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SYMPOSIUM

SOCIAL WORLD AND PANDEMIC

Edited by

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1. Sociologists and social scientists in general seem mobilized to interpret the social and political impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Is sociological theory up to the challenge of understanding and explaining the phenomenon?

I will confine my remarks to the contribution that Norbert Elias's process-sociological perspective can make to understanding the Covid-19 health crisis.¹ The high level of compliance with lockdown strategies in many societies illustrates a central theme in his study of the civilizing process, namely the existence of a long-term shift in the balance of power between self-restraint and the fear of external constraints as influences on human conduct.

Elias analysed manners books to demonstrate how new walls were built between people as a result of changing conceptions of social propriety which concerns about hygiene reinforced in later periods. Social distance measures and frequent hand washing at present should be seen in that context - in the necessary long-term perspective and in conjunction with the larger structural changes such as state formation and internal pacification which Elias examined.

¹ The issues discussed in this interview are drawn from the author's book, *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of the Global Order* which will be published by Bristol University Press and is reproduced with their permission.



The societies in question acquired enormous powers over nature but Elias repeatedly stressed their susceptibility to the tyranny of processes they cannot control. A recurrent theme is that greater societal power over nature developed hand in hand with the increased danger of subjection to uncontrolled processes such as war. The following citation from his book, *The Symbol Theory*, shows how he nuanced the point. He observed that 'humankind has gained the ascendancy over most of its potential rivals and enemies in the animal kingdom'. Human societies 'have killed, imprisoned or confined to reserves other animal species, and are just beginning to notice that rule over others entails some responsibility for them'. But victory is incomplete. At the 'level of viruses and bacilli', Elias argued, 'the struggle goes on'.

A central question for Elias is how far societies can transcend fear-driven responses to crises and how far they can acquire more detached standpoints that increase their prospects of bringing unplanned processes under control. Crucial is the relationship between highly-involved national perspectives and more detached orientations that are humanity-centred.

2. How can your research area contribute to examining different dimensions of the phenomenon?

Recent research has been geared towards completing a book on the idea of civilization in world politics and laying the foundations for a study of symbols in long-term perspective. Let me make a few comments about the links between the projects and the current health crisis.

The book discusses Elias's argument that in the course of the European civilizing process levels of violence declined overall, levels of self-restraint increased, emotional identification between people widened, and social planning was stepped up. We can ask how far those four tendencies are evident in world politics. To rephrase the point, Elias's writings provide criteria for ascertaining the main directions of change.

Turning to symbols, any changes in the relative power of national and international symbols can shed light on overall global trends. By way of example, national-populist parties of late have succeeded in raising levels of support for national symbols and they have mounted a powerful challenge to international organizations such as the EU which are associated with a global establishment that stands accused of neglecting the interests of vulnerable groups and of downgrading national affiliations.



Global symbolism remains weak but movements such as Extinction Rebellion have created symbols that resonate in many societies. It will be important to analyse the symbolism of the health crisis. Will the Covid-19 virus become a symbol of national fears and anxieties that stem from the unpredictability of global interconnections? Will it become a symbol of threats to humanity that underpin new transnational solidarities? What part in other words will Covid-19 play in future images of a global civilization and in the consolidation of national orientations? Recent research that is informed by process sociology stresses that struggles over the symbolism of Covid-19 may have a critical role in the coming period and that attempts to control its meaning may have a profound effect on the balance of power between national and international perspectives.

3. Is the pandemic provoking deep social, political and cultural changes? Or is it speeding up trends of change already underway? If so, is it possible to glimpse the contours of post-pandemic societies?

In the conclusion to *Mappae Mundi*, Goudsblom and de Vries stated that the processes over which societies think they have most control may turn out to be the most unpredictable. Perhaps it is best then to focus on criteria that can be used to analyse any significant directions of change in human figurations.

As already mentioned, Elias's writings provide important criteria. Especially important for analysing global trends is whether national self-restraint is increasing or declining, whether emotional identification between people is widening or contracting, and whether support for international planning to protect the vulnerable is rising or falling. Those criteria may be especially useful for examinations of the effects of Covid-19 on the global order. They point to the need to focus on how far self-serving national preoccupations have the dominant say on events and on how far transnational solidarities are gaining in strength. Important is the balance of power between those forces.

The issue then is the relative importance of national and post-national orientations to the world. In the recent period, national-populist movements have been scornful of globalism. National symbols have been central to an assault on international organizations. Environmental movements have been in the forefront of counter-offensives that stress problems affecting humanity as a whole and requiring global action. It remains to be seen whether Covid-19 will be stamped with national or



globalist standpoints, or how balances will develop. That is one of the central questions that will deserve the close attention of the social-scientific community.

4. What work(s) of Sociology or Social Sciences can help us to comprehend and dialogue about the challenges underway?

Process sociologists have argued for taking the long-term perspective on social arrangements and challenges. They have not ignored the impact of epidemics on human figurations. Stephen Menell recently drew attention to a magnificent article by the late Johan Goudsblom on public health and the civilizing process which was published in *The Milbank Quarterly* in 1986. The essay discusses how standards of self-restraint changed in response to epidemics. Fascinating in the current context is the reference to expectations that lepers in the Middle Ages should maintain a distance of six feet from healthy persons.

Goudsblom links those suppositions about necessary standards of self-restraint with the overall course of the European civilizing process. The article is a superb introduction to the long-term perspective on the social world that is the hallmark of process sociology. It invites readers to reflect on the relationship between attitudes to the body, health and hygiene, and the civilizing process.

Elias's book, *Involvement and Detachment* has contemporary significance as people struggle to orientate themselves to new challenges and dangers. Elias stressed how fear often dominates responses to crisis and compounds human difficulties. The question is how far societies can acquire a level of detachment that contributes to greater understanding and control of processes that stand over them.

Again, it is the balance between completing forces that matters. In recent times national-populist leaders have poured scorn on experts. Trump of course has been quick to label inconvenient truths as fake news. There has been a corruption of public discourse. Scientific communities are now widely regarded as providers of the detached knowledge that can enable societies to find their way out of the crisis. Much of the focus is on humanity as a whole rather than on the interests of the nation. *Involvement and Detachment* offers a long-term perspective on such tensions and on the difficulties that societies have in rising above national attachments as they deal with the challenges of lengthening and deepening global interconnections.



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