



Identity, Identification, Habitus: A Process Sociology Approach

Florence Delmotte

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Abstract

Identity is a polysemic, politically saturated, and even polemical notion. Sometimes considered a formidable problem when it is associated with fundamentalism and extreme nationalism, identity is seen at other times as a precious asset, a project to be built or a treasure to be regained, for example when it is a question of a European identity. However, the term identity remains difficult to replace. The many phenomena it evokes are nothing less than existential, for individuals and groups, in that they refer to the questions “Who am I?”, “Who are we?” and “Who are they?” as Charles Tilly pointed out. By focusing more on processes of identification than on given identities, historical sociology reveals the relational and changing character of these phenomena and avoids the trap of essentialism.

F. Delmotte (✉)

Fund for Scientific Research (FNRS) / Université Saint-Louis – Bruxelles, Bruxelles, Belgium

e-mail: florence.delmotte@usaintlouis.be

But it also avoids the pitfalls of constructivism, of seeing identities everywhere or nowhere. In particular, Norbert Elias' sociology of figurations and processes considers the long-term transformations of political and psychic structures. Reconciling macro- and microsociological perspectives, this approach focuses on interdependent relationships and power differences between social groups as well as on the place of affects, notably when political identities are at stake. Eliasian-inspired historical sociology thus makes it possible to question the feelings of belonging and the process of identification with a postnational Europe. In the end, process sociology allows for a better understanding of the resistance that the tenacity of "national habitus" continues to put up against it on the part of the citizens of the European Union Member States.

Keywords

Individual and collective identity · Identification processes · Norbert Elias · Habitus · European identity · Belonging · Emotions · Nationalism

The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (Marx 1852, 5)

Part of the self-love of individuals, it seems, can attach itself to one of the groups with which they identify themselves, most of all to nations and other types of survival groups. (Elias 2007, 7–8)

Introduction

In the spring of 2020, at the beginning of the so-called containment period imposed by the "Covid 19" pandemic, in most European cities flags burgeoned on facades, on the balconies of buildings: national flags in the majority, but also regional, local, more rarely European, sometimes flags of different colors, and of different sizes, side by side. All these flags were often handmade. Some were accompanied by messages. Most were messages of unity in the face of adversity, of solidarity with the countries most affected by the epidemic, or of support for care staff in hospitals and retirement homes, and for other frontline jobs such as garbage collectors, delivery drivers, postmen and cashiers. Some of the banners were less politically committed than others, here denouncing capitalism and the destruction of the environment, and there, the budget cuts inflicted on the health care systems over the past decades. But all were evocative of different dimensions of politics.

Is it not strange to display (most often national) flags in the face of global fear and disease? Not so much. These flags, and some of the messages and symbols raised by the crisis, however discreet they may have been – nothing comparable to the outpouring that can be seen during certain sporting competitions, particularly the football World Cup – remind us of the strength of social attachments and affiliations.

They have, in other words, an identity dimension. They say something about those who hold them, about the way they define themselves, both individually and collectively, in the home and in the public space of the street, as belonging to one or more political entities, identifying with one or more groups. These flags and banners are a reminder that this dimension of identity is everywhere, even where it is not necessarily expected. It is present, in the background, or on a few facades, making visible for a few months this “banal nationalism,” the one that, by definition, we do not notice most of the time (Billig 1995).

In what follows, we will first turn to the reticence that one may have about the use of the term “identity.” This notion invites caution in all cases. Its ambiguities justify for some authors renouncing it. For others, the term identity remains unavoidable. It designates, with rare evocative power, a bundle of phenomena that are, so to speak, consubstantial with social experience. The approaches of historical sociology, beyond their plurality (Bucholtz and Mennell 2022; Déloye 2003), share the same aversion to reifying nouns. Logically, therefore, they will favor the study of *identification processes*, from a perspective that is interested both in the transformations of social life and in the “dead hand of the past” that weighs on this moving reality. This is the idea, so clearly expressed by Marx, that “[m]en make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past” (Marx 1852, 5).

The figurational or process sociology of Norbert Elias, which we will focus on in the second part, is particularly good at understanding and explaining the processes of identification of individuals and groups in the long run – about what, and how one comes to say “I” and “we.” In a major work, first published in 1939, Elias (2012a) clearly showed that the development of the mental or psychic structures of individuals and the development of the social and political entities that these connected individuals form together are linked. These developmental processes are not necessarily synchronous and harmonious, but rather interconnected and interacting. This is fundamental to understanding how individuals sharing a certain “habitus,” a social knowledge that is shared and incorporated to the point of becoming unconscious, more or less consciously perceive themselves as belonging to groups that are more or less important to them, with which they “identify,” and which therefore constitute part of their individual and collective “identity.”

This historical sociology also makes it possible to understand that the meaning of these identifications and the importance of these groups – not only families, villages, clans, tribes, or nation-states, but also professions, generations, or genders – are not always or everywhere the same. According to Elias, however, we will see that there are major trends that can be observed over the long term, namely a growing trend toward individualization, which goes hand in hand not only with the expansion of the so-called “survival units,” but also with the expansion of the circle of “mutual identification” between human beings as human beings. Driven by the powerful movement of interdependence of all kinds (economic, geopolitical, ecological, etc.) that has led to what is commonly known as “globalization,” these trends simultaneously tolerate particularities and generate tensions, blockages, and backtracking.

The question of European identity – and identification with Europe – is therefore, through the question of the sense of belonging, a fine field of investigation for an Eliasian analysis. One could even say that the two enlighten each other. At the end of his life, Elias (2010 [1987]) was indeed interested in the question of obstacles to postnational political integration, which continue to preoccupy researchers in European studies and political theory. In the third and last part of this chapter, we will see that his reflections have lost none of their relevance. They resonate, less unexpectedly than it seems, with a Kantian-inspired philosophical reflection on European identity and citizenship (Ferry 1992; Habermas 2001). Above all, Elias' analyses may prove to be a valuable tool to accompany the sociological turn of European studies (Favell and Guiraudon 2009; Majastre and Mercenier 2016) and guide qualitative approaches toward paths that remain underexplored.

From Identity to Identification

Stories and identities intersect when people start deploying shared answers to the questions “Who are you?”, “Who are we?” and “Who are they?” (Tilly 2003, 608)

In this first part, we return to the problematic and inescapable character of the notion of identity and the controversies linked to its use by the social sciences. First, we look back at its history and the history of its success, and second, at the criticisms that have been addressed to it.

Grandeur and Misery of a Concept

As Brubaker and Cooper (2000) conceded in an important article for our topic, “identity” is first and foremost one of the terms that has always been used “to address the perennial philosophical problems of permanence amidst manifest change, and of unity amidst manifest diversity” (Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 3). Identity is what remains while everything is changing, what unifies and “makes identical” diverse elements, which otherwise tend to disperse. Like the notion of “person” – a founding concept for political theory, which designates both what is unique and the character of what is common, what is deep, authentic, and hidden (the personality), and what is visible, apparent, and shown (the mask, the face) – “identity” refers at the same time to what makes things unique and what amalgamates (Martin 1994). This tension, between the shared and the singular, and of permanence in change, this contradiction almost, is even constitutive of the notion (Déloye 2010). Identity is, in other words, “*ce qui fait que deux ou plusieurs choses ne sont qu’une même*” [what makes two or more things one and the same], says the dictionary of the French Academy in 1694. It is therefore understandable that the encyclopedists did not predict any spectacular posterity or popularity for the notion.

In fact, while the problem of permanence and change was raised in antiquity by Parmenides and Heraclitus, the success of the concept and the multiplication of its

uses are recent (Martin 2010). Its uses come first, logically, from the scholarly world. After philosophy many centuries earlier, it is toward psychoanalysis and psychology that we must look. In a landmark work, Erikson (1968) drew on Freud's work on the role of identifications, and the idea that the relations between the person and society are constitutive of the self. On this basis, Erikson defines identity "as consciousness and as a process: both the feeling that the individual has of himself and the affiliation of the individual to social groups" (Martin 1994, 15). Identity appears there in a relational situation and concerns first of all a crisis situation: that of adolescence. It cannot be conceived as a permanent situation. Both isolation and immobility are banished. In history (Braudel), in anthropology (Lévi-Strauss, Mauss), and of course in sociology (Simmel, Mead), we find the idea that the formation of the "I" – or the "we" – cannot take place if there is no "other." In the philosopher Paul Ricœur (1990), identity is transformed in the course of narratives, where "Oneself" is considered "as Another."

While Erikson gives the term identity its conceptual dimension, the notion has other channels of dissemination. On the one hand, it is associated with "ethnicity." On the other hand, in his theory of reference groups, Merton (1957 [1949]) had already stated that identification with ensembles is one of the important mechanisms for building the identity of individuals and collectives. Soon after, social constructionism (Berger and Luckmann 1967) and symbolic interactionism (Goffman 1959) appropriated the notion, insisting on the importance of the way individuals present and represent themselves. The substitution of "identity" for "self" in Erving Goffman's (1963) study of stigma clearly marks a turning point in the history of the notion. In the social sciences, its uses have multiplied to the point where identity has become an inescapable part of "pop sociology" (Gleason 1983).

It is true that it had a remarkable resonance in the 1960s. "Identity" seemed able to apprehend the mass society, the generational revolt at the end of the decade, the Black Panther movement, and other groups in their wake in the struggle for black American civil rights. Brubaker and Cooper (2000) point out that its formidable spread has been facilitated by the weakness, in the United States, of a social and political analysis in terms of class, which leaves room for the proliferation of identity claims and the transposition of the problem of individual identity to the group level. As decried and attacked as the notion subsequently became, its success continued unabated, rapidly transcending borders and disciplines. In the 1970s, the word was already "driven out of its wits by over-use" (Mackenzie 1978, 11; Brubaker and Cooper 2000, 3) and in their turn gender studies, writings on sexuality, race, religion, or nationalism, were invaded by identities, to the point of saturation. Fuzzy, versatile, in its social uses, identity is both practical – in every sense of the word, a conceptual Swiss army knife according to Brubaker and Cooper – but soon also, and for this very reason, highly problematic.

In fact, we can point to several types of problems that are difficult to untangle and which, according to many authors, call into question the use of the concept of identity by the social sciences. First of all, its use is said to have been increasingly guided by political perspectives, whether militant or even insurrectionary, whether institutional or even conservative. It is difficult to speak of "identity" without

legitimizing – or condemning – what we are talking about, depending on whether we are talking about a valued belonging or a sectarianism to be defeated. Second, the problem with the notion of identity in many analyses, which indiscriminately consider it as explanatory, analytical, or even descriptive (Surdez et al. 2009), is the indecision of its status. As in the case of other ambivalent and problematic concepts, such as nation, ethnicity, or race, the use of identity always runs the risk of promoting a reifying reading of collective membership, of helping to validate the existence of the groups, communities, or categories to be studied, or even of endowing them with an “essence,” with “immutable” characteristics. In other words, the invocation of identity loses its character as an object of analysis and runs the risk of replacing the analysis itself, bringing with it its share of commonplaces, judgments, prejudices, or ideological preferences.

Beyond Constructivism

All these difficulties easily explain why approaches claiming to be constructivist and rejecting essentialism have subsequently prevailed in the social sciences, at least in the intention of many writers in the humanities. In such work, collective identity is seen as the product of social activities, which do not exist *a priori*. However, some of these approaches err on the side of relativism, and there is a risk of “dissolving” identities, of no longer seeing them anywhere, or of seeing them everywhere. Constructivist approaches thus struggle to account for the strength of the essentialist claims of contemporary identity politics. Another position is concerned about the risk of reducing identities to pure illusions (Surdez et al. 2009). Brubaker and Cooper (2000) propose getting rid of the term in order to distance themselves from its political and essentialist uses. They propose, in other words, to replace the word without abandoning the study of what it concerns: belonging, sense of community, self-understanding, and self-identification – in other words, a bundle of phenomena that are both distinct and often intertwined, and that sociological analysis could not grasp from a single term. Other authors would rather advocate retaining its use “conditionally,” particularly within cultural studies (Hall 1996), but sometimes acknowledging that the word, inseparable from a certain idea of permanence, seems ill-suited to processual analysis (Melucci 1995).

In a nutshell, identity is a “vast and polysemous concept,” “used in extremely varied and contradictory terms, mixed up with essentialist and constructivist understandings” (Duchesne 2008, 7). For Charles Tilly (2003), however, one should not throw the baby out with the bath water. It is clear that individuals are constantly confronted with the need to produce socially relevant responses to the question of their own definition in relation to the groups to which they belong (Surdez et al. 2009). In his response to Brubaker and Cooper, who proposed to “expunge ‘identity’ from our analytic lexicon,” Tilly proposes instead “that we get identity right” (Tilly 2003, 608). He writes on this subject:

We can escape the search for inner selves about which Brubaker and Cooper rightly complain by recognizing that people regularly negotiate and deploy socially based answers to the questions ‘Who are you?’, ‘Who are we?’ and ‘Who are they?’ Those are identity questions. Their answers are identities – always assertions, always contingent, always negotiable, but also always consequential. Identities are social arrangements.

He adds: “To be more precise, identities have four components:

1. a boundary separating me from you or us from them;
2. a set of relations within the boundary;
3. a set of relations across the boundary;
4. a set of stories about the boundary and the relations.”

To support his argument, Tilly takes the eloquent example of the politics of Henry VIII, his imposition of a boundary between Anglicans and Catholics in England in 1536, and its impact, first on the politicization of the religious identities of the parishioners of Morebath (Devon), and then in the longer term (Tilly 2003, 609 ff.).

Several elements are important in this passage, which well illustrates some major characteristics of a historical sociology of politics (Déloye 2003). First of all, the question of the definition of oneself, of us, and of others is unavoidable and reveals a relational point of view on the social world. Individuals and groups are not defined by their intrinsic characteristics but through the relationships (of interdependence and power, first and foremost) that structure the social world. This vision of things makes it possible to escape from the alternative already mentioned between the reification of categories and criteria of belonging, and their reduction to linguistic fictions, to illusions. Tilly demonstrates that we can be interested both in the construction of identities – in their constructed character – and in their impact, their effects. This also makes it possible to take into account the multiple dimensions of identity, or “identification.” A historical sociology or social history approach (Noiriel 2007) would indeed tend to use the term “identification,” in order to avoid the often ideological or partisan debate on the substantial dimension of identity, and to focus on “the study of the complex processes of identity construction and projection” (Déloye 2010, 404).

If identification is first understood as “a process which accounts for the way individuals develop the feelings of belonging to a group” (Duchesne 2008), for historical sociology this dimension (identifying oneself) is intimately linked to a process of identification and categorization of other groups (identifying). Here lies another “constitutive tension” of identity phenomena or processes, this time corresponding to the interaction between the objective and subjective dimensions of identifications, in a Weberian reading (Déloye 2010). Max Weber (1978 [1921]) actually distinguishes between “socialization,” defined by its “objectivity,” on the one hand, and “communalization,” which is distinguished by its “subjective” dimension, on the other hand. According to him, it is the sense of belonging to the community that defines and produces the community, not the sharing of supposedly objective characteristics such as language, religion, blood, or custom. And it is, again according to Weber, the relationship to other communities that reveals the

community to itself and makes it define the elements that will be held common to its members and by its members, and distinctive from other communities. Language, religion, blood, and custom are therefore not in themselves. Simmel, for his part, emphasizes the importance of opposition to the other and conflict in the making of borders, which he says are “always psychological” (Simmel 2009 [1908]).

Thus self-identification (of “me,” of “us”) is intimately correlated, in the relational perspective of the historical sociology that interests us, with the identification of others (of “you,” of “them”). This self-identification may contain a more or less conscious dimension, and it may be articulated in a discursive way, in a narrative, but this is not necessarily the case. We will see this with Elias through the notion of habitus. For his part, Michael Billig (1995) has clearly shown that the strength of “banal nationalism” lies in its diffuse, tacit, involuntary, and very often unconscious character.

Processes of identification – identification of others, of other groups, and identification of oneself by others, of one’s own group, or of one’s groups by other groups – are the other side of the same identity coin. Historical sociology allows us to consider that these processes are not only relational but also categorical (Calhoun 1997). Identification processes do not only refer to the existence of networks of relationships, more or less concrete or abstract, close or distant, in relation to which individuals and groups define themselves. They also refer to “categories,” that is, groups of individuals who share categorical attributes, or considered as such in a given context – race, gender, nationality, language, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and so on. These attributes are defined in a power relationship between those who are in a position to produce these categories and those on whom the former want to impose them (Bourdieu 1984), with varying degrees of success. In this respect, the modern state, as studied in line with the work of Max Weber, Pierre Bourdieu, and Michel Foucault, has clearly been one of the most important agents of identification and categorization. Bourdieu points out that it claimed not only a monopoly on legitimate physical violence, but also a monopoly on symbolic power. It is not, according this time to Foucault (2007), that the state “creates” identities. Indeed, state is incapable of doing so, a point to which we shall return in discussing Elias. Rather, it has ended up, long enough, with incomparable material and symbolic resources to impose its classifications as well as its modes of accounting. Gérard Noiriel (1991) speaks in this respect of a real “revolution in identification.”

To sum up, one may have the impression that “identity” refers above all to an emotionally charged form of “self-understanding,” both to a vague feeling and to a narrative of belonging. The problem then is that the use of the notion evades the question of what constructs this feeling or narrative – the processes, necessarily relational, and the power relations from which they emerge. This is why a relational and processual approach involves a preference for, in a word, the idea of “identification.” This notion, however, does not necessarily temper the “conscious” and “articulated” dimension of the sense and narrative of identity but tends on the contrary to accentuate it. This is why Eliasian-inspired historical sociology definitely prefers the notion of habitus (Mennell 1994, 177), attentive both to the sedimentation

and transformation of affiliations and identity markers over time, and to their inscription in bodies as well as in hearts and minds.

The Eliasian Approach

The remarkable propensity of people for projecting part of their individual self-love into specific social units, to which they are linked by strong feelings of identity and of belonging, is one of the roots of the dangers which human groups constitute for each other. (Elias 2007, 8)

Generally speaking, the so-called “historical” sociology of Elias – who actually thought that there was no other, that all sociology had to be “historical” – is marked by two fundamental convictions, from which its ambitions derive. First, the individual and society are not two separate and distinct entities. Rather, what affects what we call “the individual” also affects the society in which they live, or to which they are said to “belong.” Conversely, what affects society also affects the individuals who are said to “compose” it. Second, everything that concerns sociology, the way in which human beings live together, is of a “processual” nature. What is observed now, what was observed yesterday, and what will be observed tomorrow are necessarily connected in one way or another, and the whole thing is necessarily linked to what happened the day before yesterday and what will happen the day after tomorrow. These two characteristics allow Elias’ sociology of figurations and processes, on the one hand, to overcome the micro–macro dilemma, by showing that it is totally abstract (Calhoun 1994, 4), and, on the other hand, to reject “the retreat of the sociologists into the present” (Elias 2009a [1987]), without returning to the historical determinism of nineteenth-century social theories.

On this basis, Elias’ sociology provides a very compelling approach to identity phenomena. It avoids many of the pitfalls typical of identity studies while proving to be compatible and complementary with their advances, particularly on issues related to nationalism, along the lines of Anderson (1983) and Hobsbawm (1990). In what follows, we present the characteristics of Elias’ approach that make it original and give it added value for thinking about identity, the processes of identification, and the formation of identities, and that explain a rich and increasing posterity (Mennell 2007; Kuzmics et al. 2020). Elias’ strong and inspiring points include his conception of habitus, the theory of established–outsider relations, and the study of the “changes in the ‘we–I’ balance” in the long duration of the civilization process. Before we get to that, the point of view still needs to be situated and clarified.

Involvement and Detachment Facing Dangerous Emotions

In Elias’ writings, too, the term identity appears in the 1960s and expressions such as “we-identity,” “we-image,” “we-perspective,” and “they perspective” are frequently used together (Elias 2007, 8, editor’s note 1; Elias 2012b, 117–123). The general

idea is that the we-image is the collective equivalent of the self-image of an individual person. In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scotson (2008 [1965]) further demonstrated from their study of the dynamics between two urban communities in a small industrial town in the north of England that the we-image of the members of a group is inseparable from their they-image of the other group.

Twenty years later, Elias gave these issues a central and urgent character in the long English Introduction for the volume *Involvement and Detachment* (Elias 2007 [1987], 3–67). In the context of the Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States, this opens with the origins of intergroup warfare and violence. Elias writes that there is a “self-perpetuating propensity of long-lasting cycles of violence” (2007, 7), expressed in civil and ethnic wars, revolutions, and wars between states. Yet war, or the threat of war alone, is rooted in the relationships that human groups have with one another, in their attitudes toward one another, more precisely in the feelings they have for one another.

This dimension, the emotional origin of the dangers that human groups represent for each other, deserves even more attention as it is largely underestimated. Why is this? Because it refers to a narcissistic component of attachment to the group, commonly less valued, more likely to be criticized than its altruistic and disinterested component – the latter we have in mind, for example, when we talk about “patriotism.” Why is this narcissistic component of attachment to the group poorly regarded, nearly taboo? Because this self-love, this valuing of ourselves, often goes hand in hand with feeling bigger, better, and stronger than “others” (Elias 2007, 8). In other words, it refers to a frequent and difficult to assume confusion between power (a higher power ratio) and human value, the same confusion which explains both the propensity of human groups to dominate, and the potentially devastating effects of decline. If the weakening, fall, or defeat of the group can be nothing less than synonymous with death and a sense of destruction, both individually and collectively, this is so given the fantasy confusion between power and value and the strong emotional dimension of individuals’ identification with the group, especially when it is a “survival unit” (clan, tribe, village, or state, depending on the context).

On this subject, Elias (2007, 11) writes further: “The stronger the hold of involved forms of thinking, and thus of the inability to distance oneself from traditional attitudes, the stronger the danger inherent in the situation created by people’s attitudes towards each other and towards themselves.” This is, moreover, the key problem studied in the various texts brought together in *Involvement and Detachment*. Elias (2007, 11–12) there explains:

One difference between a more detached and a more involved approach [...] is a difference in the time perspective. [...] No doubt a long-term perspective demands a greater capacity for distancing oneself for a while from the situation of the moment. But it also opens the way towards greater detachment from the wishes and fears of the moment, and thus from time-bound fantasies. It increases the chance of a more fact-oriented diagnosis.

For Elias’ historical sociology, questions of identity, far from being merely fashionable or sporadic, are questions that affect the lives of human groups, literally

and figuratively – and fundamental, structural questions. They still largely escape understanding, including by researchers, who are also identified individuals and who identify with groups. It is therefore important to take a historical distance. This is all the more necessary because, if these questions of identity and identification are eternal, at the same time they are not: These processes do not escape history; they *are* history. The structure of their development has to be brought to light. We shall come back to this after having presented the notion of habitus.

Habitus and “the Filo Pastry of Identity” (Mennell 1994)

In 1994, in another important text for our topic, Stephen Mennell recalls the classical division of the theories on identity formation into two bodies. On the one hand, there are those interested in self-identity and how the self is constructed, in line with the work of George Herbert Mead (2015 [1934]), which was extended into psychoanalytic theory. On the other hand, there are studies that look at how certain categories of people (men, women, whites, blacks, gays, this or that social class, etc.) come to share a collective identity. Mennell emphasizes the obvious nature of this partition, but also its strangeness. For as far back as we can go, humans have never been solitary animals: “their self-images and we-images have always – since the acquisition of the uniquely human capacity for self-reflection – been formed over time within groups of interdependent people, groups that have steadily increased in size” (Mennell 1994, 176). Mennell (1994, 177) also recalls the powerful formula (and dated sexist phraseology) of Kluckhohn and Murray (1948), according to which “every man is in certain respect (a) like all other men, (b) like some other men, (c) like no other man.” According to Mennell, the term habitus popularized by Pierre Bourdieu (1984) concerns the second level, focusing on “the characteristics which all human beings share in common with *certain* other human beings in the particular groups to which they belong.”

In Elias, habitus appears in the preface, written in 1936, to the first edition of *On the Process of Civilisation* (Elias 2012a, 4–7). Its first merit is not to cut off reflection on the individual from reflection on the collective: “the social habitus of individual forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society” (Elias cited in Mennell 1994, 179). Through habitus, the processes of individualization and socialization are inextricably linked.

Compared to identity, the notion of habitus refers more directly to the idea of a “second nature” (Elias 2013a) that was already found in Max Weber and others. Thus, habitus has the already mentioned advantage over identity of being more encompassing. It does not imply conscious awareness of belonging to a group and of distinguishing oneself from other groups (Mennell 1994, 177). People may share the same habitus without paying much attention to it, without having thought about its characteristics or the feelings it inspires, or having expressed them discursively, shaped into a narrative. The habitus is, in other words, social knowledge that is shared and embodied in the strong sense, including the literal sense. Before Elias, we

find a magnificent illustration of this in an anecdote reported by the anthropologist Marcel Mauss (1935, cited in Déloye 2010). Mauss draws it from his experience of the First World War, which he has in common with Elias:

The Worcester Regiment, having achieved considerable glory alongside French infantry in the Battle of the Aisne, requested royal permission to have French trumpets and drums, a band of French buglers and drummers. The result was not very encouraging. [...] The unfortunate regiment of tall Englishmen could not march. Their gait was completely at odds. When they tried to march in step, the music would be out of step. With the result that the Worcester Regiment was forced to give up its French buglers.

Another important feature of habitus and identification to which it refers is that they are always, especially in the modern world and in complex societies, multilayered: people “belong” to multiple groups, whether they are, so to speak, concentric or overlapping. The multiple layers of identity of people living in the same era may also date from different periods (Mennell 1994, 177). Even when the sense of national identity dominates, in the sense that it is strongest, emotionally, for the majority of people, and regarding its consequences, this level of identification is profoundly historical: It is over the centuries that “the fortunes of a nation become crystallized in institutions which are responsible for ensuring that the most different people of a society acquire the same characteristics, possess the same national habitus” (Elias 2013a, 23). However, even in this specific case of sedimentation over a very long period of time, the habitus does not imply anything fixed or static: “habitus changes over time precisely because the fortunes and experiences of a nation (or of its constituent groupings) continue to change and accumulate” (Dunning and Mennell 1996, ix).

At this stage, two questions are important for an approach to historical sociology. First question: What is it that makes identities and habitus transform, apart from simply the succession of generations of individuals who give them life? Second question: If the processes of identification have a direction, in what direction do we observe them evolving?

Interdependence and the Changing Balance of Power Between Established and Outsiders

As well as the terms “processes” and “figurations,” the idea of “interdependence(s),” singular or plural, marks Elias’ sociology and sums up its gesture. Interdependence (s) or interdependent relations might be defined by what they are not. They are not “interactions” in the sense that they do not link two (or more) independent individuals first existing by their own and who would “create” interactions in a second time (Lacassagne 2008, 273). For Elias, such individuals and “interactions” are purely fictitious. Human beings have always been linked from before birth to other human beings by various types of dependency – not only affective, but also economic, political, and cultural ones – which evolve over the course of individuals’ lives, and over generations and centuries.

Interdependencies between individuals and between groups are not necessarily “egalitarian” relationships. Most of the time, they are not. For Elias, however, the history of any society up to the present day is not (only) that of class struggles as Marx thought; societies are not ultimately divided between *the* group of those who dominate and *the* group of those who are dominated. What we call “power” is indeed “a structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships” (Elias 2012b, 70) although relationships can be more or less unequal.

Here we can see the very important character of established–outsider relations for a better understanding of identity issues. We remember that questions of identity took off in humanities literature at the time of a crucial episode in the struggle of black Americans for recognition of their civil rights in the 1960s. Starting from Elias’ historical sociology implies placing this process in the context of the long-term evolution of the power differential between whites and “people of colour.” It also invites us to consider more broadly the dynamics that affect the balance of power between different groups: men and women, rich and poor, gay and straight, colonizers and (de)colonized (Mennell 1994, 180). This means those around which the most difficult identity problems crystallize. In short, Elias’ sociology shows the fundamentally relational and processual nature of these problems. It is, for example, sociologically correct to say that women’s problems, and their transformations, are also those of men (Liston 2018, 363; Elias 2009b). And the problems of blacks are also those of whites, as America and the world, whites, are perhaps beginning to realize that they are. (On 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, a 46-year-old African-American man, George Floyd, died by suffocation when a white police officer knelt on his neck for eight minutes: another episode in the history of racism and police violence in American society. However, this caused protests on an unprecedented scale in the United States and around the world. Alongside black activists, a large number of white people and demonstrators of all origins marched chanting “Black lives matter,” the slogan of a movement born in 2013.)

It has already been pointed out that Elias is concerned with the remarkable propensity of people to link self-love with that of certain groups with which they identify *and* to confuse human value with superiority in the balance of power between groups. In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias and Scotson (2008) look at the relations between the inhabitants of two working-class neighborhoods that nothing a priori radically distinguishes, for example, in terms of income. The only notable difference is that one group is composed of inhabitants who have been “established” for two or three generations, the other of newer inhabitants. The authors show that the sociological seniority favorable to the first group, the “established,” is the basis of their privileged access to positions of power and their superiority in terms of symbolic prestige. This dominant position is reflected in their positive collective “we-image,” in the negative collective “they-image” they have of the newcomers, and in the negative “we-image” these “outsiders” have of themselves. The dominated have integrated and assimilated the unfavorable “we-image” corresponding to the image of “them” that the established are in a position to impose on them.

The greater the power differential on several levels, the more difficult it is for the oppressed to emerge from a dominated position, and to make their self-image evolve positively. However, “unchanging power ratios are very much the exception” (Mennell 1994, 182). When groups occupying a very unequal position in a power relationship become more interdependent, when dependence becomes more reciprocal, the result is a shift, more or less gradual or dramatic, toward a less unequal power differential. This is what happened in an accelerated way in the twentieth century and led to a relative and partial improvement in the fate of workers, women, and migrants. Elias relates this phenomenon to what he calls “functional democratization” (Elias 2012b, 62–64): “the increasing division of social functions and lengthening chains of interdependence lead to greater reciprocal dependency and thus to patterns of more multi-polar control within and among groups” (Mennell 1994, 183).

The process of translating this development into identities may be slow. In “Changes in the ‘we–I’ Balance” (2010 [1987]), Elias speaks of a “drag effect.” For him, this is a structural characteristic of the dynamic relationship between interdependencies and habitus: The latter are resistant to change and can take a long time to adapt. Let us take once again the example of race relations to illustrate how a change in the shift of power ratio is reflected in the construction of we-identities or we-images. As Mennell reminds us, the abolition of slavery in 1865 in the United States did not change much from this point of view. Black Americans long retained an inferior image of themselves, one that was imposed on them by white people during centuries of slavery (and afterward). The affirmation of Black Power and the Black is Beautiful movement are in fact a very belated development. And the process of asserting a “positive” identity is clearly not complete, nor is it fully accepted by nonblacks.

From Nationalism to Cosmopolitanism? Enlarging Identification and Changes in the “We–I” Balance

Another contemporary expression of this resistance of habitus and identities to change concerns the tenacity of national habitus. There is empirical evidence that, over the long term, human beings become more and more interdependent and tend to form ever larger “survival units” (Elias 2012a, 479). Enlarging social entities are also more complex, as the differentiation of social functions increases. Elias argues that the same is generally true of feelings of belonging and collective identities, of we-images: When we look back over the long history, we see that they tend to expand and multiply even if some of them come to predominate. Furthermore, the current difficulty of moving to forms of postnational political integration that would require broader and less affective forms of identification is striking.

Although it adopts an inclusive and historical perspective, the sociology of Elias remains, as is more or less all sociology in the twentieth century (Bourdieu 2012), centered on the state, and in his own way Elias assumes it. It is not that every society is necessarily state-centered, and the state scale is far from being the most relevant

for studying social phenomena. We cannot any more separate what happens within states from what happens between them. The point is rather that, for the Western civilizing process and the recent history of human societies, the “sociogenesis” and “psychogenesis” of the state are crucial phenomena (Elias 2012a, vol. 2). The state has consecrated a double movement – of interdependence and competition – that has pushed individuals and groups to live in peace within an enlarged territory under the monopoly of legitimate violence. In the process, the vast majority of individuals and groups have come to identify with, and become attached to, the state. But this took time, and in many cases, democratization played a very specific role in this process. Elias originally argues that in many European countries it is democratization that makes it possible to develop a “national we,” and not the other way around:

The emergence of the European states as we-units happened gradually and in stages. [...] The dictum ascribed to Louis XIV, *l'État, c'est moi*, ‘I am the state’, shows a specific fusion of ‘we’ and ‘I’ in relation to the dynasty and the incumbent of the throne, and only to them. [...] Only in conjunction with the parliamentary representation of all classes did all members of the state begin to perceive it more as a we-unit and less as a they-group. Only in the course of the two great wars of this century did the populations of more developed industrial states take on the character of nation states [...]. (Elias 2010, 185–186)

Regarding political and social democratization and access to rights (Marshall 1950), great things have been achieved within the framework of the state at certain times. As Elias acknowledges, “the self-esteem of nations and other survival groups need not be undeserved [...]. They may have achievements to their credit which are great benefit to humanity” (Elias 2007, 9). It is above all for this reason that subjects, having become citizens, became more attached to the state – and why they become less when they feel abandoned by the state. That said, collective self-praise is rarely synonymous with realism, and a well-orchestrated conflict is often very helpful in reestablishing the identity of the group.

Hence the remarkable resilience of national identity. The nation-state may have long been overtaken by the globalization of risk, the arms race, and rising ecological perils. Interdependencies may have reached the ultimate level and humanity may be the “true” survival unit: It is difficult for most people to attach themselves to entities beyond their state borders, and even more difficult to identify with humankind (Elias 2010, 195; 203). This level of integration seems too distant and too loose and very few people feel that belonging to humanity is a social bond. Even at a lower level, the continental integration of Europe has been facing “the tenacious resistance of emotive ideas which give the integration the character of ruins, a loss that one cannot cease mourning” (Elias 2010, 201). This is because, “in relation to their own group identity and, more widely, their own social habitus, people have no free choice. These cannot be simply changed like clothes” (Elias 2010, 200). However, Elias speaks of a “drag effect” (Elias 2010, 188–196; see also Ernst et al. 2017). If the habitus has changed, it can change again, and it is not “unrealistic to suppose that in the future terms like ‘European’ or ‘Latin American’ will take on a far stronger emotive content than they have at present” (Elias 2010, 202).

This view does not imply a belief in progress (Mennell 1994, 189). Retrogressive steps backward – identity-based retreats – are most probable, because the push for integration implies an increased concentration of power and generates tensions and new inequalities. Nor is this view particularly optimistic. Like Stinchcombe (1975, cited in Mennell 1994, 189), Elias might have written: “it is the great tragedy of social life that every extension of solidarity from family to village, village to nation, also presents the opportunity of organizing hatred on a larger scale.” And he never ceased to criticize nationalism, all nationalisms, may it appear extreme or banal, as one of the greatest perils that humanity has ever known (Elias 2013a).

As part of a broader civilizational process, the transformations of the “we–I” balance are thus characterized by their ambivalence and incompleteness. On the one hand, the “I-identity” tends to take precedence over the “we-identity”: The growing integration of humanity is accompanied by increasing individualization. References made by Elias to the rise of human rights claims, to the rights of individuals against the state, suggest it is not necessarily a bad thing (Elias 2010, 207–208). On the other hand, this movement feeds strongly affective resistances, hindering the development of a mutual identification enlarged to the scale of humanity. For its part, this broader mutual identification would be based on a historically increased sensitivity to the suffering of others more and more distant and different from oneself (De Swaan 1995). In the end, it refers less to the regulatory ideal of a disembodied cosmopolitanism than to a condition of survival in an interdependent world (Elias 2011).

While recalling the importance of long duration and global transformations, historical sociology, in particular that of Elias, reconciles the methodological detachment that must characterize sociological work and a deep commitment to a sociology devoted to its emancipatory mission: “hunting myths” (2012b, 46–65), developing a nonideological vision of society (Elias 2013b) and thereby increasing the orientation capacities of individuals (Elias 2007; Mennell 2021). If, in its own way, this historical sociology studies identities, it is ultimately to ensure that people are less trapped by them, and that identities set them less against each other and against themselves. Concretely, this implies putting related individuals – their stories, their emotions, their representations, and their practices – back at the center of sociological analysis. This gesture will prove to be particularly valuable in changing the way we look at the question of European identity.

The Case of European Identity

For you folks, identity is something nice; it’s all about institutions, deliberations and elites. Where I study identity, people die for it! (A Middle East specialist decrying the way in which Europeanists study identity, quoted in Checkel and Katzenstein 2009, 10)

Much has been written about the issue of European identity, and it is beyond the scope of this chapter to examine it in detail. Rather, we propose in this last part to recall the elements that frame contemporary discussions on European identity and to

summarize how historical sociology, and in particular Elias' perspective, allows us to approach the subject, in comparison with classical or more recent debate.

What European Identity?

“United in diversity”: The motto of the European Union (EU) first came into use in 2000, and it sums up well the eternal philosophical problem of identity, its constitutive tension, and its self-contradictory character (see Delanty 2003 for a criticism of this motto). In the European case, as in all cases, the debate on identity raises the question “who are we?” and/or “who are they?” However, because of the obvious multiplicity of national cultures and languages in the EU, “Europe” is a fine case because it casts doubt on the very possibility of the existence of a single, unified collective political identity, beyond a pure rhetoric accompanying governance (Shore 2006).

The question of European identity took off in political life and in the academic field at the beginning of the 1990s, around the signing of a treaty considered important for the history of European construction, the “Maastricht Treaty.” Signed in 1992 after encountering greater than expected resistance, this treaty introduces the notion of European citizenship and recognises it for any citizen having the nationality of one of the EU member states. European citizenship is accompanied by the right to free movement within the Union and the right to vote and to be elected, at least in European elections, in the state in which one resides.

In the 2000s, the politicization of issues related to European identity became more pronounced (Checkel and Katzenstein 2009). The decade was marked by the entry into the EU of 12 new countries from the former “Eastern bloc” in 2004 and 2007 and by the failure of a project for a constitution, following the negative results of referendums in two old member states, France and the Netherlands. At the same time, the tensions caused by increased internal mobility and the challenges raised by the securing of the EU's external borders are drawing new logics of exclusion and questioning the very meaning of community (Duez 2014). Hitherto implicitly dominant, the cosmopolitan conception of the European identity – elitist and sometimes inconsistent, for example, in the matter of migration – is increasingly contested not only by sovereigntist parties more or less hostile to Europe, by national populist parties, but also on the left. On the side of the European institutions and the pro-European currents, the new problem is fast becoming the solution. “European identity,” “European culture,” “common European history,” “European memory,” the “feeling of belonging to Europe,” and “pride in being European” are often invoked and confused as remedies for the EU's real or supposed “democratic deficit” and the “lack of legitimacy” of the European project.

Studies on Europe accompany these developments. Since the early 1990s, a whole theoretical literature has been developing on the question of integration and European citizenship which is no longer of the same type as the major normative theories of integration (federalism, intergovernmentalism, etc.) which had dominated until then. In political theory, the “postnational” model, following the “Kantian

way” (Ferry 1992, 2005) and extending the debate on the constitutional patriotism (*Verfassungspatriotismus*) born in Germany, defends the necessity and possibility of dissociating democratic citizenship from national belonging in a multicultural society (Habermas 1998, 2001). The postnational model is opposed not only to national-sovereignists, for whom nationhood and democracy are inseparable, but also to some advocates of a European federal state, who conceive of Europe as a super-nation. Philosophically anchored in the rationalist paradigm, this postnationalism, nevertheless, underestimates the weight of emotions and resistance to Europe and overestimates the identifying potential of the deliberative ideal and democratic institutions.

Once again, it is impossible to review here all the literature dealing with the question of European identity at the turn of the millennium – from historical institutionalism to studies on Europeanization, via constructivism and more classical political sociology. What is certain is that in less than a decade, work dedicated to identity is taking precedence over attitudinal approaches in the growing body of research on the relationship between citizens and the European political system (Duchesne 2008; Belot 2010). However, many of these studies can be criticized for reverting to a conception of identity borrowed from social psychology (Tajfel 1974; Bruter 2005), a conception that focuses too much on the notions of in-group and out-group and on the “othering,” “without appropriate theoretical adaptation to the political democratic nature of the social group that a European polity would be” (Duchesne 2008).

These two decades are also marked by a double turning point. The first is that of the “normalisation” of European studies – that is, the reappropriation of European objects by the disciplines and methods of the social sciences, the rediscovery of the classics and even of the long term (Bartolini 2005). In studies on citizens, the qualitative turn of the sociology of European integration (see for example White 2011) then de-sacralizes the importance of electoral behavior, opinion polls, and Eurobarometer to focus on what cannot ultimately be measured: representations, relations, and affects. Sociohistorical approaches are part of this double evolution (Déloye 2006).

European Identification as a Process

For its part, Eliasian historical sociology reminds us that it is possible and necessary to go beyond the false micro-/macroopposition in a relational approach. Such perspective is compatible with studies that mix (qualitative and quantitative) methods (Van Ingelgom 2014). Moreover, processual and long-term approaches favor the reciprocal enlightenment of empiricism and theory and show the relative, not absolute, originality of the question of identification with Europe (Delmotte 2012). By focusing in the 1980s on identification to Europe through “obstacles” to European integration, Elias (2010) anticipates by a generation the development of studies on Euroskepticism (see Szczerbiak and Taggart 2008). At the same time, he draws attention in advance to the limits that these will encounter by focusing primarily on political opposition and

political parties. Elias is more interested in latent, less explicit, or even unconscious oppositions: those that relate to the resistance, of an affective nature, of national habitus, and feed a deficit of identification to Europe and a form of widely shared indifference. In so doing, Elias also anticipates the renewed interest of political science in general and European studies in particular for the role of emotions in politics (see Belot and Bouillaud 2008).

The interest in affects and feelings does not imply per se any valuation of these as far as political identities are concerned. Following Elias, it is rather important to recognize their weight, explain and understand their role in the conduct of human affairs. One cannot simply consider that further postnational integration, in Europe and beyond, would be rational and beneficial. Nor is it crucial to “love Europe” as a homeland or even “humanity” as one big family. Rather, it must be seen that at a very high level of relational complexity – as is necessarily the case with a federation or confederation of nation-states – it is difficult for people to find their way around, *a fortiori* in a context of uncertainty. It is then tempting – and dangerous – to listen to the most immediately reassuring and comforting speeches, those that speak more to emotions or know how to mobilize beliefs.

The place of affects, feelings, and emotions is therefore very important in identities and identification processes in general. However, it is not a question of opposing passions to reason. If we rely on historical sociology, we are led to reject such dualistic way of thinking, based on antitheses that do not correspond to any reality. “The heart has its reasons,” which reason does not necessarily ignore. Democratization and the development of social solidarity have directly contributed to attachment to the nation. Although we have to be attentive to the diversity of national trajectories, there is therefore no opposition or flagrant contrast between the level of belonging to the nation and a higher, more encompassing level, but a form of continuity. It also means that there is no more equality or homogeneity in identification with Europe than with the nation. As Duchesne (2008) points out, for those who have been left behind by European integration, who do not have the opportunity to experience it “as an empowering idea in their lives,” it is reduced to a “supra-nationalist narrative,” “where the political community is imagined as limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1983). For these people, identifying with Europe means giving up the nation they have learned to love since childhood (Billig 1995), unlike the more direct beneficiaries of European construction, whose attachments do not compete but can complement each other.

Contrary to what Inglehart (1970) thought, identification with Europe will not necessarily take place in a more abstract way than identification with nations. It is too early to say whether it will simply take several generations to change inherited affiliations. Nevertheless, over the long term, the recomposition of human groups into ever larger units is a strong trend, which does not exclude the existence of centrifugal effects. The identification with an ever more distant and different other is also a strong trend. Not only the evolution of sensitivities contributes to this, but also the evolution of the awareness of the interdependencies that bind us together.

Historical sociology can provide a powerful critique of nationalism. It also gives grist to the mill of the postnational political project (Delmotte 2012). It thus redefines

within itself another relationship – a critical and reciprocal one – between theoretical, philosophical and political normativity, on the one hand, and empirical, sociological and historical observation, on the other. Not only are these two strands not opposed, but also they complement each other and can dialogue. Whether the current European project is doomed to “success” or “failure” changes nothing. Investigating contemporary political identities and identification with Europe as an ongoing process whose origins are lost in the mists of time involves taking an interest in it both in the long term and here and now, both from above, from the macrosocial point of view of the political and economic structures that frame this process, and from below, from the point of view of the individuals who give life to it (Delmotte, Mercenier, and Van Ingelgom 2017). The qualitative shift in the sociology of Europe tends to take seriously the voice of the actors, their feelings, and their life experiences. This gesture is perfectly compatible with the ambition to contribute to the development of a sociology that is both “reality congruent” and emancipatory. And Elias is particularly rich in hypotheses to be tested on the “changes of the ‘we–I’ balance” which concern Europeans, among others.

Conclusion

Benjamin had always assumed that he would grow old and die at home; that he was bound to end his life by returning to the country of his childhood. But he was starting to understand, at last, that this place had only ever existed in his imagination.

Adieu to old England, adieu

And adieu to some hundreds of pounds

If the world had been ended when I had been young

My sorrows I'd never known (Coe 2019, 419)

We began with the image of national flags hanging on the facades of houses in European cities during the first months of a pandemic, which, in the spring of 2020, had paralyzed part of the world economy and banned half of the world's population from going out (<https://www.euronews.com/2020/04/02/coronavirus-in-europe-spain-s-death-toll-hits-10-000-after-record-950-new-deaths-in-24-hou>). Some did not hesitate to speak of a “war” against an invisible enemy, a virus, on a planetary scale. We pointed out the apparent paradox of displaying the nation's colors as a sign of resistance to a scourge that knows no borders. While situated as such an image may seem, we felt that it nonetheless evoked the strength and relevance of some identity attachments which may seem out of date or totally irrelevant. We chose the episode of the Coronavirus pandemic as a starting point, namely an object not yet identified by the social sciences. We might as well have begun by mentioning the process, completed in 2020, of the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the European Union, which it joined in 1973. The role played in the so-called Brexit by identities, habitus, affiliations, and identificatory affects is undeniable. Historical sociology of Eliasian inspiration makes it possible, in the end, to realize that these are never insignificant and that it is important to explain them and to better understand them. For doing so, this approach offers a number of assets that set it apart from many others that have taken an interest in identities and identification

phenomena – a central object for the human sciences since the 1960s, which has become a veritable political obsession. To conclude, we recall one last time what these most characteristic assets consist of.

First of all, it is a matter of restoring the historical dimension of identity phenomena, and often of placing them in the long term. Identities, habitus, almost always have a long history and evolve slowly. Individuals and groups inevitably inherit, in their own defense, the stories lived by the generations that preceded them. The identities specific to each individual and each group are thus composed of multiple layers and based in part on the oblivion of these. The work of a historical sociology may consist, above all, in finding their origins and uncovering the process of their sedimentation. This approach thus avoids “reifying” identities, all the more so as it reminds us that any identity, any identification process, first of all involves human beings in relationships at different levels, from the most intimate to the most global, and in different temporalities. In doing so, it also takes into account the fact that identification, of oneself and of the group, always takes place in relation to others. Finally, it recalls the importance of power ratios, of the affective dimension, and of the evolution of these two aspects, for the study of the processes of identification.

Such a perspective disenchant identities. But it is not limited to denouncing their potentially murderous character or their sectarian tendencies, nor to deploring the blindness of those who remain prisoners of their identity(ies) while waiting for science to free them. Rather, the historical sociology we are interested in takes seriously the reasons for our attachments and helps us to look at them with an empathic and critical eye.

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