

About Post-National Integration in Norbert Elias's Work Towards a Socio-Historical Approach [1] [#N1]

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I. The Topicality of a Classic

At first glance, it may be surprising to consider the German-Jewish born sociologist Norbert Elias (Breslau, 1897–Amsterdam, 1990) as a reference of primary importance for thinking about the future of democracy and citizenship in Europe and beyond. Until recently, ‘classics’ of historical sociology as a whole have rarely been considered as highly relevant for investigations of the present state and future of relations between political communities in the age of globalisation. Moreover, in Elias’s work, which focuses on very long-term social (including political) processes in pre- modern and modern Europe, the major terms used in European Studies and in political theories on European Union – such as ‘legitimacy’, ‘sovereignty’, ‘citizenship’ or ‘democracy’ – are rarely mentioned. Elias was obviously not first and foremost a theorist of nationalism or a post-nationalist author. He would even have refused to be considered mainly as a political or social theorist, and even less as a theorist or as a philosopher *tout court*. Elias’s first doctorate was in philosophy but he was to abandon that discipline in favour of sociology, an intellectual break that deeply shaped his subsequent thinking (Elias 1994; Mennell 1998: 7-9). Elias’s sociology was then marked by the opposition between positive, descriptive or ‘reality congruent’ social sciences, on the one hand, and normative philosophy, sometimes denounced as unrealistic or utopian, on the other. In addition, he refused to consider politics or policy as a distinct sphere. Moreover, Elias’s historical sociology, in its more political aspects, mostly seems interested in the genesis of the state (Elias 1996; 1997), as were such sociologists as Anderson (1977) and Tilly (1993).

However, a closer examination of his work reveals the undoubtedly central character of the question of social and political integration beyond the nation state. This preoccupation is already present in the conclusion of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1997, completed in 1939), often considered as his magnum opus, which reveals that, at this early stage in his writings, Elias questioned the relationship between nation-states and democracy. He continued to do so in later essays, especially in the crucial text, ‘Changes in the We–I Balance’ (1991, written in 1987), on which I will focus in the following discussion, and in *Humana Conditio* (2010, written in 1985). Now, the nature of this ‘link’ – historical and contingent, or, alternatively, conceptual or necessary – has led in the past twenty years to a well-known opposition between the so-called ‘post-nationalist’ authors and the ‘national republicans’, in France, or the ‘liberal’ or ‘civic nationalists’, in Great Britain (see Lacroix 2002; 2004). Even though Elias did not directly confront the problem of transcending national borders in conceiving of, and implementing, democracy in European Union, his intuitions can be read in relation to these recent debates about the pertinence of the national-democratic and post-national paradigms. It is true that Europe in the sense of the actual European Union does not really receive close attention in his writings. Quite obviously in Elias’s view, European integration, if it would really take place, should rather be considered as a first step or as a transitional phase towards a more global, worldwide integration. Nevertheless, he demonstrated through all his work how much historical sociology is relevant for thinking about European integration and the very nature of the European Union.

In ‘Changes in the We–I Balance’, Elias did not explicitly examine whether democracy can, or should, exist beyond the nation state, although it appears quite obvious, as in *Humana Conditio* (2010), that the nation-state is not the end of history. The originality of Elias’s sociology lies elsewhere, and is twofold. On the one hand, it is to be found in Elias’s forceful suggestion that any immediate political problem has to be considered in the light of

long-term developments (see Déloye 2000; 2008) and in an all-embracing sociological perspective. Recently, Stefano Bartolini's book *Restructuring Europe* (2005) is an exceptional attempt to adopt a genuinely long-term socio-political perspective in order to understand the centralising processes that led to nation-states and to European integration. However, it remains focused on politics whereas Elias's more comprehensive approach includes the domains of psychology and the emotions. On the other hand, Elias's originality consists of his determination not to turn observations into norms or values that could legitimate particular conceptions of politics. If one forgets that sociological, self detached, standpoint, then Elias's propositions might sometimes seem similar to nationalist ideas, of course referring to civic or liberal nationalism (see Miller 1995; 2000) that considers the nation as the 'ultimate horizon of a political identity', or at least to the notion that democracy cannot be detached from the national frame. First of all, Elias strongly insists on the importance of affects and emotions for all kinds of collective identities, including political ones, and for every social and individual process of integration. Furthermore, his writings lay great stress on the enduring importance of the 'national *habitus*' (Elias 1991; 1996), particularly in the case of the old European countries. Finally, Elias sometimes seems to define the community as founded on conflicts with outsiders, both inside the community (Elias 2008), at the cultural or national level (Elias 1996), and beyond (Elias 1991), which at first glance resembles the fashionable idea (after Edward Said) of 'the Other'.

In this paper, I will challenge this 'national' or culturalist reading of Elias's work, a reading that insists on the importance of belonging to a national community that one can find in the French sociologist Dominique Schnapper's essay *La communauté des citoyens* (1994). I will show that Elias's intuitions, by giving a crucial role to democratisation processes, contribute much more to deepen, from a sociological standpoint and in a critical way, the conceptions articulated by the post-nationalist authors – first of all the concept of 'constitutional patriotism' advocated by Jürgen Habermas [2] [N2] (1998; 2000) and that of 'post-national identity' presented by Jean-Marc Ferry (1992; 2000; 2005).

And yet, according to Elias, European union, European unity or European integration, is not, first of all, a matter of values or ideals, political will or belief. More generally and less consciously, the growing repulsion towards suffering and pain would reveal a growing emotional identification between human beings over the centuries, though most obviously within their particular nation-states. However, just like Habermas, Elias suggests that a democratic political community could not be entirely based on such a feeling, although it is a 'civilising' one. This is because of his rational preferment that leads him to argue that people should rather base their acts on an understanding of the reality of their social relations. Moreover, there is no reason to consider as typically European in any meaning of the term that conscience-formation process associated with a widening circle of mutual identification. Elias admittedly studied the civilizing process by focusing on modern Western Europe at first, but it has never signified that European people have to be considered as 'civilized', compared to others, or even 'more civilized' thanks to cultural specific features, or in the vanguard of such a decentred conscience-formation process thanks to a specific European process. Not only did Elias severely criticise all nationalist and Eurocentric positions but, in the twentieth century more than ever before, humanity as a whole has to be considered as the real social unit of reference in a wholly interdependent world.

In what follows, I firstly propose to review briefly the main ideas of the theory of the civilising process from state formation to globalisation that provides the framework for a long-term historical sociology. In this first part I will emphasize the crucial question of the links between the nation-state and democracy in the twentieth century that constitute the background of the current discussion between (liberal, civic) nationalists and post-nationalists. Second, I will show how the question of post-national interdependence and integration appears as a central problem in Elias's 'political' sociology, that always considers distinctly and together national, European, and global levels in a processual way. Third, I will tackle what are, according to Elias, the main obstacles to post-national political integration in terms of the endurance of national *habitus*, and will insist on the importance of not conflating the sociological study of such a phenomenon with its political justification. I will end with some comments on Eliasian post-nationalism and on his 'realist cosmopolitanism'. My opinion is that the stimulating tension between Hobbesian and Kantian inflexions in Elias's work, already analysed by Andrew Linklater in the field of international relations theory (Linklater 2004; 2011), is interestingly questioned when post-national integration in Europe or civic patriotism is at stake. My hypothesis is that, from an 'Eliasian' standpoint, the sociological study of long-term historical processes would not only reveal what separates

Europeans from each other, but also what (temporarily) binds them together, 'for better and for worse', and what (more definitely) binds Europeans to the rest of the world.

II. From modern state to national democracy: 'objective' and 'subjective' integration processes

Über den Prozess der Zivilisation gives a central role to the modern state. However, the state is never considered as a beginning or as an end. Elias shows indeed that, in particular conditions, the social dynamics will most likely 'obey' a strong competitive trend, characterized by the so-called 'monopoly mechanism' (Elias 1997 II: 151–68). In the very long term, small, independent and competitive feudal social units were transformed and integrated into larger, more centralized and powerful social units. What we call the 'modern state' could then be considered as a particular form of 'survival unit', one characterized by a specific monopolisation and centralisation of physical power (Elias 1997 II: 151). More specifically, the state's monopoly of the legitimate use of violence consolidated the constraints already imposed on aggressive drives because of the development of economic interdependencies, among other factors (Elias 1997 II: 323–347). In that perspective, it is possible to consider the 'civilising process' as 'unplanned but ordered' (Elias 1997 II: 229–30), and understandable precisely because it has in a definite way 'followed' (*in einer ganz bestimmten Richtung*, 1997 II: 444) the undetermined logics of social interdependencies of different kinds (demographic, military, monetary, commercial, cultural, educational ones, *etc.*). These have shaped the direction (or the 'orientation') of at least one aspect of social development: namely ever-increasing, and more and more complex interdependencies and patterns of integration within larger, relatively pacified, bounded political units (Elias 1997 II: 330–2).

Furthermore, in the 1939 text, especially in the 'Conclusion', Elias makes a crucial distinction. On the one hand, monopolisation and centralisation led by interdependencies would unleash processes (including growing competition for power between states) that found expression in the Second World War (Elias 1997 II: 446–447). On the other hand, the civilising process *stricto sensu*, including the development of individual self-restraints, would prove to be fragile and would be reversed by the growing fears caused by the same war (Elias 1997 I: 424n; 1997 II: 462; see also Elias 2007 and 1996, especially about Germany in the interwar).

Although the 'civilising process' as described by Elias is never linear and even involves disintegrative and de-civilising spurts (see the section entitled 'The Breakdown of Civilisation' on Nazism and the extermination of Jews in Elias 1996: 299–402), in the long term the social and political integration of humanity as a whole seems to be 'inescapable'. Elias (1991) does not doubt that the tension between integration and disintegration dynamics will continue to coexist. It was increasingly the case that humanity is the only survival unit to be real and permanent in an era dominated by risks (Beck 1986): 'It is the whole of mankind which now constitutes the last effective survival unit. [...] Only the highest level of integration, membership of humanity, has remained permanent and inescapable' (Elias 1991: 226; see also 1997 II: 446–449). Nevertheless, especially in 'Changes in the We–I Balance', Elias does stress the 'gap' – or the 'un-coincidence', the 'discrepancy' – between the emergence of a new 'survival unit' and the dominant social identities for most people.

It is a *habitus* problem of a peculiar kind. In studying social development processes we repeatedly come across a constellation in which the dynamic of unplanned social processes is tending to advance beyond a given stage towards another, which may be higher or lower, while the people affected by this change cling to the earlier stage in their personality structure, their social *habitus*. It depends entirely on the relative strength of the social shift and the deep-rootedness and therefore the resistance of the social *habitus* whether – and how quickly – the dynamic of the unplanned social process brings about a more or less radical restructuring of this *habitus*, or whether the social *habitus* of individuals successfully opposes the social dynamic, either by slowing it down or blocking it entirely. There are many examples of such drag effects. The barrier just mentioned which the national *habitus* of the members of European states puts in the way of the formation of a European continental state is only one. The tensions and conflicts associated with it may be made easier to understand by looking from a greater distance to analogous events at an earlier stage of development, that of the transition from tribes to states as the dominant units of survival and

integration. (1991: 211)

At that time, Elias introduces another crucial distinction that was highlighted and translated into French by Guillaume Devin (1995). Not only should we not confuse interdependence or interconnectedness with social or political integration; we should also distinguish between 'objective' integration and 'subjective' integration. The first term refers to economic, cultural and military 'interdependencies', and occasionally to their juridical and political institutionalisation. The second refers to the processes of building identities, to the development of '*habitus*', and to the forms of self-consciousness that individuals have as members of specific groups. At least for a while – sometimes for centuries indeed – the first and the second levels do not 'fit'. Objective and subjective integrations do not 'coincide' in time. Through this distinction, Elias reminds us that the modern state, for instance the French absolutist state, is not in its early stages the locus of collective identification, neither for its individual members nor for its constitutive groups. Such a 'young' state is not (yet) a 'subjective integration' unit. On the contrary, the latter corresponds to the modern nation – to what we usually denote by the term, 'nation-state', which has developed more recently, and involves a particular form of collective identification. According to Elias, to exist, the nation needs a shared national conscience, a feeling of belonging. That does not mean that internal conflicts and tensions have disappeared. It means that the people know, think or 'believe' that they share, or belong to, the same social unit, which is 'theirs'. To talk about the 'nation-state' therefore signifies that the state has also become a nation – in other words, that people have appropriated the state, for example through the idea of popular sovereignty.

How did that change take place, socio-historically speaking? What explains how such a nation emerged and developed? To that question, Elias surprisingly answers: that it is democracy, that is to say the 'democratisation' or the political representation of the majority of the constitutive groups in the parliaments of the modern occidental states in the twentieth century [3][#N3]. And this is, moreover, one of the major points on which Elias differs from many authors who, from both post-national and national democratic paradigms, agree that the nation at least preceded the democracy even though it did not necessarily lead to democracy. Was democracy impossible without the nation? Elias's quite original suggestion is indeed the opposite, namely that modern nations and nation states would have been impossible without universal suffrage and democratic participation that occurred as part of the reduction in differences of powers between higher and lower strata groups in the industrial societies at the turn of the twentieth century. According to Elias, 'functional democracy' preceded 'institutional democracy' (Elias 1978). A majority of people began then to consider the state as a 'we' and no longer as a 'they', the latter term having referred up to that time to the ruling class of the state. In Elias's words: 'The more complete integration of all citizens into the state in the European multi-party states has really only happened in the course of the twentieth century. Only in conjunction with the parliamentary representation of all classes did all the members of the state begin to perceive it more as a we-unit and less as a they-group' (Elias 1991: 207–8). Of course, that does not mean that nations are founded on love or feelings of brotherhood and, as already stated, even less that conflicts (for example class conflicts) have disappeared. That only means that these oppositions are to be managed in a new frame, through the operation of quite different political rules.

Elias is here rather close to a 'Habermasian-modernist' approach. Habermas (1998: 98 ff.) also contends that the Weberian or, more precisely, Hobbesian state and the modern nation respectively correspond to distinctive historical periods, even though he notes that the nation or modern nationalism was useful and may have been necessary in order for democratic citizenship to develop. Moreover, political democratization (and citizen participation above all) appears to both authors as a major integrative factor (see also Marshall 1992), although Habermas (2000: 105 ff.) insists more than Elias does on the importance of the rise of the welfare state, particularly during the second part of the twentieth century. Elias maintains that armed conflicts gave birth to the modern states (see also Tilly 1993), adding that *all* survival units have up to our time been born from wars, but wars in themselves were insufficient to integrate people, to build nations, to create a 'we-unit'. And they can lead to social fragmentation too, not only between nation states but also within nation-states themselves (1991a). In other words, Elias would not agree with one of the main proposals of some of the French national republicans, who have occasionally used Elias's work to support their sceptical, nationalist vision about the future of a 'too peaceful' European Union (see Schnapper 1994: 197).

From another standpoint, Elias does not really argue that the state constructed the nation – for example through a national educative system (see Gellner 1983; Schnapper 1994: 131–3). The reason is that he does not conceive of the nation as ‘culturally’ homogeneous. Such an idea is to my mind a common point between, on the one hand, most of the ‘modernist’ approaches, be they functionalist (see Gellner 1983) or constructivist (see Anderson 1991; Hobsbawm 1991), and, on the other hand, the ‘primordialist’ approaches of the nation (see Smith 1986; 1999), which insist on ancestral ethnic origins of nations. Both indeed define the nation in terms of distinctive ‘objective’ cultural features, such as rituals, traditions, or common languages, whether the nation was created by the nationalism of the state or the state was preceded by, and based on, the ethnic, ancestral nation. In *The Established and the Outsiders*, Elias emphasizes much more the ability of a community to create and to develop its own distinctive characteristics through its relations with other communities. In a context where ‘objective differences’ do *not* exist regarding social class, ethnic descent or religious denomination, specific features first only exist in the conscience of the community members, thanks to the development of relations between more ancient ‘established’ groups and more recent ‘outsiders’ groups (Elias 2008).

Perhaps Elias would have agreed with liberal nationalist authors such as Benedict Anderson (1991) or Yael Tamir (1992) who talk about the nation in terms of an ‘imagined community’ or ‘subjective nation’. Elias shares the idea that national culture and national belonging form a part of the collective and subjective identity of each individual. Nevertheless, according to Elias, belonging to a nation is not a choice – or a legal status, which would be restrictive from a sociological standpoint – although we partly ‘imagine’ it. Since Elias never suggests that we are free to choose our national identity, the nation cannot be for that reason a value. Moreover, in *The Germans*, Elias precisely demonstrates that a self-conscious national culture cannot be considered in itself as a good that should be preserved and cherished. So, it is from a sociological ‘positivist’ and retrospective standpoint – and not from a philosophical, value-oriented, ideological or political one – that Elias, following Max Weber and his definitions of ‘communalisation’ and ‘sociation’ (1971), suggests that the nation implies much more a shared conscience or a feeling of belonging than a cultural, pre-political and substantial homogeneity, in terms of ethnic origins, inherited traditions, common language or religion.

III. Beyond the nation-state

A first Eliasian socio-historical lesson could be summarized as follows. We cannot talk about the present and the future of nation-states if we do not analyse the long-term processes that gave birth to states and nations. Social development has indeed no beginning and no end, and political development has no reason to cease at the stage of the nation-state, which is a particularly recent phenomenon in any case. The second lesson is that to look back is not sufficient, because social evolution is not linear, nor is it made of cycles. So, the fact that political history will not end with the nation (-state) problematises the contention that history is bound simply to repeat itself. In the civilising process as described by Elias, and according to the much contested idea of ‘progression’ – which should not be confused with the idea of progress – that is intrinsic to the explanation of that process, what happens in any future phase is not bound to repeat the past. Although Elias points out strong trends and tendencies – linked to the dynamics of interconnectedness – they could have, at some later stage, other consequences than they had in the past. For instance, the monopoly mechanism can be expected to lead to larger and larger concentrations of power and to bigger and bigger survival units. But the first could be other than territorial ones (on the model of the state), and the second may not lead to identification processes that are similar to those that underpin the sense of national affiliation. The idea that humanity as a whole is the real (objective, realistic) survival unit is not incompatible with the idea of its possible auto-destruction. People’s behaviour and representations are rarely guided by reality-congruent principles. At the opposite, emotions and feelings often prevent a correct understanding of social processes (see ‘The Fishermen in the Maelstrom’ in Elias 2007).

The only thing that seems certain is that we can observe today, as in the past, the same gap or discrepancy between the ‘objective survival unit’ – the continent or, conceivably, interdependent humanity as a whole – and the ‘subjective’ political integrative unit for a majority of people, which is their nation, the democratic community of citizens. One can read into that argument another common point with the thought of Habermas fifteen years ago. But according to Elias in ‘Changes in the We–I Balance’, a question remains whether it is only a ‘time lag’, only a delay. We actually do not know if the ‘we’ subjective feeling will one day coincide with the ‘real’ objective

survival unit.

With respect to Europe, Elias tended to think in 1987 that the development of a collective identity was thinkable and possible. However, his focus was largely on the global level. Like Habermas, Ulrich Beck (1986) or earlier Karl Jaspers (1957), Elias thought that the level of our interdependencies has already reached a final level, especially because of the nuclear weapons (Elias 1991: 227; see also 'The Fishermen in the Maelstrom' in Elias 2007) and the ecological risks:

[...] The function of the effective survival unit is now visibly shifting more and more from the level of the nation states to the post-national unions of states and, beyond them, to humanity. The catastrophe of Chernobyl, the large-scale destruction of fish and the pollution of the Rhine after the disorganized attempt to combat a fire in a Swiss chemical works, can serve as limited but instructive examples of the fact that nation state units have in reality relinquished their function as guarantors of the physical security of their citizens, and thus as survival units, to supra-state units. (1991: 217–18)

Only belonging to humanity could then be considered as 'permanent' and 'necessary', or 'inescapable' in Elias's terms. But 'our ties to this all-embracing we-unit are so loose that very few people, it seems, are aware of them as social bonds' (Elias 1991: 226–7). The rise of the United Nations, and also of private organizations such as Amnesty International and, more generally, increasing claims about human rights are the first, tentative signs of a developing worldwide feeling of belonging or, more exactly, of a common 'sense of responsibility among individuals for the fate of others far beyond the frontiers of their own country or continent' (Elias 1991: 168). But that 'sense of responsibility for imperilled humanity is minimal. Eminently realistic as such a concern may be, the habitus attuned to one's own nation makes it appear unrealistic, even naïve' (Elias 1991: 228). According to Elias, part of the explanation can be found in a 'unique peculiarity of humanity considered as a single social unit': 'At all other levels of integration the we-feeling has developed in conjunction with threats to one's own group by other groups. Mankind itself, however, is not threatened by other, non-human groups, but only by sub-groups within itself' (Elias 1991: 229). At that level, the danger comes from 'inside' and seems less integrative. In one sense, the lack of an 'outside', foreign, non-human enemy, excepted in some popular American movies, frustrates the development of such a universal conscience!

Concerning Europe, the first difference compared to the global level is that 'objective' integration has partly been achieved through law and political institutions. That observation confirms the 'continuist' way of thinking that Elias invites us to adopt, showing that between objective interdependencies and subjective integration, an objective (political, institutional, legal) integration process already exists. I have already evoked that hypothesis about the early absolutist French state. In recent decades, distinctive European institutions have emerged and developed. It is obvious that European citizens in general do not consider these institutions as 'theirs', for whatever reason, such as the so-called 'democracy deficit' or their lack of emotional warmth which will be considered later in this article. But we have just seen that 'we' feeling centred on the nation is recent and far from 'natural' or innate. Just like Habermas a few years later (Habermas 2000: 38), Elias suggested that there is no reason that the 'we' could not adapt once again. National *habitus* and its constraints 'are part of the reality of social existence' (Elias 1991: 228).

The idea that they could change is regarded as naïve. But the constraints of *habitus* are created by human beings. At one time in the past they were adjusted in all people to suit the integration level of the clan. At other stages in the past tribes were the highest integration units, which attracted, if in an ambivalent form, especially strong we-feelings and imposed a relatively high obligation of loyalty and solidarity on all their members. The we-image of human being has changed; it can change again. Such changes do not take place overnight. They involve processes that often take many generations (Elias 1991: 228–9)

It is not, in Elias's terms, completely 'unrealistic to suppose that in the future terms like "European" or "Latin-American" will take on a far stronger emotive content' than they possess at the end of the twentieth century (1991: 226). Here is maybe the second difference between Europe and the global level. However, the (very hypothetical) development of very strong European feelings of belonging is not necessarily a 'good' thing, rather the transposition of national we-feelings. In Elias's view, emotions or affects do not seem sufficient or even appropriate to constitute the foundation of a new political identity, a post-national one, in Europe or beyond. If social scientists have to pay attention to the persistence of national *habitus*, it is because national *habitus* may well survive long into the future. If one keeps in mind the teachings of *Involvement and Detachment* in the field of the sociology of knowledge (Elias 2007) and those of *The Germans*, such an observation about their persistence cannot be reduced to any legitimisation of current national *habitus*. Considering the fantasy and so, potentially dangerous, content of national *habitus*, *The Germans* could even be read as a serious critique of all kinds of nationalism, that is to say an indictment of the closing of national communities and a warning of the dangers of fantastic worldviews that are inherent in national feelings [4] [#N4]. It remains that their endurance has to be considered seriously.

IV. The endurance of national *habitus*

The late essay, 'Changes in the We-I Balance', is far more 'political' and at the same time more 'speculative' than *The Civilising Process* or *The Germans*, although perhaps less so than *Humana Conditio*. Nevertheless, the main problem for Elias in the first of those texts is to formulate a comprehensive explanation of the historical resistance of the national *habitus*, more particularly its 'drag effect' on the political building-process in Europe. It is striking to observe that, in his reflections on that phenomenon, Elias uses most of the arguments that we usually find in debates about post-national integration problems that developed from the nineties in France, Germany and Britain, around and after the Maastricht Treaty. More precisely, Elias paradoxically evokes most of the arguments that we can read in defence of the national-democratic integration model (see for instance Miller 1995; Smith 1998). I say 'paradoxically' because the European and even cosmopolitan preferences of the 'European Elias' are highly evident throughout his work and explicit in *Reflections on a life* (Elias 1994). Nevertheless, there is no paradox if we take into account the distinction between the prescription of 'what it should be' and the description of 'how the things are', that is to say the comprehensive explanation of figurations and processes, when most of the theoretical, political and philosophical debates that we have just evoked take less care of the distinction between the 'normative' and the 'factual'. By this, I mean that observations or intuitions about national realities and the constraining role of the *habitus* are never transformed by Elias into 'nationalist' arguments in order to legitimate or justify the national integration model, including when the focus is on its association with the democratic dimension. What, it should be asked, are the ideas that are, at first glance, shared by Elias and some leading liberal nationalists?

The first argument would precisely be the strictly 'political' one, about the proper deficit of the European Union regarding democracy. Despite his suspicion of this un-sociological concept, Elias wrote: '[...] The individual citizens who in parliamentary democracies have painfully won the right to control their own fates to a limited extent through elections within the state framework, have virtually no chance of influencing events on the global plane of integration. [...] We may or may not welcome the increasing integration of mankind. What is quite certain is that to begin with it increases the impotence of the individual [...]' (1991: 165–6). But, on the other hand, Elias firmly asserts indeed that *all* integration processes are marked at the beginning by a shift of power that begins by strengthening the helplessness of individuals:

One of the features of many social integration processes from a lower to a higher level is the fact that power is transferred from one level to another. When, in earlier times, self-ruling tribes combined into self-ruling states, the power of the tribal authority was reduced in favour of that of the state authorities. The individual members of the tribe now lived at a greater distance from the social centres of power, which decided over their fate in many respects. The individual members had, in many cases, a chance to participate in the decisions of the tribe. This chance diminishes when the tribes increasingly give up their power and decision-making to the state authorities. [...] Something very similar is now happening in connection with the shift of power from the state level

to the continental levels. (1991: 165)

In other words, Elias's argument cannot be reduced to the liberal nationalist position, which states that: 'Only nations are democratic; Europe is not and will not become a nation; consequently, Europe is not and will never be a democracy' (see Lacroix 2004: 67–76).

The second argument that Elias seems to share with liberal nationalists refers to long-term processes of change. At times, he obviously argues that the antiquity and the strength of the *habitus* go together. 'One has the impression that the solidity, the resistance, the deep-rootedness of the social *habitus* of individuals in a survival unit is greater the longer and more continuous the chain of generations within which a certain social *habitus* has been transmitted from parents to children' (Elias 1991: 211). One could then think that the age of the inherited practices and representations is the main explanatory factor. However, I have emphasised that Elias also strongly insists, in other passages, on the fact that national identities are actually quite recent. According to Elias, the national 'we-feeling' is undoubtedly associated with universal suffrage (more exactly with democratic representation and participation) and with the world wars that made Europe a new 'objective' survival unit. Oldness is then not the final explanatory factor, and neither is the strength of a national identity: in *The Established and Outsiders* and in *The Germans*, Elias tends to affirm that young and fragile identities are, just like (old and) declining ones, often more reactive and closed, especially in times of danger. However, weak or imperilled *habitus* are not really supposed to be the only ones that resist further integration. In other words, strong, living identities are not said to be necessarily more tolerant and open to inner and outside diversity, because they would be supposedly more self-confident, as advocated by civic nationalism (see Lacroix 2002: 947 ff.). According to Elias, openness and tolerance would rather depend on the features on which, or against which, the integrative political identity has been built, the role of democratic models for instance (see the comparison between England, France and Germany in Elias 1996: 322 ff.; see also Elias 2010). To repeat, the antiquity and strength of national *habitus* cannot be considered as a final explanation of their endurance - no more than weakness or newness indeed. [5] [N5]

The third argument is that the absence of external warfare inhibits the development of a strong European political identity. According to some French national republican authors (see for example Debray 1999), the European Union, built on a peace project between the nations, has no real 'enemy' and thus cannot become a 'real' integration unit, a real political community. Nevertheless, there is no ambiguity on this point in Elias's texts, and we evidently cannot reduce the Eliasian propositions to that assertion and to its implicit assumptions about the positive affective value of war (for democracy). First, according to Elias, wars are never sufficient to create a 'we-unit'. Armed conflicts only give birth to survival units, as they did for modern states and for tribes. Secondly, if one can say that wars sometimes strengthen an existing or developing national 'we-feeling' (see also Simmel 1999: 328–39), that is not self-evidently to be valued. It is no more than a sociological observation once again. Above all, Elias stresses that 'the demand that its members be prepared to forfeit their own lives [...] for the security of the whole nation' (1991: 208) tends to turn the 'hoped-for survival units unintentionally into potential or actual annihilation units'. Instead of giving war positive value, Elias on the contrary ends by celebrating the 'right to decline to use or threaten to use force in the service of another' (Elias 1991: 233).

In order to explain the resistance of national *habitus*, Elias finally favours a type of argument, based on the importance of affects and emotions in social and political life. The point is that, beyond the nation-state, the emotional tone of the collective identity weakens and, for that reason, does not satisfy a crucially basic social need. If 'the need to love and to be loved', 'the emotive need for human society' is one of the 'fundamental conditions of human existence' (Elias 1991: 201; see also *The Loneliness of the Dying* in Elias 2010), a crucial explanation for the resistance to post-national integration is that 'the emotional tinge of we-identity grows noticeably fainter in relation to post-national forms of integration, such as unions of African, Latin-American or European states' (Elias 1991: 202–3). It is important to clarify that Elias's reflections never aim to highlight and legitimate emotions, affects or instincts that his sociology investigates. Reading Elias, one cannot ignore that explanation is not justification, for instance when he stresses that identifying processes often depend on stigmatizing 'other groups' or 'outsiders' as inferiors in order to securing established groups' self-image (see Elias 1996: 152–5). More generally, if one absolutely wants to provide the 'civilising process' with a normative value,

that would consist of controlling and maybe neutralizing feelings and affective representations in politics. Elias argues indeed that greater reality-congruence means a decline of emotional engagement with the world, a growing rationality. But such an evolution is so fragile that it sometimes appears more like a 'must be'. It remains that emotions and affects have to be considered seriously by a reality-congruent sociology. They are obviously important, not because emotions *should* remain a foundation for political identities, rather for the opposite reason, because any form of post-national integration has to be freed from such affective collective identification process.

Elias himself could have written that *'l'homme est un animal de passions autant que de raison'* (Schnapper 1994: 155). However, he would have immediately pointed to the socio-historical 'changing balance' between the 'impulsive' and 'rational' components of collective identities, although the civilizing process could have, on that point too, paradoxical effects. Elias admitted that national myths and symbols have provided and are still supplying social cohesion. But such an observation does not prevent him from arguing that a real post-national integration would be 'rational' and 'beneficial' (1991: 225). In the end, Elias firmly deplores the reality that 'intellectual awareness of the logic of integration meets the tenacious resistance of emotive ideas'. People do need myths, but not to rule their social life, Elias argues in his autobiographical reflections (Elias 1990). Throughout his work, he invites us to think that some high fantasy-content representations, emotions, feelings and affects are *also* what prevent Europeans from seeing what really, concretely, binds them together and what binds them to others, that is to say more global than national social, economic, environmental and political interconnectedness.

V. Post-nationalism and cosmopolitanism

To summarize, the 'objective' (minimal, material, concrete) integration of humankind led by interdependencies appears to be 'inescapable' or 'unavoidable' (Elias 1991: 225). At the end of the twentieth century, the nation-state is no longer the real survival unit: 'It has this function only in the *consciousness* of most of its members' (Elias 1991: 208). Following Elias, we should moreover note an interesting paradox. The state became indeed a 'subjective' integrative or a we-unit while it had already been objectively overtaken. At the same time, the Second World War led to new, supra-national, survival units, East and West, which would come to have a leading role in world politics. For the last few decades, we can observe a similar phenomenon in Europe. The problem of its political as opposed to subjective integration has stood out, when increasingly the real survival unit is not the continent but humanity as a whole. Now, the question is: Will that asymmetry remain or not? Do identities and *habitus* always lag behind? Reading Elias, some could think that there is something like a necessary adaptation of identities (social and individual processes of identification) and of (social and political) integration processes, following, or obeying, objective interdependencies processes that include changes in the domains of geopolitics, the economy and administration. The conclusion would be that the identities and the communities they are related to 'die or adapt' to stronger, more powerful trends.

Elias never takes for granted that the nation-state constitutes the only or the last theoretical or practical means of improving democratic participation. Accordingly, his implicit European 'plea' does not suggest that Europe could or should become a single large 'nation'. The European Union is undoubtedly searching for a concrete identity, but a relevant European identity would consist of a really shared social and political *habitus* and not of substantial characteristics related to inherited traditions, common cultural origins or religion. That claim also implies that a more rational and less emotional we-consciousness has to develop, possibly helped by the knowledge provided by social science that can enable people to exercise higher levels of control over their social relations and to govern political life accordingly in the context of significant levels of interconnectedness.

The 'constitutional patriotism' defended by Habermas reveals indeed the same disposition. According to Habermas (1998: 67–119), democracy does not require a grounding in a pre-political, culturally homogeneous community. The German thinker precisely tends to demonstrate that the link between the nation-state and democracy was 'historically contingent' and is not 'conceptually necessary'. That does not mean that democratic citizenship only consists of purely abstract values like human rights. Democratic citizenship cannot exist apart from shared social practices. But Europe will probably and happily not become a 'nation' on a larger scale. Consequently, a common '*political culture*' should and could emerge and develop in a concretely 'multicultural' society. The opening to the cultural and (infra-) national diversities could then be considered as one of the

distinctive fundamentals of the Union. In many respects, Elias's historical thought is more than simply compatible with post-nationalism. Elias's historical sociology offers a critical and moderate foundation for that philosophical and political project often and sometimes unfairly denounced for its unrealistic or theoretical dimensions.

To conclude, I would like to add a few words about the question of an 'Eliasian cosmopolitanism', following on from the analysis in Linklater (2004; 2011). Elias's reader cannot ignore the fact that his theory has always avoided either celebrating or rejecting European or Western 'civilisation'. Another famous feature is the positive value that Elias sometimes seems to confer on the modern state model. Nevertheless, as argued in the introduction, Elias's thought is marked by deep and stimulating hesitations. Some concern the meaning of civilisation itself, some the degree of reversibility of the processes that are related to civilisation. Others refer to the idea of a post-national (world) state, a solution that Jürgen Habermas also envisioned whereas some other cosmopolitan authors judge it as theoretically weak and politically dangerous (see Ferry 1992; also Cheneval 2005). In most of Elias's texts, the monopoly of the legitimate use of violence seems to condition the pacification of social relations in a neo-Hobbesian perspective. That implies that, without compelling force, international law is unable to pacify international relations, which, for that reason, are not civilised or even civilising (Elias 2007). In that hypothesis, realism in the meaning it has within the theory of international relations is clearly predominant in Elias's thought. And something like a 'post-national global state' appears quite clearly as a matter of survival. The 'end of the road' (Elias 2010) could then mean the end of humanity, in case of a nuclear war (see *Humana Conditio* written in 1985), or the emergence of a post-national cosmopolitan order, which would suppose a post-national 'state' in the sense of a 'further stage in the centralisation of the means of coercion' (Alan and Brigitte Scott in Elias 2010: xiv–v). In other words, there is little possibility of peace and of a civilising process beyond the state in our age.

But there is an alternative. As suggested above, and following Linklater, it is not so obvious, in Elias's work, that civilisation – of course as a process – is delimited by the borders of the state(s). Through *The Germans* and *The Loneliness of the Dying* (2010), for instance, Elias demonstrates that the growing repulsion, through the centuries, towards the suffering and pain of others reveals or entails a growing emotional identification between human beings as human beings (see Mennell 1998: 248 ff.; De Swaan 2005). Perhaps for the first time in history, a fragile (international) civilising process based on a decentred conscience would then *precede* the political regulation of (global) interconnectedness. In other words, 'cosmopolitan' feelings could precede political and juridical institutionalisation of interdependencies at the global level. This decentred conscience or, better, 'sense of responsibility', may not be sufficient in itself to establish a new political community, but at least it may be a necessary first step. And of course that conscience would have nothing natural or innate about it; there is not a-historical sense of 'morality' as depicted by Zigmunt Bauman (1989). There would be no more typically 'European' model of self-consciousness as suggested by Joseph Weiler. Weiler (2001: 67–68) does not found Europeanness (European political identity, European 'we') on democracy or human rights, on which the European Union obviously has no monopoly. He does not stress those features of a specific cultural legacy as much as the supposedly truly 'European' capacity for self-detachment, for adopting or adapting to the others' standpoint (Lacroix 2004: 186). However, following Elias, one can argue that such a static vision would be historically wrong, and that it is to regard a more decentred conscience as typically European! More importantly, the cosmopolitan feelings, the self-detached conscience or human sense of responsibility cannot be reduced to a new 'we-feeling' once more built on the opposition to 'others' or entailing it. Following that second hypothesis, Kantian cosmopolitanism is not so far from Elias's thought, maybe closer to Elias than to Weiler indeed. Elias himself would have surely refused to admit it: first because of his hostility to Kantian epistemology, second because of his sociological repugnance to giving history a meaning or an end.

And yet Elias allows us to think that 'realism' is not so evidently on the side of the first solution, namely the necessity for a world state. Mutual identification can also be considered as a powerful, binding principle, indeed, to the extent that it reveals a changing balance of power between groups or nations towards more equality, or results from a decrease of differentials of power. Let us think about the national welfare state, that is to say the relative but greater than before solidarity policies between lower industrial classes in the middle of the twentieth century in liberal democracies for instance. Of course, a significant increase in the level of interdependencies between groups or nations does not necessary lead to greater equality. However, if 'we', in highly developed

countries, can maybe less than ever support the idea that AIDS, hunger or civil wars are a fate for the others, it is (not only but also) because the 'North' ('we'), objectively continues to depend on the 'South', maybe more than ever, at least on that part of the 'South' that has in a way or another given rise to a new power balance in world politics. We may remain largely unconscious of that, and feelings of compassion still remain largely undeveloped, sterile, or highly insufficient to move towards global equity policies. Such reciprocal dependence may only be slightly different than the one that marked the age of colonisation, or may mostly be guided by fears, for example as far as migration flows are concerned or in the field of climate change (Beck 1986). However, that conclusion, which one has to consider as a hypothesis only, is not so pessimistic, or cynical. It invites us to think that the *habitus*, on the one hand, and the interconnectedness between political units in the broader sense, on the other hand, are potentially changing in an interconnected way, for worse... and for better sometimes.

The social and political development of the United States of America as analysed by Stephen Mennell (2007) could illustrate that proposition in a paradoxical way, *par l'absurde*. Since 1786, despite some important but actually localised failures, the USA has grown more and more in terms of territory and power, in relation to its neighbours and to the rest of the world. That has occurred at a time when most of the traditional great powers have more than once experienced severe decline. It has had pervasive effects on the way a majority of Americans see themselves and perceive the rest of the world (Mennell 2007: 294–322). Because of their dominant position and because of their consequent fear of dropping in status, various groups in the USA have been unable to see themselves in the way that other nations see the USA. They have not been disposed to consider themselves as a nation-state among other (most often weaker) nation-states. But it is important to remember, as suggested by Mennell following Elias, that the same American society, which for this very reason can hardly be considered as highly civilised, is not so different from ours, and that 'they' and 'we' Europeans are together in the same boat.

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Biography

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Notes

1. This text is based on a paper originally given at the conference 'Globalisation and Civilisation in International Relations: Towards New Models of Human Interdependence' held at University College Dublin (8-10th April 2010). I want to thank Stephen Mennell and Andrew Linklater for their very precious reading and comments on earlier versions. ☞ [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. Intentionally, this paper only refers to the 'first Habermas', that is to say to the texts written between the mid-1980s (the first were about Germany, in the context of the *Historikerstreit*) and the famous article co-produced with Derrida in May 2003. On the 'discrepancy between Jürgen Habermas's initial plea for critical and rational identities and his more recent glorification of the European model', see Lacroix (2009).☞ [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. I say 'surprisingly', because Elias scarcely uses the word 'democracy', and hardly seems to be interested in the fact of democracy as a political system and in the question of its foundations. There are of course many seeming exceptions. Allusions to the deeply rooted conditions of a democratization process are already

scattered in *The Process* and later in *The Germans*. See especially the passage where Elias is interested in qualifying the differences between French, British and German national *habitus* with respect to specific ideals and national heroes that nation-building processes have favoured in each case (Elias 1996: 327 ff). [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)

4. In *The Germans*, Elias wrote: 'The attempt of the National Socialists to destroy the Jews [...] was one of the most striking examples of the power which a belief – in this case, a social or, more properly, a national belief – can gain over people' (1996: 313). Further: 'Few of the social and, especially, the national myths of our age are free of similar falsehoods and barbarisms. The National Socialist doctrine shows, as if in a distorting mirror, some of their common features in a glaring form' (1996: 315; see also Elias 2010: 90 ff.). [\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. Sophie Duchesne (2002; 2005; 2008) has recently demonstrated how relations between processes of identification with nations and processes of identification with Europe were complex and not necessarily antagonistic or exclusive. [\[#N5-pt1\]](#)

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