

# Bourdieu on the state: An Eliasian Critique

*Steven Loyal*

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**Abstract:** *This paper analyses Bourdieu's theory of the state which remained largely implicit in much of his writing until the recent publication of his lectures On the State in 2014. It argues that although there are many parallels in their work, including, for example, a shared conceptual nomenclature of habitus and field, this can sometimes blind us to their theoretical and substantive divergences. Such differences are especially evident in their respective analyses of the state. In this regard I reflect upon Bourdieu's theory of the state, which critically draws upon Elias's work, and assess its theoretical and empirical relevance from an Eliasian perspective.*

**Keywords:** *Bourdieu, Elias, state, bureaucratic field, state-formation*

Pierre Bourdieu, along with Norbert Elias, is rightly regarded as one of the foremost modern sociologists of the modern era. It has been long recognised that there are parallels in their work. Both use a similar terminology of habitus and field, both subscribe to Cassirer's relational form of analysis, both have a strong Durkheimian social morphology underpinning their approach, and both share a similar political world-view – Republican socialism and radical social democrat respectively. Nevertheless, there are also differences in terms of their philosophical anthropology, the nature of the long-term analysis, the different contexts within which their work emerged – Algeria and the First and Second World Wars – and the divergent nature of the substantive sociological problems they engage with. As Elias notes in his correspondence with Bourdieu:

I so much regret there is little opportunity for us to sit together and so discuss peacefully and leisurely the problems that arise from our common resolve to develop sociological theory in constant cross-fertilization with empirical research. We both, if I understand it rightly, are at one in our conviction that for sociological theory to come into its own one has to break with the whole tradition of the egocentric philosophical transcendentalism though perhaps I am a bit more unrelenting [...] I have great hopes of a further advance of your theoretical work through the development of the field concept. How stimulating it could be to sit together and to compare your and my habitus concept. Both have a front directed against ideas and idealism. There are similarities and differences. Alas, I know we have so little time. (Elias,1987).

Whether one chooses to highlight their similarities or differences is itself a sociological question tied to the interests and agenda of the researcher, and a matter often discussed in the sociology of science in terms of 'similarity relations' (see Kuhn 1977; Barnes 1982: 16-40). This can be for sociological or extra-sociological reasons. In terms of the latter, for example, some writers may emphasize their similarities particularly given the prestigious position Bourdieu's work currently holds within the academy, whilst others may foreground their differences as part of a distinction strategy. This paper examines Bourdieu's analysis of the state and its continuities and discontinuities with the approach of Elias, not in order to attempt to determine who is the superior thinker – a fatuous enterprise – but to ascertain its power to generate substantive, empirical analyses of the state.

Elias is of course justly famous for his discussion of state formation. As Mennell incisively summarises it, it combines an earlier analysis of state formation with a less discussed and later analysis of nation-building:

Yet while there is no doubt that the formation of we-identities in the course of nation-building is an important facet of state formation processes, it is subsidiary to the central feature of the formation of a state in the sense in which Weber defined it: “an organization which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence.” Establishing such a monopoly involves, on the one hand, securing and extending the boundaries of a territory, to a considerable extent by means of the use of violence against external opponents; and on the other, it involves the internal pacification of the territory. Elias’s thesis (to quote it again) is that internal pacification also, in the long term comes to be embodied in a more pacific habitus: “if in this or that region, the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to leave at peace with each other, the moulding of effects and the standards of emotion management are very gradually changed as well” (Mennell 2007: 158-9).

Although the state began to play a more central role in much of his later thinking, Bourdieu never provided a unified theory of the state in his work, with the exception of a few articles and chapters in various books written in the mid-1990s. [1],[#N1] However, the recent the publication of his lectures given over three academic years in the *College de France* between January 1990 and December 1991 in ‘*On the State*’ goes some way to fill this gap. This book demonstrates that the theory of the state, plays a fundamental role in understanding his entire sociological *oeuvre*, especially with regard to the centrality accorded to the concepts of symbolic capital, symbolic power and symbolic violence, concepts he first systematically discussed in the mid-1970s. [2]

[#N2]

In order to understand Bourdieu’s theory of the state it needs to be situated in relation to both the classical theories – Marx, Weber and Durkheim and some modern theories of the state including that of Elias, Tilly, and Corrigan and Sayer. [3],[#N3] In *On the State*, Bourdieu reviews, appraises and criticises all these theories with the exception of Durkheim, which is surprising, given that it is Durkheim’s theory of the state that his own theory has the strongest affinities with. Obviously limitations of space do not allow us to review these theories here other than to mention a few of their underpinnings in a cursory fashion. The classical sociological theorists all provided penetrating, though selective, insights into the state. For Durkheim, the state was above all an ‘organ of social thought’ elaborating definite representations for the collectivity: ‘the special organ whose responsibility it is to work out certain representations which hold good for the collectivity’ (Durkheim, 1992: 56). It both partially constituted society’s sentiments and ideals, the moral order, and reflected the universal interests of those over whom it governed by promoting moral individualism. Marxists have been more concerned with the economic functions of the state as a relation of production, distinguishing between its ideological appearance as serving the general interests of society as a whole, and its essential relations that function to promote the specific needs of the bourgeoisie. Its repressive aspects geared towards the maintenance of social order and property have also been acknowledged. For Weber the state was able to claim a monopoly of legitimate violence with the aid of a regularised administrative staff as well as a paid army over a delimited territorial area. As he added: ‘the modern state is a compulsory association which organises domination’ (Weber, 1978:54).

These three classic sociological conceptions of the state point to a central dilemma. The state remains recalcitrant to any tightly constructed conceptual or functional definition. Modern Western democratic capitalist states carry out a multiplicity of tasks in addition to their political function of governing and the

production of legislation, and these include binding rule-making, maintaining security, sustaining international relations (including warfare), and the regulation of the market and labour power. Weber recognised this diversity in state functions when he noted that there were no activities that the state had not been involved in ‘from the provision of subsistence to the patronage of the arts’ (Weber, 1978:58).

## The state as a monopoly of physical and symbolic violence.

It is in this theoretical context that Bourdieu defines the state. The state, Bourdieu tells us, is the sector of the field of power, or bureaucratic field, that is defined by a possession of the monopoly of legitimate physical *and* symbolic violence: ‘the state is an X (to be determined) which successfully claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical and *symbolic* violence over a definite territory and over the totality of the corresponding population’ (Bourdieu 1998a: 3). Weber is clearly present in this definition but it is actually from Durkheim (and to a lesser extent, Cassirer) that his theory draws its force.

At one level, it could be argued, Bourdieu reinterprets Weber’s definition of the state through a Durkheimian optic. Although Bourdieu talks about a monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence, it is the latter that is prioritised in his work and the former, force and violence, remains largely absent or secondary in his discussion. Hence he argues that the monopolisation of symbolic violence is a *condition* for the exercise of a monopoly of physical violence. His definition of the state therefore underlies Weber’s focus on physical force. By contrast to ‘physicalist’ approaches – which in addition to Weber also include Marx, Elias and Tilly – that correlate domination largely to material or military forces, including the army or police force, Bourdieu argues following Pascal (and paradoxically other aspects of the work of Weber concerned with legitimation) [4] [4] that no power can be exercised only as naked power:

Force acts directly, by physical constraint, but also through the representation that those subject to it have of this force; the most brutal and violent force obtains a form of recognition that goes beyond mere submission to its physical effect [...] there is no physical effect in the social world that is not accompanied by a symbolic effect [...] the strange logic of human action means that brute force is never only brute force: it exerts a form of seduction, persuasion, which bears on the fact that it manages to obtain a certain form of recognition (Bourdieu 2014:192).

Here two points are stressed. First all physical violence also contains a symbolic dimension. The material/ physical and ideal and symbolic aspects of force cannot be separated, and in fact the latter has priority. Second, the two processes of violence only make sense when they are recognised by a collectivity of agents with specific dispositions or a specific habitus. By contrast, physicalist theories, lack an explanation of how the social order is constituted in the first place and why the dominated submit so easily to state domination. They neglect the fact that systems of domination based simply on force are fragile and easy to overthrow. It is in this context that symbolic forms need to be recognised for the central role that they play in state domination. The central questions, for Bourdieu, then turn on *state legitimation* in the maintenance of social order, authority, and acquiring consent.

The cognitive structures individuals internalise and apply to the social world, which are both descriptive and evaluative, are constituted by the state and, operate ‘through belief and the pre-agreement of the body and the mind with the world’ Wacquant, & Bourdieu, 1993a:34).

This increased emphasis on symbolic forms and culture in maintaining and reproducing the social order does not, Bourdieu believes, mean relapsing into an idealism, rather it entails what he calls an, 'expanded materialism', or a 'materialist theory of the symbolic', where symbolic and material forms of domination co-exist. As he notes elsewhere, relations of communication are not wholly dissimilar from relations of force. [5] [#N5]. In modern societies, it is the state, particularly through the school system, which is an 'immense rite of institution', that creates and inscribes *national* social divisions and hierarchies in people's mental structures creating a consensus and societal common sense. And it is for this reason that Bourdieu has written so extensively over the years on the role of the school system. [6]. [#N6]. Although the school may be seen as an institution of integration, providing all with the instruments of citizenship and economic access, something Bourdieu tended to only stress in his later writings, it is simultaneously, if not primarily, the part of the state that by inscribing in individuals evaluative binary categories produces principles of hierarchisation as well as 'national' forms of culture, through an imposition of a cultural arbitrary.

## The state exists within us.

The state, for Bourdieu is not a monolithic, abstract, detached entity engaged in large-scale substantial acts as is commonly assumed – passing legislation, governing, or producing legitimising discourses to serve dominant class interests. Rather more prosaically and simultaneously more profoundly, the state operates in and through us, state thinking penetrates the minutest aspects of our everyday lives from filling in a bureaucratic form, carrying an identity card, signing a birth certificate, to shaping our thinking and thought: it is the public at the heart of what we consider the private: 'the state structures the social order itself – timetables, budget periods, calendars, our whole social life is structured by the state – and, by the same token, so is our thought' (Bourdieu 2014: 183). The state, then, is everywhere exercising an unconscious effect of symbolic imposition: objectively in things, the division in disciplines, age-groups, official statistics, census categories, the curriculum, in national borders; and in mental structures, with the dispositions to classify and act in certain ways:

To endeavour to think the state is to take the risk of thinking over (or being taken over by) a thought of the state, i.e. of applying to the state categories of thought produced and guaranteed by the state and hence to misrecognise its most profound truth (Bourdieu 1991a: 1).

According to Bourdieu, the state is not akin to an object, it is not a bloc but a field of forces, a sector of the field of power which may be called the 'administrative' field, 'bureaucratic field' or 'field of public office'. The state is not a thing or something you lay your hands on, but a reality that exists in its effects and the collective beliefs which underpin these effects. The state exists differently to how people believe it exists: it is not an entity but an administrative or bureaucratic field, part of the field of power, a space structured according to oppositions linked to specific forms of capital tied to different social interests. In addition to claiming the state has a monopoly over the legitimate physical and symbolic violence and regarding the state as a 'bureaucratic' or 'administrative field', Bourdieu argues that it is the 'central bank of symbolic capital', the place where a monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence has been established.

## State Formation

An analysis of what the state consists of and what it does presupposes an historical analysis of its emergence. How did the state acquire the monopoly of legitimate physical and symbolic violence? In addition to examining 'state acts', for Bourdieu, a genetic structuralist methodology (2014: 87) can break through state doxa allowing for the re-emergence of the 'arbitrariness of beginnings'. This does not mean establishing a straightforward historical or comparative analysis but, rather, constructing a theoretical *model* of the state that allows statements about the state to be open to systematic verification. Here, France and to a lesser extent, England and Japan, function as privileged examples of possible cases of more universal state processes, countries that also served in reality as models for the development of subsequent modern states. Bourdieu attempts to show how an autonomous bureaucratic field with its own logic and capital or *raison d'état* emerged. According to Bourdieu, whose analysis draws primarily on secondary analysis of state-formation starting from the twelfth century, modern states, which did not emerge until after the seventeenth century differ fundamentally from earlier states, including city-states and empires, and dynastic or patrimonial states.

In his discussion on the emergence of the state Bourdieu outlines a model based on four stages of state formation that are both logical and chronological (2014: 213–214). The stage first concerns the process of concentration of each type of capital – military, informational (cultural) and economic – which are part of the process of the monopolisation of symbolic capital.

The establishment of the state as a unified national-social space, a space of spaces or field of fields, holding a meta or state capital occurs co-extensively with the emergence and establishment of differentiated and relatively autonomous social fields such as the economic and cultural field or market initially during the twelfth century. This process also includes the concentration and monopolisation of physical capital. Two inter-related processes here are central: the external need to wage war abroad to acquire more land and territory, and the internal requirement to oppose competing lords, and those from the lower classes, which leads to the development of centralised military and police forces respectively: Bourdieu concurs with Elias's argument that the concentration of public physical force was accompanied by a reduction and control of day-to-day violence. Again such processes presuppose the prior accumulation of symbolic capital – for example the concentration of physical violence into a specialised body with symbolic uniforms – the police – since mobilisation that can only occur if the state has some prior legitimacy.

The concentration of the means of violence is accompanied by a monopolisation of taxation and eventually the construction and centralisation of economic capital. In the last decade of the twelfth century an impersonal tax paid by all subjects required for territorial defence increasingly became used as a justification for imposing public tax levies. A system of tax collection was instituted where mandates in the form of uniformed and qualified liveries for representatives of the state were authorised to collect taxes. The authoritative, legitimated, and official nature of taxation also became bound up with the rise of a form of patriotism or nationalism. [7][#N7]

This process of unification, centralisation, and monopolisation in terms of military and economic forces was also one of standardisation and homogenisation through the creation of an autonomous and centralised cultural market. The unification of culture, in parallel with the development of an economic market, entailed the creation of a legitimate *national* culture, containing standardised and generalised knowledge including: educational qualifications, weights and measurements, common writing and spelling practices. Cultural capital constitutes one dimension of a more generic form of informational capital. The state begins to measure, assess, investigate and concentrate information, regulating its distribution, instigating the birth of maps, drawing up genealogies, and unifying theories.



Finally, the concentration physical/military, economic and cultural and capital takes place in parallel with the concentration of juridical capital. Diverse, mutually exclusive bodies of law become increasingly unified from the twelfth century onwards. Correspondingly judges and jurors of the feudal courts become gradually replaced by provosts, bailiffs, impersonal professional lawyers, and their decisions increasingly become referred to the king. The result is the creation of a separate legal field with its own laws that reflect the advancement of formally universal institutions respecting laws and protecting universal rights.

The second phase of state-formation takes place conjointly with the concentration and monopolisation of symbolic capital. This entails an analysis of the dynastic-patrimonial state, in which the government, and all major possessions within a territory are perceived as the personal property of the king. The state here is identified with the 'king's house', which also includes the broader royal family household. Reproduction strategies centred on succession and family wars around patrimony, royal blood, and lineage constitute the central dynamic in dynastic states. The king's position of power is reinforced by the fact that he places himself strategically at the 'centre' as feudal chieftain, and becomes the only means through which all other nobles can communicate to one another – what Elias calls the 'royal mechanism' (Elias 2000). Within a 'division of labour of domination', and especially the growing inter-dynastic political struggles including rivalries between the king and his brothers and second sons for power, the king becomes increasingly dependent on bureaucrats who, as members possessing competence, base their position on the legal language of Roman law, to guarantee his reproduction as heir. This then leads to a tri-partite struggle for power:

One encounters thus, almost universally, a tripartite division of power, with alongside *the king*, the *king's brothers* (in the broad sense), dynastic rivals whose authority rests on the dynastic principle of the house, and the *king's ministers*, typically *homines novi*, "new men" recruited for their competency. One can say, at the cost of some simplification, that the king needs the ministers to limit and control the power of his brothers and that, conversely, he can use his brothers to limit and control the power of ministers (Elias 2000: 37).

In addition to employing officials dependent him, the king attempts to reproduce his position and household and resolve some of the inter-dynastic conflicts by providing *apanages* as land, often acquired through war or marriages, to give to his sons.

Bureaucratic functionaries or oblates are often chosen by the king on the basis that they are unable to reproduce themselves or have few ties of interest in opposition to the king. They frequently come from marginalised groups as Weber (1978) noted – clerics vowed to celibacy, eunuchs, pariahs of low birth. Bureaucrats represent the antithesis of the king's brothers in that they are wholly dependent on the king and give him everything, including their loyalty, and aim to serve the state.

The contradictions between the king, his brothers, and the king's ministers – bureaucrats – ushers in the emergence of a new 'statist' third phase that Bourdieu characterises as a move 'from the king's house to *raison d'état*' (see Bourdieu 2005). Here the personal power of the king becomes increasingly diffused and differentiated eventually leading to the emergence of the impersonal power of the modern state. This is a transitional phase characterised by the conflict between two opposing groups and their correlative principles. On the one hand, there exists bearers of the old social model of reproduction deriving from the dynastic state where reproduction continues to be centred on lineage, blood, hereditary, and biology, and where the king rules in a personal manner as an extension of the household. On the other hand, there emerges a new model, partly as the result of the development of an autonomous legal field, based on acquired competence and merit, in which individuals – specifically lawyers and bureaucrats – have accrued powers independent of the king, and who rule on an impersonal basis with impersonal powers.

The role of the judiciary mentioned earlier is a central vector in this transitional process. As the field of power differentiates, rising groups of bureaucrats and lawyers, argue for universal principles of rule based on law and reason appealing to universal legal principles. This pursuit of the universal within the legal field suits and furthers their own particular interests, and begins to undermine previously held notions of legitimacy based on biology and nobility through blood. This represents the emergence of a new state nobility – the *noblesse de robe* – based on competence, who gradually displaces the old blood nobility – the *noblesse d'épée*. The state nobility, initially as the *noblesse de robe*, was the 'self-made' product of correlative and complementary inventions tied to its historical development. It was a body that constituted itself and simultaneously the state.

Hence, although the two models of reproduction based on blood and merit initially operate alongside each other, through a long and imperceptible process of defeudalisation, the new state nobility, within an increasingly autonomous bureaucratic field, come to supplant and denegate personal rule with a form of formal rule independent of politics, and autonomous from economics – through disinterestedness as a specific reason of state. The outcome – the development of an autonomous bureaucratic or administrative field where the distinction between function and functionary, public and private interests, and disinterestedness, become central aspects of the civil servants' habitus and characterise the operation of bureaucratic logic. With Elias, the lengthening of chains of interdependency are crucial for this transition to the reason of state:

One could say, for the sake of a pleasing formula, that the (impersonal state) is the small change of absolutism, as if the king had been dissolved into the impersonal network of a long chain of mandated plenipotentiaries who are answerable to a superior from whom they receive their authority and their power, but also, to some extent, for him and for the orders they receive from him (2005: 48).

The lengthening of chains of interdependency and legitimation does not, however, eliminate the potentiality for corruption but rather increases it as 'centralised patrimonialism' coexists together with a local form of patrimonialism. Nevertheless, it also increases the possibility of increasing the public and universal interests of citizens generally: as power grows more complex and more diverse, and relatively autonomous fields with peculiar forms of capital and logic emerge as well as the institutionalisation of formal law. The modern state, as we now conceive it, only really comes to being in the seventeenth century in France and England.

In a fourth stage of state formation Bourdieu, briefly alludes to a shift from a bureaucratic state to a 'welfare state', indicating a shift from struggles over the construction of the state to struggles over acquiring primarily its symbolic capital, but also other capitals associated with the state. This phase brings to the fore questions concerning the state, social space and social classes.

According to Bourdieu, the genesis of the state was a recursive phenomenon following the concentration of various capitals – physical, economic, and cultural around the king, and the development of a number of autonomous social fields, including the cultural, economic and juridical field. But this concentration presupposed and depended upon the prior primitive accumulation of symbolic capital. Within the context of a dynastic state certain agents of the state, specifically lawyers, made themselves into a state nobility, by instituting the state through a performative discourse regarding what the state was and should be. The vested particular interest of this group, in a weakly autonomous legal field, was to create a discourse based on serving the general interests, providing public service, and enforcing universal interests, through the law rather than through personal avarice. Such a mission transcended the interests of agents within the state, including the king. This process eventually led to the creation of a republic and a nation, independent of the dynastic state in which they were embedded:

I would like to propose [...] that there are a certain number of social agents including lawyers – who played an eminent role, in particular those possessing that capital in terms of organisational resources that was Roman law. These agents gradually built up this thing that we call the state, that is a set of specific resources that authorizes its possessor to say what is good for the social world as a whole, to proclaim the official and to pronounce words that are in fact orders, because they are backed by the force of the official. The constitution of this instance was accompanied by the construction of the state in the sense of population contained within frontiers (Bourdieu 2014:32).

## Bourdieu's criticisms of Elias

Bourdieu criticises Elias in three major respects. [81][#N81] Firstly, he argues that Elias simply provides a Weberian 'physicalist theory' of the state that ignores the symbolic dimension necessary for maintaining state legitimacy and power. [9][#N9] Secondly, he argues that Elias's definition of the monopoly mechanism is tautological since it ignores the means or assets available to a king which lead to his triumph in the competition with its rivals: 'what he [Norbert Elias] calls the "law of monopoly", a solution that I shall not discuss in detail here but which seems to me to be essentially verbal and almost tautological' (Bourdieu 2005: 33). Thirdly, Elias, like Weber, ignores the fact that a small group of individuals – the state nobility – secures a monopoly over the monopoly. Counterbalancing these criticisms, Bourdieu adds:

Where I do see Elias as truly innovative, and I will draw on this to develop the genetic theory of the state, is in the elements of the analysis he makes of the transition from a private monopoly (what I call the dynastic state) to the public monopoly of the state' (Bourdieu 2014: 128)

Although he explicitly acknowledges using Elias's genetic theory of the state and his transition from the dynastic state to the bureaucratic state, it is clear that he draws on much more: i) Elias's view that the state 'is a legitimate protection racket' (2014: 129); ii) that the state was Janus-faced, so that together with monopolisation of the means of violence and taxation there comes increasing peace, even for the most disadvantaged groups; iii) processes of differentiation, lengthening chains of dependence and interdependence lead to relations of asymmetrical dependency and legitimation; iv) that the king operates a policy of divide and conquer through what Elias calls the 'royal mechanism'; v) the more power becomes concentrated, the more difficult it becomes for the ruler to control it, and his dependency on others increases; vi); that taxes are bound up in a reciprocal virtuous cycle with warfare. [10][#N10]

Bourdieu's criticisms are of a mixed nature. The argument that Elias ignores the 'monopoly of monopoly' held by small groups, is correct to the extent that Elias jumps too quickly at looking at the process of 'functional democratisation' where the distribution of power becomes increasingly dispersed over the social figuration as a whole. But this, for Elias, needs to be understood within the context of a very-long historical time-frame. By contrast, his argument that Elias's theory of the monopoly mechanism is ultimately tautological is misjudged. Elias spends considerable time providing a rich empirical description of the dynamics and assets underpinning monopolisation, in terms of questions of land, military campaigns and money resources. As Mennell notes:

It was not inevitable that there would be a single country corresponding to France in its present boundaries: it was not preordained nor in any sense planned that the kings whose principle seat



was Paris would extend their territories until they reached the boundaries of the hexagon, and then stop. For much of the Middle Ages the Paris Kings were locked in combat with other French-speaking Kings whose principle city was London, but who often controlled more of what is now France than did the Paris Kings. Even towards the end of the medieval period, there was a resurgence of centrifugal forces when members of the royal family, assigned regions as apanages to govern on behalf of the king, used them to reassert their autonomy (Mennell 2007:14).

Hence, it was by no means inevitable that the Capetian monarchy eventually became dominant in France. Instead, the monopoly mechanism, which draws on Marx's discussion of monopoly in *Capital* (1976 [1867]), attempts to outline the high probabilities and 'compellingness' or compulsions inherent in the social formation which underpinned this.

In addition, Bourdieu is right to argue that Elias does not examine the symbolic forms or ideological factors underpinning state legitimation, not in *The Civilizing Process* (2000) at least. Rather his focus is on how state formation is compelled by the structure of the social relationships, by the compelling dynamics of social figurations, and their degree of differentiation. These are most forcefully discussed in his game models (Elias 1978). As Mennell again astutely notes:

Elias like Marx himself, is always looking for the immanent dynamic of real social relations between people –relations including unequal, exploitative interdependence, and the internal tensions which cause change – and why development went one way rather than another' (Mennell 1992: 66).

Elias does discuss, albeit unsystematically, the monopolisation of the means of orientation that certain dominant class groupings hold in steering the state. And in other essays, especially those collected in the book *The Germans* (1996) he provides an analysis of inter-state and intra-state relations responsible for shaping the model setting classes and the contradictory duality of normative codes that inhere and blend differently in nation-states:

a moral code descended from that of ruling section of the *tiers état*, egalitarian in character, and whose highest value is "man" – the human individual as such; and a nationalist code descended from the Machiavellian code of princes and ruling aristocracies, inegalitarian in character, and whose highest value is a collectivity – the state, the country, the nation to which an individual belongs (Elias 1996:155).

## Elias over Bourdieu?

But there are several respects in which Elias's account of state and state formation remains ahead of Bourdieu's own account and could usefully supplement it. Firstly, Elias is more cautious about applying terms such as political, economic or ideological (symbolic) in a causal sense, not only since these terms cannot be applied to feudal undifferentiated social relations, as Bourdieu recognises, but also because they are abstractions which look at the same nexus of social relations from different points of view. An economic sphere or field has a symbolic and political aspect as Elias recognises. By contrast, Bourdieu's discussion of economic, cultural, political fields etc. can sometimes map onto what Elias calls 'spherical thinking' (see Elias

1978). Second, Elias tends to be more reflexive than Bourdieu in terms of his use of ‘processual concepts’ that take account of, and try to capture, various social balances and power ratios pertaining to figurations. [11].[#N11] Elias rarely talks about monopolisation *per se* but rather *high degrees* of monopolisation of violence and taxation. The emphasis is on shifts in power balances between groups, not on absolutes. Although Bourdieu, at one point for example, uses the term ‘statization’, or acknowledges the existence of ‘relatively’ public monopolies (2014: 130), his discussion of the move from the personal rule of dynastic kings to the impersonal rule of the bureaucratic state, or public to private he predominantly uses hard-edged contrasts and binaries, deriving ultimately from structuralism. Binaries are of course useful in creating contrasts within social forms, and they are the stock in trade of sociology – *gemeinschaft-gesellschaft*, status-contract, military-industrial, feudalism-capitalism etc. But they are less effective, however, in capturing empirical continuities and contradictory multi-polar tendencies and ambivalences. Third, Elias’s approach is in some ways more systematic and methodologically comparative in respect of looking at France, Germany and England. Bourdieu, also looks at these countries as well as Japan and China, in his lectures contained in *On the State*, but more impressionistically, and with less comparative rigour. Bourdieu’s primary scientific methodological heuristic is the ‘model’ which has strong affinities with Weber’s ideal types. And though Bourdieu continually reminds us to avoid confusing the ‘reality of the model’ with the model of reality, the use of models also suffers from the same drawbacks as Weber’s ideal types – when empirical processes do not correspond the model is nevertheless retained and rationalised as an ideal type. Fourth, Elias gives greater importance to the international or the geo-political context within which the national state is enmeshed, and attempts through his concept of figurations, to look *simultaneously* at how changes in these processes reciprocally impact upon changes in national-state processes. The international dimension of state formation, however, is largely absent in Bourdieu’s discussion. The international realm in which states are socialised but in turn shape the international context is mentioned largely by acknowledging Elias’s work, but it gets barely more than two pages of discussion. Instead it is hidden under a discussion of the importance of symbolic capital accumulation. As a result Bourdieu’s discussion of state formation is almost wholly ‘internalist’ – examining the inner logic and conflicts within a country centred on strategies of reproduction and their concomitant mechanisms. It takes place in a vacuum so to speak. The geo-political context of nation-states within which European states, such as France, were situated both in terms of establishing international treaties with other states, broader economic flows and commerce, and war – for example the Thirty Years War and its financial and political implications – are thereby rendered invisible. Shorn of these determinations his model remains too abstract. The focus on the international dimension cannot just be an add-on to a discussion about symbolic capital. International states relations are not only of competition and conflict, but characterised by relations of rule that hold them together and bind them into a state system. It is in this context that we can understand the struggle for national prestige, which Weber foregrounded (see Collins 1986), the power ratios, and the ambivalence of interests between states, as is the case of social groups and classes, states can be enemies in one context and allies in another. This higher level of synthesis, in which interdependent inter-state actions have unplanned consequences for intra-state actions, is missing in Bourdieu’s account. This points to a fifth connected virtue of Elias’s work in comparison with Bourdieu’s – his commitment to understanding the role of the organisation of war and violence in state formation. Bourdieu of course talks about the state as having a monopoly of *physical and* symbolic violence and he briefly mentions the emergence of a military and police force in the formation of military capita in *On the State*. Again, however, compared to symbolic processes, these are peripheral concerns. For Elias, by contrast, war plays a fundamentally central role in state-formation. Focusing on how increasing internal pacification within a territory was connected with increasing and bigger wars abroad, especially against neighbouring territories, helps us to see that European state formation consisted of a realm of warring states who had to adapt to this competition by centralising political power and collecting taxes to fund wars.

As Hobson, discussing Elias, notes:

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 [...] 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 (2012).

States therefore needed to constantly modernise their economies and develop their military power bases in order to prevent invasion, subsumption, or military defeat. This meant they had to ensure revenue base from particular social interest groups, including aristocrats, challenging their interests and opposition and attempting to win autonomy from them, in order to survive as states. That war is a central component of state formation is not peculiar to Elias, but has also of course a central theme in Hintze and Weber's and neo Weberian accounts of state formation. For Hintze: 'All state organisation was originally military organisation for war' (Hintze 1989: 181).

A further aspect in which Elias's theory of state formation supersedes Bourdieu's is in terms of another contextual variable – Elias's stronger focus on class. Elias's book *The Civilizing Process* is subtitled: '*Changes in the Behaviour of the Secular Upper-Class in the West*' and is centrally concerned with the conflict and contestation between the descending nobility and rising bourgeoisie. These groups, within a system of multi-polar tensions, are dependent on the central authority of the king, who plays them off one another to maintain his position of power, often by giving positions of power to individuals from the rising bourgeoisie, a new elite of magistrates and officials, who constituted the *noblesse de robe*, at the expense of the declining nobility. Elias was conscious of class fractions, for example the division in the bourgeoisie between administrators who generally supported the *ancien regime* and wished to acquire the rights and entitlements of the nobility, and the enterprising merchant part of the bourgeoisie who were more in favour of challenging the social formation. But he was also aware of the ambivalence of interests between many of these conflictual groupings challenging the monarch also sometimes meant challenging the whole social order and therefore one's intermediary position within it. In such an explanation, Elias does not need to revert to concepts such as acquiring consent or symbolic violence in order to account for why groups acted as they did in relation to a powerful king. It is the overall structure of the configuration and the interests of the groups within it that compels them to act in certain ways. This is neither a question of the nobility being free or forced but a question of the degrees of compulsion operating upon them in a given conjuncture of interdependencies.

In addition, Elias is also conscious of the relativity of the content of his concepts that is sometimes absent in Bourdieu's discussion. The emerging bourgeoisie in the earlier period of the fifteenth century for example was not the same as that of a later period in the eighteenth nor was the nobility, despite sharing the same conceptual nomenclature (see Loyal 2004). This polymorphous and ambiguous analysis of conflict is for the most part absent from Bourdieu's analysis which focuses largely on a binary or tripartite conflict between the dominant, dominated fractions of the dominant, and dominated, or conflicts between the king, his brothers and the bureaucracy.

Rather surprisingly Bourdieu rarely mentions the role of class in his analysis of state formation. Class reproduction is of course something he foregrounds in relation to modern states, schools and social reproduction. He is not obliged to do so, and Bourdieu is rightly wary of applying concepts only applicable to modern societies to estates that exist in the feudal order, hence the *noblesse de robe* are seen as a status group

rather than a class. And their major function is seen in terms of their universalising role, albeit for their own particular interests as a status group. [12],[#N12]. But one can recognise the fundamental difference between classes in modern capitalist social orders and those in feudal society as Marx did yet acknowledge class nevertheless plays a role in earlier formations. This is especially true for the class conflict between lords and peasants during the feudal era, within which much of Bourdieu's discussion of the dynastic state takes place. For Elias, in an era where land was the primary resource and in order to maintain their distinct, luxurious, lifestyles the court needed to squeeze the peasantry for greater resources, eventually leading to a fundamental divide between the two groups who saw themselves as races apart (see Elias 1983).

In discussing the role of the state and violence it may be useful also to look at the work of Gramsci. Gramsci examines how ideologies do not need to be opposed in their totality but can be transformed by preserving and rearranging their most durable elements. He also examines a problem that is central to Bourdieu, the relation between force and consent in a more informed and explanatorily fruitful way. Bourdieu, as we noted had blurred the boundaries of this binary to an extent, by examining communication as a form of force and violence, while still retaining the notion of physical force, or what he calls 'raw power' (1998b: 383) which is always accompanied by a symbolic effect. But although this can be acknowledged at one level, this downplays the significance of physical violence as an autonomous force in social life, albeit symbolically accompanied and mediated. Bourdieu tends to see symbolic violence as a more important form of 'violence' characterising modern societies. Unlike Bourdieu, who tends to focus almost exclusively on symbolic violence despite his definition of the state, for Gramsci, the acquisition of consent is usually only a possibility when the use of physical force to back it up is also present, and the latter is usually employed 'when it appears to be based on the consent of the majority' (1973: 80). In addition, Bourdieu's use of the term 'violence' not only pushes our ordinary understanding of violence to its limit, but again, an Eliasian account of tilts and balances would be more useful here. Hence, it may be more helpful, both explanatorily and empirically, to retain a marked distinction between force and consent and examine shifts in their balance. Gramsci of course, does this through the concept of hegemony, Elias had similarly used a parallel distinction between shifting balances between external constraints (*Fremdwange*) and self-constraints (*Selbstzwange*) in his writings (2000: 365, 378).

Having made these criticism, I will now make what appears to be a *volte face*. I believe there are more problems with his thinking on the state than in his general sociological theory, which although informed by it, remains one of the most important contributions to sociology in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Bourdieu's theory of the state, however, is, and remains, incomplete. The discussions on the state show the direction in which his thinking on the state was developing but they by no means provide an overall, coherent, or systematic theory. Yet, despite its flaws, and he provides a dynamic and creative theory of the state, offering a needed corrective to standard views which neglect the role of cultural forms and social classifications and their role in maintaining and reproducing forms of power and domination. Bourdieu's concepts have been fashioned from empirical work and their usefulness is tied to their power of generating insightful substantive analyses. Once we account for what can be termed 'bending the stick too far in the cultural direction', Bourdieu's reflexive genetic approach, when married with other more 'materialist' approaches, provides a basis for examining the development of state administrative systems centred on authority, the role of performatives and the self-referring nature of knowledge tied to state legitimation. The emphasis on the state's power of nomination, classification, and official validation, in constructing both groups and modes of identification, sanctioning and defining social practices, and the cleavages that exists in the state itself, as a field of power operating in terms of 'antagonistic co-operation' between a left and the right hand, are all fundamental concepts for understanding the modern state. Thus, what Bourdieu's theory provides in contrast to a number of Marxist and Weberian inspired analyses of the state – which remain abstract and general – is a concrete research programme.

## Endnotes:

1. Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic Wacquant. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992; Bourdieu, Pierre. *The State Nobility: Elite Schools in the Field of Power*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998; Bourdieu, Pierre 'Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field' in Bourdieu, Pierre. *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998. pp35-63; Bourdieu, Pierre. 'From the Kings House to the Reason of State: A Model of the Genesis of the Bureaucratic Field' in L. Wacquant (ed) *Pierre Bourdieu and Democratic Politics: the Mystery of Ministry*. Cambridge: Polity 2005. [#N1-pt1](#)
2. See his essay 'On Symbolic Power' in *Language and Symbolic Power* (1991: 163-170). The concept of symbolic violence is also discussed in his book originally published in 1970, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. [#N2-pt1](#)
3. Bourdieu also reviews the work of Eisenstadt, Anderson, and Barrington-Moore, and draws on the work of Marc Bloch, Karl Polanyi, Wittfogel, Coulborn. [#N3-pt1](#)
4. Thus, whilst discussing charisma and legitimation Weber states: 'the need of social strata, privileged through existing political, social and economic orders, to have their social and economic positions "Legitimised". They wish to see their positions transformed from purely factual power relations into a cosmos of acquired rights, and to know they are thus sanctified' (Weber 2009: 262) [#N4-pt1](#)
5. Bourdieu states: 'Relations of force are inseparable from relations of meaning and communication, the dominated are also people who know and acknowledge... The act of obedience presupposes an act of knowledge, which is at the same time an act of acknowledgement [...] the person who submits, who obeys, bends to an order or discipline, performs a cognitive action[...]. Acts of submission and obedience are cognitive acts, and as such they bring into play cognitive structures, categories of perception, patterns of perception, principles of vision and division, a whole series of things that the neo-Kantian tradition emphasises' (2014:164). [#N5-pt1](#)
6. As Wacquant notes: 'devoting no fewer than five books to the topic and returning to it time and again through four decades of prolific research, it is not that he is a sociologist of 'education' per se but because he considers schools to be the pre-eminent institutional machinery for the certification of social hierarchies in advanced nation-states. Again, not unlike the church in medieval society, the school supplies a sociodicy in action of the existing social order, a rationale for its inequities and the cognitive and moral basis for its conservation' (1993: 2). [#N6-pt1](#)
7. 'The progressive development of the recognition of the legitimacy of official taxation is bound up with the rise of a form of nationalism. And, indeed, the broad-based collection of taxes has likely contributed to the unification of the territory or, to be more precise, to the construction, both in reality and in representation, of the state as a unitary territory, as a reality unified by its submission to the same obligations themselves imposed by the imperatives of defence' (Bourdieu 1998a: 7). [#N7-pt1](#)
8. One of these is idiosyncratic: 'I am a strong defender of Elias's ideas, but I begin to be somewhat vexed by the fact that he enjoys a kind of sacralization today' (Bourdieu 2014:199) [#N8-pt1](#)
9. The word 'legitimate, if you take it quite seriously, is enough to evoke the symbolic dimension of this violence, since the idea of legitimacy includes the idea of recognition. Despite everything, however, Weber did not develop this aspect of the state in his theory very strongly; with Elias, this aspect – disappears almost completely. That is the main criticism I make of his model. Elias, in fact, lets the symbolic dimension of state power disappear, and essentially retains the constitution of a double monopoly, that of physical violence and that of taxation ( Bourdieu,2014:128). [#N9-pt1](#)
10. More generally, there are numerous other parallels in their work, both use the notion of habitus and field, seek to transcend the agency-structure divide, and both see state formation as inextricably tied to changes in personality structure and both, following Durkheim, argue that as societies advance they



differentiate into separate spheres. They also share a broadly similar world-social democratic view. Though some of the differences in terms of physical violence and symbolic violence can also be accounted for by the paradigmatic crises situations they both respond to – the aftermath of the violence of the First World War and Algeria respectively. ↗[#N10-ptr1]

11. For Elias causality is often more complex, in terms of the reciprocity between cause and effect, and sometimes the term cause needs to be replaced by the concept of correspondence. State formation, the increase in division of labour, in the length of chains of interdependence, the growth of towns, trade and money, and the growth of an administrative apparatus are reinforcing processes with no causal priority. ↗[#N11-ptr1]
12. Bourdieu may be justified in not using the term class in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries, but is he also in the seventeenth or twentieth when he still sees the state nobility as a status group? Is not their class condition, as for example in Goldmann's *The Hidden God* (1976), where Jansenism and Pascal's and Racine's tragic disposition to the world are outlined, of some importance? ↗[#N12-ptr1]

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## Biography

Steven Loyal is an Associate Professor in sociology at University College Dublin. His research interests include: migration, ethno-racial domination, social stratification, sociological theory, historical sociology, and

the sociology of knowledge. His forthcoming book is entitled: *Bourdieu's theory of the state: a critical introduction*, New York: Palgrave.

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