with his analysis of domestic political structures. Indeed the former turns out to be the polar opposite of the latter, given that domestic political structures are 'hierarchies' while the IPS is an 'anarchic realm'. Another way of differentiating these two types of political structure is to note that there are three basic properties or tiers/levels of domestic political structures but only two within the IPS. Thus while the domestic political structure has three tiers – comprising (1) the *ordering principle*; (2) the *character* or *differentiation* of the units; (3) the *distribution of capabilities* – the IPS has only the first and third. As alluded to already, understanding why the 'second tier' drops out of Waltz's definition of the IPS is the key to his whole theory.

The first tier – or what is termed the 'ordering principle' – is the key aspect of any political structure. In a domestic political structure the 'units' (the individuals in society) enter into a harmonious and interdependent division of labour. Specifically the 'ordering principle' of hierarchy is to 'specialize'. That is, individuals concentrate their efforts on performing one key task and then trade with others the goods that they need but do not produce themselves. Thus cooperation and interdependence become key defining aspects of the relations between the units [the individuals] within the nation-state. This follows from the simple point that in a domestic hierarchy there exists a higher authority – the state – which solves the internal problem of security and order. In many ways, Waltz's conception of the national realm is one that is, ironically, congruent with Adam Smith's liberal prescriptions for a successful national economy. However, for Smith, the successful specialization of individuals and their interdependence within societies is the recipe for the creation of a harmonious, interdependent and peaceful international system. Waltz, by contrast, turns this conception on its head when he theorises the international realm.

For Waltz, the international realm is characterised by a *singular absence* – specifically the absence of a higher authority that stands above the units of the international system (ie., above the constituent states). It is this lack of a higher authority – or a world government – that Waltz refers to as an international *anarchy*. And it is this absence that underpins his central argument that the international realm, governed by the logic of anarchy, is one of perpetual competition and conflict between the constituent political units – whether these be city-states, feudal polities, empires or nation-states. Thus the ordering principle of anarchy dictates that political units must *not* specialize in that which they do best (as in classical liberalism and the theory of comparative advantage) but should follow 'self-help' and thereby aim to be as self-sufficient as possible in order to avoid the need to rely on other states. This must be avoided for the simple reason that states are perpetually insecure and can be attacked, at least in principle, by a larger one at any time precisely because there is no higher authority to prevent this from happening. That, in essence, is the basis of his whole theory.

As already noted, particularly important to the discussion is Waltz's argument that the 'second tier' (the 'character' of states, and state-society relations) 'drops out' of the definition of the IPS (Waltz 1979: 93, 101). By this he means simply that such unit-level factors are not relevant in informing the general patterns of inter-state behaviour. Instead sovereign states become 'black-boxed' and are treated as functionally 'like units'. Of course, there is considerable divergence in that some states are Christian, others Islamic, some capitalist and others socialist, some democratic and others authoritarian, and so on. But these properties are explicitly bracketed out. States become 'like units' in that they all *function* alike: that is, they are all sovereign with a centralized political system that enjoys a legitimate monopoly of violence and rule-making, and are not subject to a higher political authority either domestically or internationally (Waltz 1979: 95). Critically, the reason why they are all the same derives from the 'socializing' logic of international anarchy. Failure to *emulate* the successful practices of the leading states (ie., conform to the 'logic of anarchic competition') leads to the opening up of a 'relative power gap'. And given that there is no higher authority to prevent states from attacking each other, so the development of a larger relative power gap between state A and state B means that the former becomes vulnerable to a potential attack by the latter. Survival dictates convergence or functional homogeneity – though it also requires balancing, as I explain below. Accordingly, the nature of societies in no way shapes or affects the game of international politics, for this is governed by the structure of the international system (notwithstanding various qualifications that he made on this point (see Hobson 2000: 28–29)). Moreover, Waltz effectively invokes a 'second-image reversed' account, whereby the international shapes the national but the latter has little or no impact on the former, thereby justifying the exclusion of unit force variables from his 'third image' parsimonious-systemic theory

But to return to a point that I signalled earlier, it aids understanding here if I clarify what Waltz is *not* saying. For he is *not* saying that domestic variables are irrelevant to international politics. As he argued in a lesser known book, *Foreign Policy and Democratic Politics* (1967), domestic variables must be utilised if we are to explain the *foreign policies* of states. But, he insists, a *structural* explanation of the international system does not try to explain the details of each country's foreign policies. It merely tries to tell us 'a small number of big and important things' about the general tendencies and characteristics of international politics (Waltz 1986: 329, 344, 345; Waltz 1979: Ch. 1, 71–2, 121–3). And it is precisely this that he is concerned to explain. Or, to put it differently, a theory of the international system requires the analyst to avoid the problem of what he calls 'reductionism' in favour of a systemic approach. Reductionism, in his unorthodox usage, refers to the predominant tendency to explain international politics through factors or changes that go on within the units (ie., states). It is this which underpins theories of foreign policies; it is its avoidance through systemic analysis that secures a theory of international politics.

The final part of his definition of the IPS concerns the 'third tier' (though because the 'character of the units drops out' so the third is in effect the second key variable). This is what he terms the 'distribution of capabilities'. Thus while states are all functionally alike, nevertheless they are differentiated in terms of power capability (ie., *power differentiation*). Here he refers to strong and weak states. Strong states or great powers are in effect 'power-makers'; they can change the behaviour of other states and lead the system whereas weak states are in effect 'power-takers', having no choice but to follow the great powers. This, of course, follows the original proposition articulated by Thucydides in the Melian Dialogue: that 'the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must'. But this is by no means a license to suggest that the strong go unrestrained in international politics. For under international anarchy, power differentiation ensures that *all* states must follow self-help and that all must adapt either to survive or to remain as a great power. Still, while Waltz allows for the possibility that sometimes states will choose to ignore the imperative of self-help, they will however as a result either decline or perish. Interestingly, the power balancing logic of his theory is central to the restraining hand that compels states to 'think straight' or to lose out in 'elimination contests' to use Eliasian language. [9] [#N9]

But, it might be asked, does not the inclusion of capability allow 'unit forces' (ie., the domestic realm) back into the definition, as is sometimes charged by his critics (eg., Gabriel 1994: 85)? No, he answers, because having abstracted (ie., ignored) every aspect of the state except power, 'what emerges is a positional picture, in which states are understood by their placement in the system as opposed to their individual attributes' (Waltz 1979: 99). Or again,

> [a]nd yet one may wonder why only (state) *capability* is included in the third part of the definition, and not such characteristics as ideology, form of government, peacefulness, bellicosity, or whatever. The answer is this: Power is estimated by comparing the capabilities of a number of units. Although capabilities are attributes of units, the distribution of capabilities is not. The distribution of capabilities is not a unit attribute, but rather a system-wide concept (Waltz 1979: 97–8).

Thus because it is the 'systemic' or 'positional' picture that matters, Waltz succeeds in once again keeping the 'second tier' of the state or state-society relations out of the definition of the IPS.

Finally, because of the dangers that all states face in an anarchic world of uneven state power, so states have three generic policy options to follow in order to survive: adaptation via emulation; adaptation via integrating into the system's rules; and adaption through joining a balance of power against the strongest unit. Let me take each briefly in turn:

1. *adaptation through emulation*: due to power differentiation under anarchy, states must imitate or emulate the successful practices of the leading state(s), since failure to do so leads to heightened vulnerability. Thus there is in play a 'demonstration effect' such that the successful practices of the leading state(s) point the way forward for other states in terms of how they subsequently develop. So, for example, when Prussia defeated Austria (1866) and France (1870) through its superior military staff system, other states imitated these practices very soon after, since failure to do so would have left them vulnerable.

2. *adaption through integration*: the second adaptive strategy involves the need to accept the rules of the IPS. Thus Waltz insists that even chiliastic (non-conformist or recalcitrant) states will have no real choice but to conform to the system's diktat, and may even engage in great power politics (as the USSR did after 1917). As Waltz put it:

   > The close juxtaposition of states promotes their sameness through the disadvantages that arise from a failure to conform to successful practices. It is through this "sameness", an effect of the system, that is so often attributed to the acceptance of so-called rules of state behavior. *Chiliastic* [i.e., recalcitrant] *rulers occasionally come to power* [who initially seek to avoid integrating into the international systems – as did the USSR in 1917]. *In power most of them quickly change their ways* [for fear of defeat or extinction] (Waltz 1979: 128; my emphasis).

3. *adaptation through balancing*: the third adaptive strategy that states must pursue is that of balancing. Here states join a balance of power that is formed as a defensive counterweight to the strongest state(s) in the system. Note that while states 'imitate' or emulate the great powers as a means of minimising the relative power gap this, of course, does not fully eradicate fundamental differentials in power across the system: hence the need to also form a balance of power.

All in all, it is particularly important to note that the result of states following these various adaptive strategies is the maintenance and reproduction of the anarchic multi-state system. Note, however, that this is not intended by states, but is the unwitting or unintended consequence of individual states following their own survival imperative. In the process, it becomes impossible for the system to evolve into, or be superseded by, a single imperial hierarchy. Thus while there has been a long line of would-be imperialists who have sought such a goal – eg., Adolf Hitler and Napoleon Bonaparte – none have succeeded precisely because most of the other states have ganged up against it in order to ensure their own survival. Accordingly, structural change of the international system through the replacement of anarchy by hierarchy is impossible.

Finally, to close this discussion two concluding points are noteworthy. First, Waltz openly sets out to develop an *ahistorical* and *asociological* theory of world politics. Elsewhere I have described his ahistoricism as 'tempocentric'. Tempocentrism in effect takes a snapshot of a reified present and extrapolates this back in time to render all history amenable to transhistorical, universalist analysis (see Hobson 2002: 9–15). Thus, Waltz takes the 'fact' of contemporary 'anarchy' and effectively extrapolates this back in time, removing the ruptures that punctuate the world-historical longue durée. This is, in effect, a form of inverted path-dependency in which all actors and, indeed, the international system itself, are presented as homologous or isomorphic. Thus we are told that the superpower contest between the United States and the Soviet Union finds its historical equivalent in the conflict between Athens and Sparta; or that ancient imperialism is equivalent to that deployed by various European imperial powers between 1492 through to the twentieth century. Accordingly, this approach induces tempocentric (transhistorical) statements such as the 'classic history of Thucydides is as meaningful a guide to the behavior of states today as when it was written in the fifth century BC' (Gilpin 1981: 7). Thus terms such as sovereignty, balance of power and anarchy are employed without due regard for time and place specificity; instead they take on a stable, fixed transhistorical meaning. And second, Waltz also in effect dismisses historical sociology as a means to explain the international system, precisely because it is 'stasis' rather than 'change' that is the principal thing to explain (see Waltz 1979: 43–9). In essence, then, the deployment of a Waltzian neorealist conception of the international in effect carries with it the intellectual health warning: historical sociology seriously damages your theoretical health.

Eliasian historical sociology in the mirror of Waltzian neorealism

Having laid out the six principles of Eliasian historical sociology (section 1) and the six principles of Waltzian neorealism (section 2), I now turn to consider how Elias's conceptions of the international often dovetail with the prognosis made by Waltz. Before I do so, however, it is worth noting that I have juxtaposed the Eliasian approach with that of Waltz in Table 1.

Table 1: Juxtaposing Eliasian historical sociology with Waltzian neorealism

ELIASIAN HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY	WALTZIAN NEOREALISM
1. **Historical sociology of change** Societies and international relations comprise an imminent order of change	1. **Ahistorical, asociological theory of continuity** The international is the realm of recurrence and repetition
2. **Complex ontological conception**	2. **Ontological reductionism**

The multiple sources of power attain partial autonomy and mutually entwine as 'polymorphous figurations'	The political structure of the international system is the sole causal variable; and as such it is a self-constituting entity
3. **Actors as ontologically complex** Multiple actors that mutually entwine as polymorphous figurations	3. **State-centrism** States are the only significant actors; they are self-constituting, autonomous billiard ball-like entities
4. **Complex polymorphous spatiality/inter-societal relations** Spatial realms are co-constitutive and neither can be ontologically privileged. The 'second tier' (state-society relations) is important	4. **Spatial-parsimony** The realms are separate and the international is reified as the primary realm and shapes the national realm. The 'second tier' drops out and is irrelevant
5. **Structurationist** Structures and agents entwine such that neither can be privileged	5. **Structuralist** Although states are the agents of international politics, their remits are dictated by the international political structure
6. **Materialist and ideationalist** Socio-psychological, normative *and* material processes underpin the civilizing process and the concomitant process of historical social change	6. **Materialist** The dictates of anarchy and the uneven distribution of military power are the key processes of IP

The lesson of Table 1 is that Eliasian integrity stands opposed to the principles of Waltzian neorealism. This, then, is the 'promise' of Eliasian historical sociology. Nevertheless, at times this radical differentiation is compromised and occasionally contradicted when Elias draws close to neorealism. While Linklater accepts that there are some neorealist cues in Elias's work, he nevertheless sees a closer linkage with some of the insights produced by classical realism (as in E.H. Carr and Hans Morgenthau). Thus he asserts that

> in an essentially realist approach, Elias referred to 'elimination contests' in which weaker 'survival units' were amalgamated in larger territorial concentrations of power. The 'monopoly mechanism' that led to European states had been a central influence on the whole course of human history, and might indeed continue to dominate international relations until such time as humanity falls under the dominion of a world state that proceeds to pacify the whole globe (Linklater 2011: 176–7).

Moreover, he concludes that '[a]t the heart of Elias's writings is a tragic conception of world politics that is in harmony with classical realism' (Linklater 2011: 178). [10] [#N10] This point can be developed further by noting that a Waltzian neorealist conception of the international sometimes informs his theory of state-formation, particularly where warfare that is the product of the anarchic inter-state system presses rulers to centralise

power and reverse the centrifugal terms of rule (or balance of social power) between rulers and nobles in favour of the former.

Here it worth noting that it is hardly controversial to say that there are many overlaps between Elias and Weber, particularly in their analyses of state-formation (even though Elias arguably produced a much more detailed historical sociology of this phenomenon, particularly in *The Civilizing Process* and *The Court Society*). [11] [#N11] And it is also the case that his emphasis on war in state-formation draws him close to the work of neo-Weberian historical sociologists, a good number of whom seek to bring the state back in (Evans et al 1985; Skocpol 1979; Tilly 1990). [12] [#N12] Unfortunately historical sociologists have been slow to pick up, if not being largely indifferent to, developments going on within IR. [13] [#N13] For in the last decade or so there has developed within the discipline of IR an interest in historical sociology, [14] [#N14] with one of the claims being that much of the neo-Weberian analysis of state-formation relies on a neorealist conception of the international (see Hobden 1998; Hobson 2000: ch. 6). Because this has not been picked up sufficiently within historical sociology, a brief discussion of this in the Eliasian context is necessary.

What underpins the European state-formation process for Elias is the fact that Europe comprises an anarchic realm of competing 'warring states', where adapting in effect to the logic of anarchic competition requires rulers to centralise political power. He narrates the story of the rise of the modern European state very much according to a process in which rulers sought to expropriate the local provincial political power of the nobility in order to furnish them with the capacity to collect taxes in order to maintain the state in this particular anarchic realm of inter-state competition (see esp Elias 1939/1982: 8–12, 104, 210–29). Important here is that the costs of military technology under conditions of inter-feudal war increased at the same time that new forms of warfare – especially the rise of the mercenary army and later the professional standing army – shifted the opportunity structure for successful state-centralisation (Elias 1939/1982: 9–11, 155). Notable here is that the shift from feudalism to the modern state is one which sees the terms of rule, or what Elias called 'the balance of social power', between the state and nobility shift away from the latter to the former (Elias 1939/1982: 187, 291, 323, 350). Or put differently, feudal 'centrifugal' terms of rule are replaced by a 'centripetal' balance of social power (Elias 1939: 15–30, 57–65, 131–48). In general, it is true that the anarchic international system turns out to apply to the intra-European system – as it does for all neo-Weberian analyses of European state-formation. But it is ultimately the fact that the anarchic system forms a 'realm of necessity' such that rulers must centralise state power or suffer the consequences – defeat in war or subsumption within another state – that sees Elias's approach dovetail with that of neorealism.

Of course, it is certainly the case that Elias pays considerable attention to state-society relations, such that in effect he explores in depth what goes on in Waltz's 'second tier' (the character of the units). But it could be argued that the ontological primacy of international anarchy recalibrates the ontological status of state-society relations into that of an intervening variable. Moreover, in this vision the state becomes reconfigured around its capacity to be adaptive to the logic of international anarchy. In this respect the analysis enters directly onto the terrain of the neorealist work of Robert Gilpin. In particular, in his book *War and Change in World Politics* (1981) he in effect argues that states are maladaptive when they are unable to conform to international anarchy because they have low domestic institutional autonomy and are consequently unable to overcome social fetters which block the development of state capacity. That is, when a state has insufficient autonomy to overcome the particular demands of certain domestic interest groups/dominant classes – especially the inability to overcome the power of the aristocratic class – then this results in an inadequate revenue base that in turn feeds into declining military power and hence vulnerability in the inter-state system. It is this, then, that leads on to great power decline or simply defeat in war. Conversely states are adaptive when they have high domestic agency or autonomy which enables them to overcome domestic fetters, thereby enhancing their revenue base that in turn promotes survival and even the rise to great power.

The key point is that domestic state power and state-society relations are merely *intervening variables* because they are relevant only to the extent that they enable or hinder the state from conforming to the primary logic of anarchy; that is, the state is ultimately reduced to the 'primitive' structure of the anarchic international system. In essence for Gilpin, as for Waltz (1979) and Mearsheimer (2001), states must be adaptive: that is they must constantly upgrade and modernise their economies (ie., emulate the successful practices of the leading states) so as to enhance their fiscal-military power base, with failure to do so being punished by defeat in warfare or subsumption. In addition, states must be able to maintain a sufficient rate of taxation in the face of domestic opposition. This is precisely the same schema that various neo-Weberians deploy, including Skocpol (1979) and Tilly (1990). And much the same conclusion, I would argue, applies to Elias's story of state-formation. Thus a central paradox is that while state-society relations are supposed to be vitally important in Elias's theory, his deployment of the neorealist conception of the international leads unwittingly to the elision of Waltz's 'second tier' as a fully independent variable and hence to the irrelevance of state-society relations.

However, this is by no means to say that all of Elias's work falls into the neorealist trap. Indeed, elsewhere his position is much more nuanced – for example in *The Germans* (Elias 1996) – and he recognises that there have been different national orientations to violence and to its acceptability. [15] [#N15] Thus he certainly gave space to the notion that state-society relations played an important role in shaping international relations, thereby living up to the promise of Eliasian historical sociology that I described earlier. Indeed, it is certainly the case that other conceptions of the international are at least latent within Elias's works and that these move beyond tragic visions and ontological reductionism. Thus as others have suggested Elias occasionally claims that the existence of nuclear weapons might bring an end to inter-state conflict – a point that places him at considerable odds with Waltz. Indeed this emphasis dovetails with an analysis of a global civilizing process wherein states engage in the praxis of self-restraint as a result of this particular military technology – thereby constituting a parallel with the domestic civilizing process (see also Mennell 1990). And this links up to one of Linklater's observations that although there are undoubted parallels with realism nevertheless this is tempered by his emphasis on 'the "compulsions of interdependence" that require self-restraint, foresight and other dispositions that English School writers associate with the existence of a society [rather than a system] of states' (Linklater 2011: 155). Indeed it is this side of Elias's conception of the international that Linklater takes much further in his own unique synthesis of Elias with the English School theory of IR. Partly to support Linklater's project, and partly to inform my historical sociological readership of alternative *non*-realist theories of IR that can help Eliasian sociology live up to its 'promise' I shall turn in this final section to consider how the English School offers one particular resolution to the 'impasse' that Eliasian HS now finds itself in (though this is by no means to discount the many brilliant insights that Elias provides that could and indeed should be drawn upon in order to enhance the English School approach).

Reconfiguring Elias in the Mirror of IR theory: Courting the international societal conception of the English School

The ES theory of IR has been pioneered by a range of thinkers, the original and most well-known of whom have been Martin Wight, Hedley Bull and Adam Watson, and more recently, Robert Jackson. They have produced a range of seminal books including *Systems of States* (Wight 1977), *Power Politics* (Wight 1978), *International Theory* (Wight 1992), *The Anarchical Society* (Bull 1977), the edited volume, *The Expansion of International Society* (Bull and Watson 1984), and *The Evolution of International Society* (Watson

1992/2009), as well as *The Global Covenant* (Jackson 2000). These scholars reside within the wing known as 'pluralism', which offers an important twist on conventional realist themes. In essence, within the English School 'pluralism' is differentiated from 'solidarism'. The former focuses on states as the principal actors and key players within international society, who come together to be bound by a series of norms that ensure the orderly reproduction of international society. By contrast, solidarism echoes liberal cosmopolitanism by emphasising the centrality of individuals throughout the world and privileges the idea of justice over order within international society. The pluralist approach in particular might well appear attractive to many Eliasians (as well as many neo-Weberians), though interestingly, Linklater's combination of certain solidarist themes with Eliasian historical sociology could also be very attractive. Noteworthy too is that there are clear shades here in the work of Michael Mann (1986), both in terms of the point that 'multi-power actor civilizations' dovetail with the ES conception of an international society that is regulated and pacified, as well as in the close parallels that exist between Mann's notion of the historical dialectic between 'multi-power actor civilizations' and 'empires of domination' and Watson's (1992/2009) story of the evolution of the international system/society.

Crucial here is that Bull and Wight differentiate a harsh anarchic international *system* that is congruent with a neorealist conception with a more benign and regulated order associated with what they call an international *society* of states. In their formulation, although anarchy still exists its harsh effects are nevertheless tempered and to an extent migitated by the international conventions or normative institutions that states set up in order to create a cooperative international realm. For states have a vested interest in maintaining international society precisely so that they can benefit from the common or collective good of international order. Indeed, as the famous definition has it:

> [a] society of states (or international society) exists when a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and common values, form a society in the sense that they conceive themselves to be bound by common sets of rules... and share in the working of common institutions (Bull 1977: 13).

There are five specific international normative institutions that comprise a well-ordered international society. The first two are the *balance of power* and *systemic warfare* – both of which, of course, appear to be entirely congruent with neorealism. But for Bull and Wight the balance of power is maintained not so much to maintain an individual state's survival (as in neorealism) but more to reproduce international society as a whole. It thereby constitutes a key normative institution of international society. [16][#N16] This is coupled with the norm of systemic warfare, which is deployed so as to prevent the anarchical European international society from being taken over by various imperial aggrandizers – including of course, Louis XIV, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Adolf Hitler. Third is *diplomacy*, which enables cooperation since it enhances communication between states as it facilitates agreement and minimises friction. And within European international society this also goes hand-in-hand with sovereign recognition. Fourth is *great power management*, where inequality between states has a functional benefit because 'it is difficult to see how, apart from resort to alliances that may introduce a contrived element of inequality, international conflicts could ever be settled and laid to rest' (Bull 1977: 205–6). More generally, great powers are important insofar as the idea of great power responsibility means that they help to preserve the balance of power, seek to avoid crises and wars between each other and are able to contain conflicts within their respective alliances (Bull 1977: 208–29). The fifth and final normative institution is *international law*, which has teeth precisely because it is backed up by the coercive power of individual states. So the pursuit of war against international law-breakers is not a symptom of anarchy (as neorealists assume) but is a sign that international society is functioning effectively.

A particularly interesting point is that these are normative institutions, even in the case of international law, though they work through an internalised form of self-restraint. However, this point has not been properly developed by ES writers. And so this constitutes a particularly significant contribution that Eliasian historical sociology could bring to the ES. [17] [#N17]

One of the paradoxes that emerges here is that in a key sense Bull in effect 'brings the state back in to IR', given that for him states are not merely autonomous agents but are able to buck the constraining structure of anarchy. For perhaps the greatest paradox that lies at the heart of Waltz's theory is that Waltz in effect 'kicks the state back out' insofar as states are determined by the structural imperative of the international system and are punished should they not conform – much as in reductivet Marxist and liberal theories where the state is determined by the structure of the mode of production/market and will be punished should it fail to conform to its structural diktat (see Hobson 2000: 17–30). Thus for those Eliasians who view the state as an important agent so pluralist English School theory provides a ready-made complement in its theory of the international (see especially Jackson 2000). [18] [#N18]

Nevertheless, even if the assumption of state autonomy is not one that all Eliasians are looking for there are further areas of complementarity. First and foremost, drawing on an ES conception of the international opens up a space for Eliasian HS to realise its six principles. Indeed, the contradictions or neorealist phantoms that sometimes, though by no means always, haunt the conception of the international found in Eliasian historical sociology are exorcised or cut out in one fell swoop when, albeit a modified, ES approach is imported. For if the ES conception is modified by incorporating the six principles of Eliasian HS so the perils of a neorealist conception can be avoided. A further complement exists in the point that for ES pluralists states in international society agree to be bound by norms of self-restraint; and that self-restraint is the corollary of what is in effect an interdependent international society of states. And yet a further area of complementarity is found in the point that some ES theorists have developed accounts of the rise of international society that very much complement those developed by Elias as well as others such as Mann (1986). Here I have in mind in particular Adam Watson's excellent book, *The Evolution of International Society* (1992/2009). However, it is also important to note that an Eliasian approach can bring to the English School a penetrating analysis of social processes within national societies that is often ignored by the latter approach. The trick, in terms of effecting a synthesis here, would be to consider how domestic developments lead on to international change and vice versa. For the blindspot of ES pluralism lies with its black-boxing of the state such that state-society relations do not play a causal part in the reproduction of international society. Thus, in sum, a very strong case could be made to Eliasian scholars for considering the benefits of drawing on an English School conception of the international rather than a neorealist one, while at the same time ES scholars might want to draw on Eliasian conceptions of state-society relations.

Noteworthy too is that the other wing of the English School is that of 'solidarism' (as was mentioned earlier). This has been developed more recently by various IR scholars including Nick Wheeler (2000), Tim Dunne (1998) and, most pertinently here, Andrew Linklater (2011). [19] [#N19] The general approach dovetails more with liberal cosmopolitanism than statism. Indeed the two approaches offer quite different analyses – though this is not to discount various cues for a solidarist approach that is found in the earlier writers including Wight, Bull and Vincent (1986). At first sight this approach appears rather less congruent with Eliasian historical sociology than does the fit between the latter and pluralism. Here the unit of analysis is the individual – or more accurately, individuals throughout global international society. For the most part, solidarism has been applied to the case of humanitarian intervention. Indeed this has constituted the posited political solution to the problem of the oppression of individuals in other states by their own state. What is solidarist about this is first the desire to protect – or indeed 'save' – 'strangers', in what amounts to a cosmopolitan politics. And second, the approach has a thicker conception of international society, which is in

effect thought to exist not simply when various institutions exist (such as diplomacy and mutual recognition via the respecting of each other's sovereignty, but when there is a shared set of thick social norms. Interestingly, Elias appears in a solidarist light when he at times supports human rights and the movement towards international criminal law. [20][#N20]

Nevertheless, it is particularly important to note that Andrew Linklater has effected a pioneering grand synthesis of Eliasian historical sociology with ES theory – one that is particularly interested in detecting a global civilizing process at the level of global society; and one which has many affinities with solidarism. Indeed, Linklater's principal concern is with detecting the existence of feelings of mutual identification and perhaps above all, the capacity to empathise at the level of global society; attributes which are essential to counteract the harm that exists in world politics (see esp. Linklater 2011: 194). Thus, in sum, within the broad gamut of ES theory it turns out that there is a great deal of mutual compatability with Eliasian historical sociology; and moreover, that such a cross-fertilisation can produce a hybrid which could overcome many of the extant blindspots that currently haunt both theoretical offerings.

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Biography

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Notes

1. Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1939/1994). [#N1-ptr1]
2. Nevertheless, Andrew Linklater (2004) has suggested that Elias draws more from classical realism. [#N2-ptr1]
3. I thank Andrew Linklater for this point (private correspondence). [#N3-ptr1]
4. And on this idea see also Giddens (1981: 23–24, 166–7); Runciman (1989: 266–84). And see the classic statement in Mann (1986: 1). [#N4-ptr1]
5. Norbert Elias, *The Symbol Theory* (London: Sage, 1991). [#N5-ptr1]
6. On this in the context of Elias's sociology of emotions see Haan and Loader (2002). [#N6-ptr1]
7. This is vividly brought to life by some of the marvellous paintings of Pieter Breugel, who painted at the nadir of feudalism (ie., in the mid 16th century). [#N7-ptr1]

8. Though this should not be confused with the formulation of structural realism that was laid out by Barry Buzan and others (see Buzan et al 1993; Buzan and Little 2000). [#N8-ptr1]

9. I thank Andrew Linklater for pointing this out (private correspondence). [#N9-ptr1]

10. Here it is noteworthy that the principle differences between the classical realism of both Morgenthau and Carr on the one hand and the neorealism of Waltz or Mearsheimer (2001) hinges on what is known in IR as 'the levels of analysis problem'. For these classical realists changes in the international system are the culmination of 'unit force' changes – specifically large changes in citizenship rights at the domestic level. For Morgenthau, it was the 'aristocratic international' in Europe was relatively peaceful because of feudal norms of restraint and politeness as well as the high autonomy of the state. By contrast the era of total warfare between 1914 and 1945 was made possible by the rise of the democratic state and the loss of state autonomy, leading to the chaos and militarism of 'nationalistic universalism' (Morgenthau 1948/1967; see also Hobson 2000: 44–55). Much the same analysis was advanced by E.H. Carr in various books (see Linklater 1998: 159–68; Hobson 2000: 55–61). [#N10-ptr1]

11. By contrast, and despite the pioneering brilliance of his posthumous volume *Economy and Society*, Weber's historical sociology of state-formation takes second place to his sociological heuristic of different polities in history. [#N11-ptr1]

12. Though it is curious that Elias is rarely invoked by many of the leading neo-Weberian historical sociologists. [#N12-ptr1]

13. Though Michael Mann has been an exception to this rule (e.g., Mann 1996). [#N13-ptr1]

14. For a relatively early summary see the edited volume by Hobden and Hobson (2002). [#N14-ptr1]

15. I am once again thankful to Andrew Linklater for pointing this out to me (private correspondence). [#N15-ptr1]

16. Though this very much overlaps with Morgenthau's classical realist definition of the balance of power (Morgenthau 1948/1967). [#N16-ptr1]

17. Once again, I am most grateful to Andrew Linklater for pointing this out to me (private correspondence). [#N17-ptr1]

18. Although I've not explored this in this article, a key area of overlap between the work of some ES writers and Eliasian HS concerns the key concept of the 'standard of civilization' (see especially Gong 1984; Suzuki 2009; Linklater 2011). [#N18-ptr1]

19. Though Linklater also draws a good deal from the pluralist wing, particularly from Martin Wight's work. [#N19-ptr1]

20. Again, I thank Andrew Linklater for this insight (personal correspondence). [#N20-ptr1]