Process Sociology and Human Emancipation: Involvement and Detachment Reconsidered [1] [#N1]

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Introduction

Elias's position on the balance between involvement and detachment may seem puzzling to readers who approach his writings from a normative or critical-theoretical perspective, as this author did almost fifteen years ago. Such a reader may well be struck by the explicitly moral claims that pepper Elias's writings but also by the apparent tension with the dominant interpretations of his perspective which emphasise his commitment to the 'detour via detachment' – to the endeavour to remove as far as possible ideological convictions and value-preferences from the scholarly quest for 'reality-congruent knowledge'. The details of Elias's position are well known in process-sociological circles, especially since the publication of Richard Kilminster's magisterial book on 'post-philosophical sociology' and a series of accompanying essays. They have explained how the detour via detachment lies at the heart of Elias's 'sociological vocation'. They have investigated Elias's commitment to a highly-restrained or self-disciplined mode of scholarly inquiry that sought to remove ideological attachments from sociological analysis. They have examined the wider intellectual context by tracing the development of two tracks of sociology – one overtly critical or emancipatory, as in the case of Marx's inquiry into industrial capitalism, the other committed to eradicating the polluting effects of ideological convictions from the sociological enterprise. Elias's analysis of the civilising process is placed firmly within the second intellectual trajectory and is therefore clearly distinguished from Frankfurt School critical sociology.

The following discussion emphasises the normative statements that arise from time to time in Elias's writings. It asks whether the analysis of the two tracks of sociology underplays those commitments and considers whether process sociology and critical or normative sociological inquiries are poles apart. It invites further debate about the purposes of process sociology that dovetails with recent sociological analyses of the negative effects of government policy – inquiries that have some parallels with critical-theoretical inquiries into, *inter alia*, the politics of gender and race. In Eliasian terms, those avowedly critical perspectives have explored established–outsider relations in sympathy with, if not from the standpoint of, subordinate groups. But they have rarely engaged with Elias's exploration of established–outsider dynamics or discussed process sociology more generally. They are perhaps inclined to locate process sociology – to the extent that they are aware of its existence or think about it at all – within traditional or established academic groupings that have been accused of failing to analyse patterns of domination in society or of unwittingly contributing to their perpetuation. If pressed, they might argue that process sociology has little, if any, relevance for their critical or emancipatory endeavours. It is manifestly not 'on their side'. The language of two tracks may seem to encourage that assessment and to reinforce convictions in critical circles that there is little profit in engaging with process sociology. Rather different possibilities may result from highlighting the significance of Elias's

occasional normative statements for possible future engagements between the advocates of process sociology and critical orientations.

The following argument raises some questions about the ramifications of Elias's more ethical and political observations for the longer-term development of process sociology and specifically for its relationship with the critical or emancipatory track taken by Marx and the Frankfurt School. Necessarily, the article begins by drawing attention to particular normative claims in Elias's writings. It then discusses core themes in Kilminster's analysis of involvement and detachment, noting in particular his emphasis on Elias's 'secular humanism' and 'humanity-centred' orientation. The following argument considers how recent arguments for closer engagement with public policies with negative effects on outsider groups – for 'detached-involvement' – provide an important bridge to scholars in critical research communities. The article concludes with some observations about the potential 'reconciliation' of process sociology and critical theory that are designed to encourage future discussion and debate about the emancipatory dimensions of Elias's position.

Normative claims in Elias's writings

A personal reflection on returning to Elias's writings after working on normative and critical theories of international relations for almost four decades may be useful. It seemed clear in the course of reading Elias's published work in the search for sociological investigations relevant to the study of harm in world politics, that Elias was broadly sympathetic with the cosmopolitan ethos of critical international theory as developed by the Frankfurt School. The first example of this congenial link was encountered in *Involvement and Detachment* (Elias 2007 [1987]: 13) where Elias stated that it should be regarded 'as a basic human right that human beings can live out their lives for as long as they so wish and that those who threaten or use violence to shorten their lives should be regarded as either criminal or insane'. Three other examples are worth noting.

First, there is apparent common ground between Elias's thesis that one of the purposes of the social sciences is to increase the fund of knowledge about social processes that humans have been unable to control (and to improve the prospects of greater control over hitherto unplanned patterns of development) and Marx's compelling statement in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to the effect that 'people make their history, but not under conditions of their own choosing' (see Marx 1852 in McLennan 1977: 300). The apparent implication of Marx's much-quoted statement was that, with greater knowledge of the social world and the requisite political action, humans would reduce and eventually bring an end to the tyranny of unplanned social processes. Major writings by Elias and Marx appear to be united in supporting the radical Enlightenment ethical conviction that the social sciences can contribute to the realisation of a state of affairs in which people make more of their history under freely-chosen conditions (see Israel 2006 on the radical Enlightenment).

Second, and developing that theme in a 1969 interview with Johan Goudsblom in Amsterdam, Elias (2013: 164) combined the claim that 'the civilizing of human beings and the standards of civilization have developed completely unplanned and in a haphazard manner' with the observation that more reality-congruent knowledge would enable humans 'to judge more closely what kind of restraints are required for complicated societies to function, and what type of restraints have been merely built into us to bolster up the authority of certain ruling groups'. There is a basic similarity between that standpoint and the critique of surplus or unnecessary constraints that can be found in the writings of Horkheimer, Marcuse or Habermas.

Third, and further emphasising the parallel with the sociology of the Frankfurt School, was Elias's striking claim in the lecture that he delivered on receiving the Adorno prize in 1977 that his approach was informed by a humanism that took 'the side of the less powerful, the oppressed, the outsider and the exploited' (Elias 2009). [2] [#N2] The overt humanism that is common to those four statements would appear to answer the

question raised by Saramago (2016), namely why the goal of increasing the level of human control over unplanned social processes was so central to Elias's conception of the sociological vocation. [3][#N3]

Reading Mennell's study of Norbert Elias suggested the need for caution in promoting that line of inquiry. Mennell's statement that Elias was firmly opposed to all forms of partisan sociology raised doubts about the value of emphasising moral commitments in Elias's writings (Mennell 1998: 171–2; see, however, Mennell forthcoming). How seriously should they be taken? Are they more than interesting asides? Should they be regarded as the 'trace elements' of earlier philosophical commitments (Kilminster 2011: 95)? The doubts were increased by encountering Kilminster's explanation of how Elias transposed traditional philosophical problems into sociological questions that could be answered through the acquisition of testable empirical claims about actual social processes (Kilminster 2007). The question is whether Elias's normative statements should be viewed in that light.

Elias's transpositional approach

Elias's analysis of the problem of control could be regarded as a primary illustration of the transpositional method. In the writings of Marx, and largely because of Hegel's influence (see Kilminster 2018), specific philosophical assumptions underpinned the political question of unplanned social processes. The reality that human beings do not make history freely and under circumstances of their choosing was, for Marx, a basic violation of the species-capacity for collective self-determination that could only be realised fully in a future socialist society that embraced the whole of humanity. It is important to ask why Elias placed the idea of greater control of the social world at the centre of his vision of sociology if, as the dominant interpretations argue, the problem of uncontrolled social dynamics was not anchored in a prior philosophical position on the good society or good life. One response is that it was grounded instead in empirical observations about recurrent challenges that all human beings have faced or that are inescapable features of the human condition, which Elias (2012a: 151–2) captured in the idea of the 'triad of controls'. [4][#N4] That concept reflected the following features of social life in all times and places. First, in infancy every person must undergo a process of acquiring control over 'animalic' drives or biological impulses in order to become a functioning member of society. Second, people in groups must engage in restraining each other's capacity for threatening or violent or other forms of harmful behaviour if they are to live together amicably. Basic social taboos have been integral to all forms of life for that reason. Third, controls over non-human nature are an inextricable part of the quest to satisfy basic needs (as are forms of self-control and associated restraints between those concerned).

Starting with those observations about actual social conditions, Elias sought to explain the problems that people have both individually and collectively in finding ways of co-existing without violent conflict, crippling forms of domination, frustrating power relations and debilitating psychological conditions – where the expressions, crippling, frustrating and debilitating, capture elements of human experience rather than express the moral judgements of the analyst. The sociological challenge was to investigate the relevant social processes in as detached a way as possible on the assumption that the deeper understanding of recurrent human predicaments could improve the prospects for social arrangements in which people can live more harmoniously with each other.

It is important to add that Elias's analysis of human problems and difficulties transposed Marx's ethical standpoint into a distinctively sociological approach that included Freud's psychological investigations of individual fears, anxieties, traumas and repressions. To attain greater reality-congruent knowledge of the human world it was imperative, Elias argued, that 'Ought questions' or 'ideological convictions' were placed

on the 'back burner' (Kilminster 2011: 111). That formulation left open the possibility of future practical engagement with actual social relations. Elias was certainly explicit that one could not discount the possibility of 'altering the course of political events through the results of sociological research'; indeed, the 'opposite is the case' (Elias 2012b [1939]: 512). But the crucial first step was the movement from partisan involvement in social and political tensions and struggles to restrained, detached inquiry. Armed with the requisite advances, sociologists could then turn to 'secondary involvement' and engage directly with the problems that people encounter as a result of the ways in which they are bound together. As Kilminster (2011: 111, italics in original) explains, with significant advances in 'theoretical-empirical inquiry' social scientists could '*return to them in a new form*'.

The sharp contrast with Marx's mode of analysis is worth recalling. Elias emphasised Marx's achievement in highlighting in a relatively detached way the role of social conflict – and especially class struggles to monopolise economic and political power – in the history of human societies. But Elias stressed the distorting effects of Marx's idealised convictions about the significance of working-class organisations for the emancipation of humanity (Elias 2012c). Major features of social groups were neglected, including the 'monopoly mechanism', which had resulted in the formation of ever larger 'survival units' in possession of increasingly destructive forms of political and military power (Elias 2012b: 301–11.). The shortcomings of Marx's perspective demonstrated how partisanship, as expressed in high levels of involvement in the practical outcome of particular struggles between groups, impoverished sociological analysis. Inconvenient truths were ignored. With involvement came a danger of failing to confront aspects of social life that were politically unwelcome. Greater detachment by ascending what Elias called the 'spiral staircase' of increasingly reality-congruent knowledge could significantly reduce the obstacles to facing unpalatable realities that had to be understood if human societies were to escape, at least in part, violent conflict and oppression, as well as scarred or disfigured human relations and the absence of personal meaning, satisfaction and happiness. The upshot was that the 'usefulness of sociological research as a tool of social practice is increased if the researcher does not deceive himself by projecting what he desires, and what he believes ought to be, into his investigation of what is and has been' in the human world (Elias 2012b [1939]: 512).

The immense gulf between achievements in the natural and social sciences underpinned Elias's case for radically altering the balance of power between involved and detached modes of sociological investigation. Increasing the practical utility of the social sciences required a major shift in the observable relationship between two major features of all social groups – emotional engagement in internal and external struggles and levels of detachment that had facilitated, amongst other things, breakthroughs in the technological sphere and increasing controls over nature. Precisely because of what were, from a long-term perspective, remarkable advances in detachment, natural-scientific research communities had acquired reality-congruent knowledge that seemed to correspond with external realities, but could not be presumed to be objectively true or immune from future revision (Elias 2007). Only relatively recently had humans reached a deeper comprehension of the universe and their place within it – including, as in the case of the Copernican and Darwinian revolutions, knowledge revolutions that many found profoundly unsettling and actively resisted because they contradicted the dominant Christian standpoints on the privileged position of humans in God's creation. As Elias argued, the shift from the geocentric to the heliocentric conception of the universe could not be explained simply in terms of 'new discoveries' or a sudden 'cumulative increase in knowledge'. Decisive was the transformation of human self-images in the shape of an increased 'capacity for self-detachment' and the greater aptitude for 'greater emotional self-control' that promoted the development of world-views that overturned earlier certainties that had been preserved by established religious groups with virtual monopolies of power over the ways in which people orientated themselves to the world (Elias 2012b [1939]: 520–1).

By contrast, the social sciences had limited success in accumulating knowledge through comparable commitments to detachment in research clusters and communities (Kilminster 2013; Kilminster 2014). The relative lack of detachment had contributed to the inability of societies to gain a degree of control over processes that bore comparison with natural-scientific achievements in expanding human powers over natural processes. There had been little progress in diagnosing human predicaments let alone in reaching prognoses with a high level of practical success. If similar advances in acquiring reality-congruent knowledge of societies in long-term perspective were to occur, Elias argued, social scientists would have to free themselves from the disposition to take sides in current social conflicts or controversies and to become entangled in power struggles that blocked the accumulation of knowledge (Kilminster 2011: 112–13). They could then hope to emulate the natural sciences in breaking the iron grip of double-bind processes, a term that referred to the practice in which humans had responded to the tyranny of natural forces by creating mythical images of the world that only reinforced traditional forms of subjection. Similar binds were evident in the social domain where human groups had repeatedly reacted to fears of attack by creating and acting on highly-emotive images of enemies. Reciprocal stigmatisation or demonisation entrenched the uncontrollability of relations with others; resulting anxieties intensified entrapment in highly emotive or deeply involved standpoints. Double-bind dynamics prevented the development of more detached perspectives that offered at least a partial escape from the dominance of unplanned and uncontrolled processes.

A related theme was that insufficiently-detached positions create the risk of social and political interventions that fail to disrupt cycles of violence, reciprocated stigmatisation and high levels of mutual distrust. As previously noted, the dangers could be reduced if political action had the support of less-involved analyses orientated towards the acquisition of more reality-congruent knowledge. Clear humanistic convictions underpinned that conception of the sociological vocation. Elias was insistent that normative commitments should not be permitted '*to shape research*' (Kilminster 2011: 112, italics in original). But his defence of the social sciences was firmly rooted in the humanistic standpoint that advances in detachment could 'assist human beings to orientate themselves in the figurations they form together and to help them to control the unintended social entanglements that threaten to escalate into destructive sequences such as mass killings and wars' (Kilminster 2011: 96). That vision of sociological inquiry had its origins in radical Enlightenment approaches to the social world that were augmented, as noted earlier, by Freud's investigation of psychological disturbances. It is essential to add, however, that Elias believed that the social sciences were still very much in their infancy and that little was known not only about the human world but also about the concepts that can produce major increases of knowledge of intra- and inter-societal interdependencies.

On global interconnectedness

A humanist commitment underpinned Elias's observation that sociologists can all too easily deceive themselves by projecting their desires, and what they believe ought to be the case, onto their investigations of the social world. Sociological detachment was a central part of Elias's 'intense human commitment' which found expression in the concern that highly-involved inquiries can lead to practical interventions in ways of life that have unforeseen tragic effects and compound the difficulties that people have in living together (Kilminster 2011: 96; Kilminster 2014). However, it is not obvious from the discussion thus far that specific normative claims underpinned a humanist mode of inquiry. Elias's position might be described as adopting the standpoint of detached empathy. [5][#N5] His sociological vocation was based on the aspiration that greater reality-congruent knowledge would help people solve the problems that arose from their relations with each other. At one and the same time, the perspective aimed for sociological detachment and expressed sympathy

for human predicaments and the desire to contribute to the improvement of social conditions. Detachment did not demand analysing people in the dispassionate manner of the natural scientist engaged in inspecting microbes under a microscope. But detachment was imperative to make the necessary explanatory breakthroughs. As for specific strategies that were designed to ameliorate human conditions, and as for the values that might inform them and provide the basis for new ways of life, those were matters that people would decide for themselves. Elias's commitment to detached empathy suggested that decisions regarding strategic interventions and value-preferences are best deferred until much more is known about human figurations. So much seems evident from the contention that 'ought questions' are best moved to the 'back burner' until the relevant explanatory advances have occurred.

At first glance, however, Elias's reflections on increasing levels of global interconnections would appear to embody clear normative preferences. Fundamental is the claim that Elias constructed 'a research programme in the service of an ardent secular humanism' – 'in the service of all humankind' and free from ties to any 'single segment, class, or faction thereof' that were so evident in Marx's writings (Kilminster 2014: 97–8). As that formulation indicates, Elias believed that sociologists had to acquire greater detachment from national attachments and orientations. Crucial was the break with methodological nationalism in the social sciences and the switch to humanity-centred investigation in which the human condition moved to the heart of sociological inquiry (Kilminster 2007: 141–5).

A powerful response to the suggestion that moral choices are in operation in Elias's position on 'humanity-centred' inquiry is that the perspective was a reaction to the realities of lengthening and deepening webs of human interconnectedness rather than the product of pre-existent cosmopolitan preferences. [6] [#N6] Support for this interpretation can be found in Elias's observation that humanity is no longer a 'beautiful ideal' but a concept that captures the 'social reality' of unprecedented levels of global integration (Elias 2008a: 87). Dissatisfaction with orthodox 'society-centred' investigation stemmed from a deep recognition (which was unusual in Sociology throughout much of the period in which Elias was writing) of the importance of inter-societal relations in the development of human societies across the millennia. Especially important was Elias's focus on the very real possibility that conflict between the superpowers in the bipolar age could end in a return to the caves (Elias 2010a: 128). The upshot is that references to double-bind processes in the relations between states in the modern period and between the dominant survival units in earlier eras occupy a central place in Elias's writings (see, for example, Elias 2007: 161–165).

Extending an earlier point in this discussion, a principal theme was that societies have been prone to develop highly emotive perspectives on adversaries in the context of heightened insecurity. Foreign policy that was driven by the demonisation of enemies increased the overall level of mutual fear and suspicion. Reciprocal stigmatisation plunged the societies involved into conflictual relations that they were powerless to control, increasing the likelihood of a descent into violent conflict that none of the societies had anticipated or desired. The crises that arose in such circumstances reflected the predominance of highly involved national self-images in which peoples absolved their own groups from culpability for the condition of insecurity and allocated blame to other societies. Emotive standpoints led the societies to ask what any particular event or episode 'means for me'; the ascent to greater detachment that was barred by such orientations would have focused on what the core dynamics that locked societies together 'were in themselves' (Kilminster 2007: 118). Only with advances in detachment could enemies transcend short-term preoccupations and engage in elementary forms of collaboration with the aim of reducing the risk of unplanned violent conflict.

The discussion suggests that Elias's dissatisfaction with society-centred perspectives arose not from prior ethical commitments but from empirically-observable dynamics in relations between societies that included the danger of the annihilation of whole populations in the nuclear age. To that degree, then, Elias's humanism would appear to represent the transposition of the ethical image of perpetual peace in Kant's writings or the

utopian vision of universal communism defended by Marx into the sociological analysis of the fears and frustrations that accompanied largely-unplanned global interdependencies. Indeed Elias explicitly rejected any link between the claim that that 'human beings are confronted for the first time with the task of organising themselves globally – that is, as humanity' and some dreamy utopianism (Elias 2010a: 120).

Elias was well aware that most people care more for their national community rather than for humanity as a whole. The latter was a 'blank space on the map of their emotions' (Elias 2010b: 181). He referred to the 'drag effect' of national loyalties and observed that high levels of emotional identification with national groups are the root cause of many of the most intractable problems that people face in the modern era (Elias 2010b: 188–190). The problem with nationalism was practical rather than ethical – based, in other words, not on philosophical first principles but on the empirical claim that powerful national attachments trapped peoples in perspectives that prevented the levels of international cooperation that were necessary in order to exercise greater control over the forces that had led to unprecedented global integration. Elias's reference to the 'drag effect' of national attachments recognised that societies may pursue anti-globalist objectives, placing the interests of the nation first, as in Trump's slogan about 'making America great again'.

It is hardly surprising on Elias's own analysis of inter-state power struggles that particular groups attempt to gain control over such global processes through nationalist strategies that can have the effect of increasing tensions between the established and the outsiders in society. From a detached standpoint, there can be nothing morally wrong about such approaches to global threats and challenges. Indeed, such a strategy could be entirely rational under particular power relations where governing elites believe they have good prospects of imposing their will on others or where they prefer to go it alone on the supposition that others will eschew multilateral approaches to global problems. Elias's empirically based conclusion was that, in all probability, societies would fail to learn how to construct global arrangements that brought unregulated forces under collective control until they attained greater detachment from national orientations. The 'intense human commitment' or secular humanist stance is evident in those remarks, as is the invitation to sociologists to engage in the 'hunting of myths', including national mythologies that ignore the reality that more and more peoples have become 'dependent on each other for their security and the satisfaction of their needs in ways' that 'surpass the comprehension of those involved' (Elias 2007: 77; see Elias 2012a: 46–65 on the sociologist as the hunter of myths). As Elias explained, millions and indeed billions of people in the modern world find that 'their hands and feet [are] chained together by invisible ties' (Elias 2007: 77). Deep involvement in 'the urgent, narrow and parochial problems which each of them has to face' distracts them from seeing 'the whole patterns they form together', as if from the 'outside' (Elias 2007: 77). Largely because of attachments to the social habitus that served human purposes when levels of interconnectedness were lower than they are today, social groups have a limited capacity to regulate 'the movements of the whole' (Elias 2007: 77). Perhaps, Elias (2010a: 81–2) argued in a colourful passage in *Human Conditio*, their prospects would improve if they regarded their planet as a miniscule part of a universe that is wholly indifferent to humanity's fate. Then they might have a deeper appreciation of the 'senselessness of wars' (Elias 2010a: 81–2). That comment can be interpreted as an empirical claim about how large-scale changes in human orientation might come about although it is tempting to ask if there is more to it, namely an expression of 'anxiety for the well-being of mankind' – Hegel's phrase that had been invoked in radical protest in the Federal German Republic against the 'wickedness of the world' (Elias 2013: 368).

The sceptical reader may warn against pushing that last point too far and caution against reading Elias through a lens shaped by a Frankfurt School critical perspective. Certainly, the argument that Elias's commitment to detachment is part of a larger humanism or concern for human beings is an important response to the claim that important ethical commitments suffuse Elias's writings. But earlier observations about his position on human rights, on the contribution that sociology can make to identifying constraints

that simply bolster the power and authority of specific groups, and on his identification with the 'less powerful, the oppressed, the outsider and the exploited' are worth recalling at this point. They raise the question of whether Elias did indeed have an ethical commitment to higher levels of control over unplanned processes that would bring benefits to all people (albeit one that should not be allowed 'to shape research'). So much seems implicit in the observation that his research programme was geared towards 'all humankind' rather than confined by an attachment to any of the sub-divisions. As previously noted, research perspectives that are linked with nation-centred standpoints may have seemed to be deeply flawed in Elias's view. It may well be that Elias believed that state-centric strategies that limit international cooperation to the protection of core interests but stop short of entertaining forms of collaboration that require a major shift in the balance of power between national and cosmopolitan attachments are bound to fail. Perhaps the claim that Elias's sociology was implicitly geared towards producing knowledge that would 'help groups to achieve greater "mutual identification"' should be understood in that light (Kilminster 2011: 96). Even so, the question that is raised here and which requires more discussion is whether similarities between Marx's ideal of a world in which people make more of their history under conditions they have freely chosen and Elias's conception of greater control over hitherto unplanned intra- and inter-societal processes should not be overlooked in the quest to emphasise the evident differences (which include Marx's failure to understand the social dynamics and constraints that frustrated the realisation of the ideal of human emancipation).

Process sociology and flawed interventions

Elias clearly believed that highly involved sociologies could ignore unpalatable realities and lend support to flawed strategies whereas detached inquiry could lead to greater reality-congruence and to better prospects of effective interventions (Kilminster 2007: 59). With the requisite breakthroughs in understanding social processes, sociologists could shift to 'secondary involvement' and engage directly with assorted social and political problems. As Dunning and Hughes (2013: 13) have argued, the acquisition of more reality-congruent knowledge could allow social scientists to 'intervene in the social world' with a reduced danger of unleashing 'unintended consequences' that compounded rather than alleviated human difficulties. The related contention is that Elias and those who are inspired by his writings share with critical sociologists the desire to 'make a difference' in the social world and, more specifically, to transform social relations that are 'shown to embody constraints greater than are necessary, or are inherently exploitative, dehumanising, or in other ways unsatisfactory' (Dunning and Hughes 2013: 13). The language clearly links process sociology with an image of an emancipatory politics where emancipation does not refer to the realisation of a specific image of the good society or good life but to a more limited image of advances in which humans are freed from the shackles of specific restraints (as originally captured by the Latin term, *emancipare*, which, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, denoted release from paternal power and constraints). That conception of emancipation which highlights process rather than idealised end states is in line with Elias's support for human rights, emphasis on identifying restraints that reflect power inequalities rather than social necessities, and central thesis that the purpose of sociology is to increase the fund of knowledge that can enable people to reduce levels of subjection to unplanned processes.

Another feature of the recent literature is the call for more involved inquiries of that kind or for what has been described as 'detached involvement' (Lever and Powell 2017). In those writings, there is an element of mild frustration that processual analyses of public policies have been 'largely unrecognised' and deserve more 'open minded engagement' (Lever and Powell 2017). Perhaps there are signs of new departures in process sociology that are the inevitable consequence of generational change – of the reality that 'a younger generation of figurational sociologists, and other social scientists making use of Elias's insights, are already

moving beyond the position adopted by an earlier generation of figurational scholars' (Powell and Lever 2017). Not that Elias held back from reflecting on questions of practice in domestic and international politics. In an unpublished paper on European–American relations, Elias (1982a: 3c) discussed different global futures including the development of a world state before contending that a 'multipolar balance of power' figuration was 'imperative'. It is important to acknowledge that, for whatever reason, Elias did not make the case for human rights in that discussion of global order. But in a parallel discussion he observed that there may come a time when killing in war is regarded as a 'criminal offense' (Elias 1982b: 35). Elias (1982b: 35) posed the question of whether killing in war should not be regarded as murder, adding that it was necessary for 'civilised' peoples to consider alternatives to punishment by long-term imprisonment and to 'find better ways of calling offenders to task'. The apparent implication that sociological inquiry should analyse non-standard punitive methods might be regarded as lending support to the position of 'detached involvement'.

Elias's reasons for caution with respect to secondary involvement have been noted. Too little was known, he maintained, about the social world or about the concepts that can deepen the understanding of processes that have escaped human control – so little, that secondary involvement appeared to be seriously premature. The risk of flawed or failed interventions was considerable. Simply put, changing the balance of power between effective and ineffective or harmful interventions would require a potentially long process of social learning. Questions arise, however, about how social scientists could decide when the level of reality-congruence had reached the point where secondary involvement was possible and desirable. Related matters include the questions of what secondary involvement should seek to achieve and how social scientists should distinguish between worthy and unworthy interventions. Elias seemed to believe that such issues could be deferred. Diagnosis had to come before prognosis. Understanding social processes required high levels of self-restraint on the part of sociological analysts and strict controls on secondary involvement. But the analysis of flawed interventions might be regarded as central to the processes of social learning in which people become better informed about how to intervene to promote social change and gain greater clarity about what they can reasonably hope to achieve given increased knowledge of human figurations.

Lever and Powell (2017) and the supporting literature contend that it is far from premature to engage with a range of public policies. The method of inquiry raises important questions about the 'we-image' of process sociologists and about external perceptions of the perspective (which will be discussed in the conclusion to this paper). Lever and Powell analyse what they have described as the 'negative effects of state/elite policies'. [7][#N7] In so doing they argue that such research is not driven by a preordained and utopian prescription of what *ought* to be, but rather by historically informed, empirical investigations that expose the negative impact of social and public policy on the human condition (Elias 2010[a]). These impacts usually impinge on the *least powerful* groups within society, as it is they who invariably bear the brunt of the 'unintended consequences' of such policies (Lever and Powell 2017, unpaginated, emphases in original).The light falls on public policies that have had adverse consequences for outsiders in Eliasian terminology and that reflect the widening emotional gulf between dominant and subordinate groups (or increasing 'disidentification'). In the literature advancing that perspective, analysts have explored the negative effects of neo-liberal strategies on migrant labour (Lever and Milburne 2017) in addition to 'civilising offensives' to combat 'anti-social behaviour' (Powell and Flint 2009) or to deal with urban riots (Flint and Powell 2012). Other objects of analysis include urban regeneration strategies and the relationship between neo-liberal governance and urban poverty (Lever 2011). The focus on contemporary policy developments does not involve what Elias (2009: 107–26) lamented as the 'retreat of sociologists into the present'. The argument is that long-term perspectives are essential for understanding the relationship between current attitudes and earlier orientations to outsider groups and also for establishing what is unique or especially distinctive about the contemporary period (Lever and Powell 2017).

As constructed, secondary involvement, or what Lever and Powell (2017) call 'detached involvement', promotes one of the central aims of sociology according to Elias (2012a: 46–65), namely engagement in the destruction of social myths. The critical investigation of influential mythologies that have shaped policies that have negative consequences for outsiders advances that commitment. As Lever and Powell (2017) argue, the approach 'combines empirical research with a figurational theoretical model' that aims to provide more realistic knowledge about the interdependencies between people including the role of myths in shaping influential strategies. The analysis of social and public policy in the present era has sought to underscore 'the potential of Elias's theoretical work in contributing to "questions of the political" by exposing the gulf between how things actually are and how they are assumed to be by economists, politicians, policy-makers and other elites' (Lever and Powell 2017). The investigation invited the comment that that secondary involvement can take many different forms ranging from the critique of existing policies and practices to the more ambitious exercise of recommending alternative new courses of action.

Perhaps the former approach is more in keeping with the spirit and letter of Elias's inquiry. Here it is worth recalling the earlier question of how sociologists can decide whether they have reached the point where a transition to secondary involvement is valid. The literature under discussion draws attention to one specific feature of the processual dimensions of such deliberations: namely, the detached analysis of interventions that fail specific groups and the examination of the plight of disadvantaged groups that is wholly consistent with Elias's remark about taking the side of 'the less powerful, the oppressed, the outsider and the exploited'. Through such investigations, which can be extended to include global policies or 'civilising offensives' promoted by international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, process sociology can contribute to the project of human emancipation that has been traditionally associated with Marxian-influenced, Frankfurt School critical social inquiry. [8][#N8] But it is clear that somewhat vague and grandiose aspirations about large-scale social and political reconstruction are mellowed by core features of process sociology. They include, first, the emphasis on limited achievements in understanding the social world; second, the inter-related concern about the danger of premature interventions given that reality; third, the belief that projects that concentrate on local or intra-societal figurations are insufficient in the context of higher levels of global interconnections; and, finally, considerable scepticism about the feasibility of grand emancipatory visions (as promoted by Marx and Marxism) given the current state of knowledge about rapidly-changing human interdependencies (see Kilminster 2011: 107 on the 'sociologically infeasible'). But as Elias (2008a: 58–9) argued, while it is necessary to eschew commitments to the 'good life' with its connotations of an 'absolute and final state' and about which 'one can argue interminably', analysts can speak of a 'better life' that refers to comparisons with an 'earlier phase'. Elias gave the example of the advances that arise when people no longer have to carry water from a distant well, but have it piped directly to their dwellings. It is not hard to think of other examples including advances in the protection of human rights that follow from Elias's secular humanism.

Conclusion

In critical-theoretical circles, broadly defined, some of the indifference to, or suspicion of, process sociology may be intertwined with the supposition that it is divorced from the radical critique of society and, in some cases, from an emancipatory project. The lack of an explicit commitment to normatively driven inquiry shapes perceptions that the author of any particular work of process sociology is not 'one of us' or on 'our side' (Kilminster 2011: 101; see also Brincat 2013; Dunne 2009).

The problems run deeper, however. The more robust critics of process sociology (specifically, of its use in the field of International Relations) regard the perspective as not just failing to take their side but as standing

against their image of radical scholarship. Postcolonial critics, for example, have reacted strongly against the supposedly Eurocentric bias of Elias's explanation of the 'civilising process'. It is accused of perpetuating the myth that European civilisation developed in isolation from the rest of the world, free from non-European influences (see Hobson 2017 for further discussion). The analysis of 'civilisation' is regarded as reflecting the traditional standpoint of the global establishment and as denying that non-European peoples had any significant impact on European patterns of social and political development. From that standpoint, process sociology is presumed to side implicitly with established groups in the contemporary struggle to create post-colonial narratives that describe the influence of Europe's outsiders on the formation of the modern world. Elias emphasised that colonisation and the civilising process were inextricably linked. However, the absence of a detailed analysis of colonialism (see Van Krieken 1999) has shaped negative impressions of process sociology in post-colonial circles. Suspicions about its political leanings are likely to endure as long as that oversight continues.

As discussed elsewhere, those critical interpretations of process sociology reflect changing power relations between established and outsider groups; they are part of struggles to challenge and overturn asymmetries of power which process sociology is well placed to explain (Linklater 2017). It is possible to advertise the credentials of the approach in that way. But changing external perceptions of process sociology and removing of some of the barriers to engaging with its core literature may not proceed far unless the humanism of the approach is brought to the attention of other scholarly groups. The 'intense human commitment' in Elias's writings may not be obvious to those who encounter those works for the first time. Stressing that dimension of Elias's thought is important as is highlighting the parallels between the image of the sociologist as 'the destroyer of myths' and the critical-theoretical analysis of ideologically-distorted ways of thinking. Common ground is the interest in criticising orientations to the world that blind people to basic realities about themselves and their social interdependencies and intensify subjection to unplanned processes. Recent analyses of public policy are important in this context since they stress the role of myth or ideology in social interventions that fail outsider groups. They are also important by virtue of making the case for 'involved-detachment' – for combining the humanist dimensions of process sociology with detached inquiry and explaining that detachment does not stand against, but is a critical part of, the sociological enterprise with humanist commitments. They take 'the side of the less powerful, the oppressed, the outsider and the exploited' but they do so in a distinctive way which, for the most part, is not understood outside process-sociological circles.

A concluding comment is that Elias (2008b: 268) argued that the central purpose of sociology was to increase the fund of knowledge that has 'humanity as its horizon'. The idea of humanity can be understood in two ways – first, as referring to the empirical reality of global interdependencies and the accompanying political challenges and, second, as the development of closer emotional identification between human groups or the growth of sympathy and compassion that can facilitate advances in developing new levels of global cooperation. Elias's writings combine the two themes in a unique marriage of involvement and detachment which has immense significance for critical explorations of the unprecedented global interdependencies of the current era. Elias's sociological project might well be regarded as transposing the critical project of human emancipation – as defining subjection to unplanned processes as a sociological problem – but not as eliminating moral claims that demonstrate the influence of the radical Enlightenment. Those ethical commitments are part of the rationale for sociological inquiry that does not regard detachment as an end in itself but as a means of contributing to an emancipatory project with cosmopolitan dimensions.

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Notes

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the April 2018 conference on the 'Sociology of Sociology in Long-Term Perspective', which was held at the University of Leeds to celebrate the work of Richard Kilminster. I am grateful to the participants for their feedback and to Stephen Mennell for comments on a draft of this paper. [#N1-ptr1]

2. A curious paradox is that in an interview in the late 1960s, Adorno defended a position on social inquiry that is more usually associated with Elias's position on detachment. 'In my writings', he stated, 'I have never offered a model for any kind of action or for some specific campaign', and added that 'theory is much more capable of having practical consequences owing to the strength of its own objectivity than if it had subjected itself to practice from the start' (Adorno 2002: 15). [#N2-ptr1]

3. I raised the question of certain parallels between Elias's standpoint, Marx's ideal of a future in which people make more of their history under conditions of their own choosing, and Frankfurt School critical theory in a brief note in the *Figurations* newsletter (Linklater 2007). The note was prompted by Eric Dunning's contribution to a discussion on primary involvement and secondary involvement that followed a panel at the 2006 University of Leicester conference on 'Elias in the Twenty-First Century'. Eric Dunning emphasised that Elias's humanism was linked with the conviction that detached sociological inquiry would facilitate 'practical engagement'. [#N3-ptr1]

4. The following comments grew out of conversations with André Saramago at the 9th International Conference on Social Science Methodology that was held at the University of Leicester in September 2016. [#N4-ptr1]

5. Once again I acknowledge the importance of conversations with André Saramago for the development of this theme. [#N5-ptr1]

6. I am grateful to Cas Wouters for this point. [#N6-ptr1]

7. This is the language in the abstract of the paper that Powell and Lever gave at the Leeds conference in honour of Richard Kilminster in April 2018. [#N7-ptr1]

8. That line of investigation can be combined with analyses of the specific social and political conditions in which seemingly effective interventions occurred and with reflections on their significance for longer-term patterns of social learning, an observation stimulated by a comment by the International Relations theorist, Chris Brown, in a roundtable at the 44th British International Studies Association Annual Conference held at the Royal Society in London on 12–14 June 2019. [#N8-ptr1]