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Edited by
Bernd Sommer
Marta Bucholc
André Saramago

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Bernd Sommer, Marta Bucholc, André Saramago*

A climate of (de-)civilisation?

This special issue deals with global warming and other cases of anthropogenic environmental change from a (mainly) process sociological perspective. This is particularly noteworthy given that the figurational and process sociological approach founded by Norbert Elias has hitherto been largely neglected by environmental sociology. The *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, edited by Riley E. Dunlap and William Michelson (2001), does not contain a single mentioning of Norbert Elias, Johan Goudsblom, or any of their students throughout its 618 pages. The same can be found in the broader field of sociologically informed sustainability research: Process sociological perspectives are broadly missing.

Although process sociology has hardly received any attention in environmental sociology and related fields, it provides promising *Denkwerkzeuge* – thinking tools – for studying socio-environmental relations and the current ecological crisis. Among these is Norbert Elias's concept of the so-called *Triad of Basic Controls* (Elias, 2012 [1978], 151), which finds its most rigorous application in Johan Goudsblom's work on the domestication of fire as part of the civilising process (Goudsblom, 1992). Further concepts that are valuable for the study of the relationship of humans to the extra-human nature can be found in Elias's sociology of knowledge, for instance, the *Fantasy–Reality Balance*, the *Involvement–Detachment Continuum*, or his theory of *The Great Evolution*, a model of different levels of integration of the universe, ranging from subatomic particles to human figurations and beyond (Elias, 2007 [1993]). In addition, Norbert Elias's sociological understanding of shame and studies on the social habitus can contribute to the understanding of phenomena such as 'flight shame', 'train pride', and more generally the emotional dimension of practices of (non-)sustainability (Rohloff, 2018; Sommer & von Querfurth, 2025).

Such Eliasian *Denkwerkzeuge* are applied in the articles of this special issue. Referring to Norbert Elias's understanding of social change as a long-term development that takes at least three generations and is unplanned, *Sighard Neckel* argues in "The quandaries of transformation. On the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity" that the rapid transformation, which is required for effective mitigation of climate change, appears unlikely from a sociological perspective. *Marta Gospodarczyk* operationalises the involvement–detachment continuum in order to study recent drought events in Poland. *Vincenzo Marasco* and *Angela Perulli* draw on Elias's notion of *social habitus* to interpret data from focus group interviews in Italy and explain the prevalence of high-carbon practices despite widespread environmental awareness.

* *Bernd Sommer (bernd.sommer@tu-dortmund.de),* TU Dortmund University, Germany.
Marta Bucholc (m.bucholc@uw.edu.pl), University of Warsaw, Poland.
André Saramago (asaramago@fe.uc.pt), University of Coimbra, Portugal.

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Norbert Elias's concepts of "civilising" and "civilisation" itself, too, can be applied fruitfully in order to make sense of the current socio-ecological crises. This brings us to the title of the special issue: *A climate of (de-)civilisation?*

In an everyday understanding, the concept of civilisation still predominantly "sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones" (Elias, 2000 [1976], 15). However, what exactly do "civilisation", "de-civilisation", and "civilising" mean within process sociology? In his theory of civilising processes (ibid.), Elias refers to changes on the level of sociogenesis as well changes on the level of psychogenesis that are inseparably linked. Empirically, he studied these developments by examining the emergence of the absolutist state in France and behavioural changes among the secular upper classes until the eve of the French Revolution. Elias described how societal units expanded and the capacity for executing physical violence became centralised. Complementary to this development, social functions and labour became increasingly differentiated, leading to longer and more complex chains of interdependencies. On the personality level, these developments went hand in hand with changes in patterns of behaviour and feelings that can be described by increasing foresight and mutual identification among individuals (independently from their group membership), the reduction of (internal) physical violence, and a decline of the fantasy-content of knowledge. Elias generalised his findings from historical research into a general theory of human development. In this broad understanding, some type of civilising process can be found in every human figuration. However, civilising processes are not intentional and they can be reversed. As Stephen Quilley (2011, 68) puts it by referring to Stephen Mennell: "Decivilization or an overall reduction in complexity is always a possibility, certainly in any particular locus". This means that the disintegration of social units, de-differentiation, and weakened chains of social interdependencies are linked to the decline in mutual identification, increased expression of aggressiveness, and the re-emergence of violence in social relations as well as increasing fantasy-content of knowledge. The current climate crisis represents a loss of societal control over extra-human events in a catastrophic form. According to Elias's notion of the interconnectedness of the *triad of basic controls*, a higher level of danger within the social or natural world is both a manifestation and a catalyst for processes of de-civilisation.

Following this perspective on de-civilisation, *Fritz Reusswig* and *Wiebke Lass* describe how populist narratives and movements contribute to such developments. *Kerrin Langer* and *Frank Reichherzer* reflect on the dynamics of de-civilising and civilising processes using the case of environmental dimensions of warfare: Violent military conflicts regularly lead to the destruction of the natural environment – sometimes even intentionally as a means of warfare. As a result, provisions that prohibit "ecocide" and constrain the destruction of the natural environment during armed conflict have been introduced in International Humanitarian Law. The

inherent ambivalence of civilising processes is examined by *Matthias Schmelzer* in his contribution "The dialectic of civilisation? Norbert Elias, economic growth, and the politics of social-ecological transformation". Schmelzer illustrates aspects of civilising processes that are – under the conditions of global capitalism – simultaneously stabilising and destructive. By doing so, Schmelzer not only highlights the limitations of Eliasian process sociology but also argues for a reconfiguration of Elias's *triad of basic controls* centered on collective self-limitation in order to avoid socio-ecological collapse.

In addition to these research articles, the special issue includes two introductory essays. By referring to Norbert Elias's biography, *Adrian Jitschin* reconstructs his relationship with and viewpoints on extra-human nature. In addition, *Nikolaj Schultz* revisits *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, co-authored with Bruno Latour (Latour & Schultz, 2022), that made use of a class concept inspired by Norbert Elias's civilising theory.

Culture, Practice & Europeanization provides a highly fitting platform for publishing this special issue; not only because the issue comprises contributions that refer to cases in various European societies, but also because Norbert Elias himself can be described as one of the few genuine European sociologists: Born and raised in Breslau, he moved to Heidelberg and Frankfurt to specialise in sociology. Due to the rise of the Nazis, he left Germany via Paris to London, where he wrote his main work *On the Process of Civilisation*. After the World War II, he acquired academic positions in Leicester. After an intermezzo in Accra, Ghana, he moved back to continental Europe, with stations in Bielefeld and Amsterdam, where he died in 1990. During his (partially forced) *tour d'Europe*, Elias left traces and influenced the sociologies of his various European home countries, and many others. This special issue demonstrates how vital and productive this influence remains today in addressing the most pressing problems of our time.

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Adrian Jitschin*

Climate and civilisation – perspectives from the viewpoint of Norbert Elias

The intersection of climate and cvilisation is of utmost importance in today's world. We are aware of the significance of climate change, and we also recognise that, in light of these changing external circumstances, we, as human societies, must adapt our lifestyles accordingly. One change is that we specifically know we will have to deal with increasingly extreme weather events, rising temperatures, rising sea levels, and altered ecosystems. This is nothing new; it has been a part of humanity's entire history since it left its roots in Africa and sought out other climatic zones around the world: that humans must adapt to different climatic conditions and characteristics. They have succeeded remarkably well at this, with a mastery unmatched by animal life forms, especially those of us that live in societies. Humans possess the astonishing ability, as omnivores, to utilise various food sources and, as wearers of clothing, to cover a range of temperature zones. In this way, for those who, for hundreds of thousands of years, had chosen to specialise in different habitats and niches of the food chain as a survival strategy, even the climate change they themselves have caused appears as just another alteration of these external conditions. Thus, this change seems to them as another manageable problem – a view on which one can certainly have differing opinions. At least morally, we bear responsibility for the fact that our actions are displacing the life forms with which we share this planet. At the same time, however, we are also replacing ourselves, the foundations on which our children and relatives can live. It's important to note that while small groups can subsist on unusual food sources, the global population is severely limited in its ability to rely on hunting or nutrient-poor sources for sustenance. This is not a viable option for the vast majority. Presently, over 8 billion people depend on agriculture, and its infrastructure is heavily concentrated in vulnerable coastal areas. The majority of people are also losing their means of living. This societal orientation is a central task in the civilising of our behaviour as a social group. Norbert Elias's perspective, which we will explore in this essay, provides a unique lens through which to understand this societal orientation and its relationship with climate change.

Elias was part of the great peace-oriented movement in Europe that formed between the two world wars. He belonged to the generation that had been drafted into the First World War quite naively; he was among those who worked to prevent a second such brutal clash of civilisations. France, Germany, and Great Britain each formed large power blocs, at the center of which stood a civilised core with a national orientation. Paris, Berlin, and London represented the culmination

* *Adrian Jitschin,* Norbert Elias Foundation, Netherlands

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of states that, while each was aware of the existence of the other powers, were fundamentally convinced of the superiority of their own civilisation. This ideology of their own superiority – military, racial, moral – was the root of why a local event in the Balkans became a major firestorm.

Elias, born in 1897, grew up in the German Prussian State, full of self-confidence in its superiority. During his youth, the use of energy and the excitement surrounding the growing economy were dominant. The automobile age had just begun; when he was six years old, the Wright brothers made their first flight. Overall, the shift to fossil fuels was viewed very positively. When criticism did arise, as in the works of Gerhart Hauptmann, it focused on the loss of traditional jobs. Karl Marx had already denounced the spinning jenny as a significant disruption, while Hauptmann, who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1912, vividly depicted the plight of Silesian weavers who were deprived of their traditional jobs.

Elias's fate is deeply intertwined with Hauptmann's in ways that may not be immediately apparent. Like Hauptmann, Elias hailed from Silesia, a region in Germany that had a population of four million people at that time. His father and uncle were textile merchants, supporting industrialisation and, as a result, environmental pollution. Elias was not just a distant observer of these issues, but a committed member of the entrepreneurial class that contributed to coal mining and the belching of industrial chimneys. This connection is further illustrated by his temporary employment in a stovepipe factory. After completing his doctorate, he spent two years in this metalworking company, attempting to establish a professional career.

Elias's role during this phase of German industrialisation is notably ambivalent. He was not a rebel against environmental pollution, yet he was rather enthusiastic about nature. His two oldest surviving writings reflect his interest in the environment. The first is an authentic account of an adventurous youth trip to the Giant Mountains. When he was 16 years old, Elias organised a three-day tour of this mountain range along the German border for a group of young people. Over the course of three days, they tackled demanding climbs. They enjoyed the physical challenges, including steep ascents to the highest mountains, the captivating Elbe waterfall, and self-sufficiency in shelters with self-cooked meals. Elias's passion for nature and literature went hand in hand; he even insisted on walking past Hauptmann's house during the trip.

The second preserved text by Elias is a more theoretical exploration titled "On Seeing in Nature," a philosophical essay that remains intellectually stimulating to read today. In this writing, a young Elias reflects on what constitutes the "beauty" of nature. He delves into the evolution of the perception of beauty in nature from prehistoric times through antiquity to the Romantic era. Elias notes that beauty is not a fixed concept, but one that changes based on individual perspectives. For example, hunters and tribal societies had a more functional relationship with their surroundings, seeing a unity between the space that provided sustenance and the

space that gave meaning to life. This is also evident in the pluralistic world of gods in Greek and Roman culture, where nature was seen as the result of various larger forces at play, and humans were merely pawns in these uncontrollable powers.

Aristotle made a significant advancement in understanding by conceptualising the plurality of trees, bushes, and lakes as a cohesive composition of elements, a perspective revisited during the Age of Enlightenment. With the rise of modern aesthetics, people eventually came to understand that nature should not be viewed merely phenomenologically but rather as an "endless process of unfolding truth."

A direct path connects the autumnal browns of the trees to questions of botany. Anyone seeking to understand a sunset shall eventually encounter explanations of planetary orbits. Likewise, the falling apple leads to an understanding of gravity. This interplay between observing nature fosters a new awareness of universal natural laws. For Elias, the epitome of this understanding is embodied in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. As a writer, Goethe's cultural works triumphed over his love of nature, with his remarkable travel accounts – from his journey through Italy to "Wilhelm Meister" – serving as prime examples of how to gain clarity and understanding of the surrounding world. Nature's hues help reveal what is often "only seen indistinctly, clouded by dark feelings." Nature, therefore, is essential for comprehending the inner workings of society.

That is the description Norbert Elias put on paper in 1921. You will look in vain for the word "environment" here. It did not exist in the same sense as it is used today. You must differentiate between the words Elias used and those he would almost certainly have used if he were alive today. Today, the term "environment" is often used to describe the natural surroundings that surround us, a concept that has been utilised in the ecology movement since the late 1960s. At the time of Elias's intellectual socialisation, the term was introduced by Max Scheler and Martin Heidegger in a different sense within the phenomenological philosophy shaped by Edmund Husserl. Elias, who had studied with Husserl in 1920, would have been much more familiar with this usage. This approach can be summarised as the unique position of humans created by the special relationship between the separation of world-boundness and spirit. As spiritually higher beings, humans no longer exist directly in and with their environment but have a mind that enables them to think abstractly. Humans can decouple themselves from animal behaviour and create their own environment, even in hostile environments. The combination we have today, that environment is understood as the totality of the nature that surrounds us, was not yet thought of at the time.

Words that seem obvious in the present day were still in their infancy back then or only acquired a new meaning later. And that brings me directly to the title of this special issue, which is called "A Climate of (De-)Civilisation". Elias played a pivotal role in shaping the concept of civilisation, and this volume seeks to deepen its connection to the climate. The idea of climate was still completely unusual in

Elias's youth. This is evident, for example, in its absence in the German Dictionary by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm. The two dictionary authors considered the word too insignificant to include in their vocabulary description.

This contrasts the long, ancient tradition of the term climate, which is not a new creation of the 20th century but a new interpretation of a rare ancient use. In ancient Greek, κλίμα referred to the inclination of the sun. In this version, climate has been part of the vocabulary for 2500 years, and this term has much to do with understanding our world. As is well known, the ancient Greeks already understood that the Earth is round. They used κλίμα to express that the view of the starry sky is different if you change your position on the north-south axis, while it remains the same on the west-east axis. It was already a significant discovery that travelling in one direction changes nothing, while travelling in the other direction changes everything: You have a different sky. Before the discovery of κλίμα, it must have been fearful nights on the rough seas. These nights alone on the high seas in a small wooden shell, tossed around by the waves, with the only light being the distant shimmer of the stars. The famous story of the Ὀδύσσεια by Homer describes King Odysseus travelling on the short stretch between Troy and Ithaca, which he then needed ten years to cross. Even if the description of this Ὀδύσσεια indeed did not happen as in the literary version, it does reveal an actual theme of helplessness and disorientation on the open sea. The discovery of the changing constellations of stars, a significant element in creating meaning, was the first means of orientation in an otherwise completely monotonous view of the high seas. From gathering this insight, which was crucial for nautical science, the understanding of the spherical shape of the Earth could be derived.

Two changes in how we perceive the term "climate" have contributed to its current linguistic form. Initially, enthusiasm for the climate, along with the discovery of warm and cold periods throughout history, has shifted to a disturbing realisation: we humans unconsciously control the climate. Our actions contribute to global warming, cause floods, and lead to the extinction of animal species. This new understanding has little connection to meteorologists, who were previously pleased to identify certain "constants" in weather patterns.

Today, our understanding is much more nuanced. We recognise that climate varies across different time scales – from short-term fluctuations to long-term trends, and from microclimates to macroclimates. In this sense, "climate" is merely a linguistic construct that describes the regularities in the changes of our blue planet on its finite journey through the infinite universe.

To put it another way: four and a half billion years ago, Earth did not exist, and in 1.7 billion years, it will no longer exist. The planet has already gone through three-quarters of its lifespan. Over time, it has transformed from a boiling volcanic planet to a cooled and stable environment, enduring ice ages, and is currently facing significant heating due to human impact. As inhabitants of Earth, we can observe

certain patterns in these changes – a consistent direction that our observations reveal. Depending on the scope of our focus, we can identify phenomena such as climate, which reflect the regularities in these processes.

This observation of regularity was the first change made after the Greeks. They referred to the change in the sun's axis and the constellation as κλίμα. In the Roman Empire, this maritime term was used to describe celestial influences on their government. When could grain be harvested in which province? What clothing should legionaries be equipped with when they were sent to the corners of the empire? Where could the grapes be cultivated from which the coveted drink was made? The fact that the Earth's tilt was a decisive factor in this was clear to the late antique administrators. But they transferred the term to the practical need to understand what kind of weather could be expected in a place.

It is this Roman meaning that then remained the same over the centuries. For modern natural scientists, there was a taxing connection between climate and plants. They categorised the vegetation and fauna they encountered according to climatic zones and created schemes accordingly. The climate zones were shaped as a model; incidentally, this attempt to divide the whole Earth into them is not old. Climate as a higher order of the world is a construct from the middle of the 20th century. The International Meteorological Organization began in 1929 to record climate data systematically over time. It took several years before these figures were taken up. The most significant turning point that led to the climate being understood as a problem area was "The Limits to Growth" in 1972. The Club of Rome proved that the individual local actions of all people have global effects that extend far beyond the time horizon and scope of action of individuals. In his introduction, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations, Kurt Waldheim, appealed that humanity only had "about a decade left to forget its old disputes and begin global cooperation." And suddenly, "climate" had a completely different meaning. We can also see the impact of this second shift in meaning in Google's NGram Viewer. Google evaluates the prevalence of a word in written language at a particular time. As early as 1972, the previously uncommon term climate became a frequently used word; the peak was in the late 1980s, and since 2019, the term has been on the rise again. Climate is now a term that is in moderate use, and hardly anyone would reduce it to just nautical science or botany.

I turn to Norbert Elias once again. In reviewing his writings, you will hardly come across the term "climate." This is not surprising, considering that the Club of Rome introduced the term prominently only when he was already 75 years old. However, it appears that Elias was concerned with the relationship between individual actions of many people and their environmental impacts. While he may not have used the word "climate" explicitly, his discussions align with the concept in various ways. Elias lacks a single, catchy term like "climate" for his observations on sociogenesis and psychogenesis. This idea is evident in the title of his renowned 1939 essay,

"The Society of Individuals", where he examines the intricate connections between individual behaviors and broader societal relationships. Numerous examples of this theme can be found throughout his early philosophical writings, as well as in his remarks on the Kitsch age, and in his later work, including his most recent publicised collection of African essays.

Elias understood that humans shape their environment, including the plants and animals around them, in various ways. He took great pleasure in tracking unintended changes. One of his favorite examples was the grey pigeons of London. Elias studied them closely, likely during his daily visits to the British Museum's reading room. It is reported that he often fed the pigeons leftover bread from his lunch. Elias also observed pigeons outside of London and noticed that the plumage of the pigeons in the city was noticeably greyer. This adaptation allowed them to blend in with the sky, which was often clouded by exhaust fumes from the countless chimneys of the metropolis. During his trips to Workers' Education Courses in the countryside, he reported on the differences between the pigeons in London and those in rural areas. This observation illustrates how people can inadvertently alter their environment. For the pigeons in London, being grey has provided an evolutionary advantage since the Industrial Revolution, as it helps them camouflage against the color of the sky.

Observations of long-term behavioral changes in humans are a general anthropological process. In his magnum opus, "On the Process of Civilisation," Elias describes a mechanism we often see today in relation to climate issues. Restraint and self-control are essential prerequisites for achieving environmental protection.

Elias explains how restraint and self-control were crucial for the emergence of complex societies based on a division of labor. More significant and abstract economic gains became possible when people learned to look beyond their immediate desires and to direct their behaviors toward long-term satisfaction. He illustrates this with the example of the French upper classes, who, over several centuries, transformed from a wild knightly caste – where the principle of the strongest ruled – to a group of courtiers who moved around the king's court in a polite and coordinated manner.

The gradual evolution of pedagogy, starting from the initial writings on the education of boys, resulted in these new aristocrats developing much more refined behavior. By the end of this transformation, they no longer resembled their knightly ancestors. They began to use polite language, wore wigs instead of helmets, ate with cutlery rather than their fingers, and concealed their emotions from one another. This shift from external competition among warriors to internal behavioral control by members of a state administration with a division of labor is strongly related to our contemporary behavior. What was once characteristic of the upper classes is now widespread in modern societies, where people learn to control their actions. The prerequisites identified by Elias for the economic boom of modern times can

also be seen as relevant for the ecological boom of today. We are witnessing a growing enthusiasm for sustainable agriculture and products made from recycled materials. More people are choosing to shop at organic stores over discount outlets, and when travelling, we recognise concepts like “flight shame” versus “train pride.” This internalisation of behaviour would certainly have captured Elias’s attention if he were still alive.

As we reflect on Elias's contributions and the interplay between humanity and nature, it becomes evident that his insights hold a remarkable relevance for our contemporary understanding of climate change and civilisation. Elias invites us to rethink our own engagement with the planet and urges us to recognise that beauty in nature transcends mere aesthetic appreciation; it encompasses a profound connection that humans have with their environment. His exploration reminds us that, much like the shifting climate, our relationship with the natural world is dynamic and deeply interconnected. As we face the pressing challenges of climate change, we are called to move on from celebrating the beauty that still exists in nature, towards our potential to restore balance and respect for the ecosystems.

Nikolaj Schultz*

Expanding the horizon of history: A few notes on Norbert Elias and *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*.

1. One of the more curious analytical suggestions in *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class. A Memo* (Latour & Schultz, 2022) was that certain ideas from the authorship of Norbert Elias could prove useful for describing this class as being legitimate and rational in its (re)definition of the vector of history than the old ruling classes. Although this suggestion caused a bit of grumbling, I do not believe it was an unreasonable argument to put forward. However, given the memorandum-style of our book, we were only able to briefly hint at this historical-theoretical inspiration, which probably did not help as well. For this reason, in this short essay, I will try to add a few more comments on this argument, in the hope of strengthening its usefulness for the continued, collective reflection on the emergence of an ecological-political subject – that is, what we called the 'ecological class'. Like the *Memo* itself, this intervention is structured in a set of concise discussion-point paragraphs.

2. Neither Bruno Latour nor I were experts on Elias, but after discussing his historical-sociological work with French philosopher Bruno Karsenti, it struck us as fruitful to draw inspiration from his ideas on classes. First, it interested us how class struggles – according to Elias – initially manifest in relatively subtle changes in habits, manners, life styles, taste and distastes, values and attitudes, before they crystalise into more visible, intense and articulated conflicts of interests. Consider how ecological conflicts today can be detected particularly in changing habits and matters of taste and consumption, for example, in what one eats, how one travels, etc. Secondly – by avoiding an economised reading of history – his definition of classes does not primarily depend on relations of production, but rather on social groups *detecting*, *formulating*, *articulating and transmitting* a given sense for history and its movements. And thirdly, finally, but no less importantly, then one finds in Elias's thoughts on class struggles no teleological perspectives or historical determinism, which allows to escape the idea that collective historical action and its actor – or, simply, *the* political subject – is already carved in stone (Latour, 2021; Latour & Schultz, 2022).

3. Due to these thoughts on social classes, we began examining more specific aspects of Elias's historical-sociological analyses in our discussion of the possible emergence of a new ecological class. Here, we need to take a step back. Unlike the old 'traditional' classes, which all continue down the paths of modernisation,

* *Nikolaj Schultz, ns@aarch.dk,* Aarhus School of Architecture, Denmark

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development and production, we defined the ecological class as the social collective that assumes responsibility for the long-term issue of preserving the planet's habitability – and which therefore can claim to have a broader, a longer, or a more complex perspective on history. This, we argued, is ultimately the reason in political ecology breaks with the old ideologies of the 19th and 20th century, and why the ecological class find itself in conflict with the old 'bearing classes' – because neither the liberals, the socialists, nor the classes they claimed to represent took into account the preservations of the planet's habitability conditions.

4. The ecological class hence *looks further ahead* than the other classes. By seeking to maintain the planet's habitability conditions it expands its calculations and sensibilities in both time and space – and it is in this sense we in the *Memo* suggested the ecological class could be regarded (and should regard itself) as more 'rational' than the traditional classes. As Bruno Latour had previously noted elsewhere, it is important here to remember the specific conceptual meaning Norbert Elias attached to the notions 'rational' and 'rationality':

> *"(…) there is nothing cognitive about it, nothing rationalist in the old-fashioned sense; it does not draw on the Enlightenment, there is nothing teleological in its argument; it is a series of entirely contingent events. No, one class can only claim to be a little more rational than another when its horizon is a little broader, a little more consistent than that of others, because it is concerned precisely with the long-term meaning of history and the cosmological framework in which it will unfold" [My translation from French to English] (Latour, 2021, 10).*

5. In other words, those classes that *avoid* working against their own civilisation project can claim to be more rational than the others. And again, by fighting to preserve Earth's habitability conditions as well as by taking responsibility for inventing and promoting the engendering practices that ensure their maintenance, the ecological class *broadens the horizon of action*, which is why it can claim to see itself as more *rational and more legitimate* in defining the direction of history and how to "progress" forward. At this point, we found it interesting to mobilise an analogy from Elias's *oeuvre*: Just as the ascending bourgeoise class criticised the aristocracy for its naïve and limited visions, values, and practices, we argued that the ecological class challenges the lack of rationality, legitimacy, and the inconsistencies of the old ruling classes, who have proven incapable of diverting from the destructive horizon of production, and who historically and continuously continue to deprioritise the planetary habitability conditions, as well as the practices that ensure them – conditions and practices that themselves are *conditioning* the very production and prosperity these classes claim to pursue.

6. Based on this argument, we proposed two things. First, that it is precisely from this self-understanding of historical legitimacy that ecologists – who often appear humble or even apologetic about their own political project – could find a source of *mobilising energy and pride*, which is essential for the development of any class consciousness. Secondly, that by undertaking the task of redefining what is 'rational' in relation to the history's trajectory, the ecological class could challenge the role

of the traditional classes in serving as what Bruno Karsenti calls "the pivotal class". Drawing on Elias, Karsenti (2024) understands the pivotal class as the class around which the distribution of political positions is organised – the class that draws the other classes with it toward a specific goal and a given civilisational horizon, and which, through its ways of life and orientations, inspires, and structures new rationalities, practices and paths into the future.

7. Thus, we found in Elias's work a historical analogy, a model, an idea of how an emerging ecological class could avoid merely limping apologetically behind the other classes, and instead strive to *give meaning* to both its own political project and history. As we noted in the book, political ecology could thus grow out of its infancy (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26), cease to appear as a humble or "backward-looking" movement on the wrong side of history, and instead assert its right to criticise the traditional classes, whose narrow-minded economized reading of history blinded them to the planetary limits of a production system, the horizon of which still confines them.

8. As we write in the *Memo:* "In classical terms, one could say that the liberal tradition, largely shared by the socialist traditions, betrayed its own project of development and progress" (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26–27). One could perhaps excuse them on the grounds that they could not have anticipated the extent of the climatic catastrophe. However, we still argued that the former ruling classes have forfeited any right to claim that they are acting in the name of civilisational rationality, just like they no longer possess any legitimacy to define the direction of history, or for that matter the right to demand respect from those other classes they once claimed to lead. Instead – and this was our idea in a nutshell, expressed in more performative terms – expanding the horizon of action *beyond* production is and remains the task of the ecological class, and it is through this endeavor it may inspire and lead the other classes along with it (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26–27).

9. To summarise our argument: With the concept of a 'pivotal class', Bruno Karsenti outlines the idea of an *avantgarde class* – one that leads the way in defining the cultural and political horizon of civilisation, a class around which the political positions end up being organised, and whose practices, rationalities and horizons inspire the other classes. As mentioned, this analysis stems from Elias's description of the ascending bourgeoisie rupture and conflict with aristocratic court society, whereas we used it to portray the emerging ecological class as a more *rational* and *legitimate* class than those still stuck in the political horizons of development and production. Why? Because the ecological class *extends* the horizon of history, and continues the civilisational project through its expanded awareness of the conditions of earthly habitability – and because in doing so, it aspires to define a different understanding of 'progress', and to inspire the other classes through its ways of life and perspectives.

10. Was this proposal naive, overly hopeful, or perhaps even slightly "extravagant" (Blok, 2023)? Possibly, perhaps – but as mentioned above, it was simply our way of suggesting that the ecological class shouldn't be ashamed or humble, but that it should strive to become a new pivotal class, a proud one, more rational than the others, more civilised even, precisely because the other classes have betrayed their own civilisational project by leading us towards the ruins of 'development' and 'progress' (Krøijer et al., 2021). Ruins that – no matter what – require us to collectively reflect on or examine all possible historical analogies in the attempt of creating a strong political ecological subject….

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Sighard Neckel*

The quandaries of transformation.

On the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity

Abstract

This paper provides a specific sociological explanation of the failing in effective climate protection, analysing the unique societal constellations in which a socio-ecological transformation is embedded. Starting with the urgent calls by the IPCC for rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems of society in the current decade, the paper explains why such disruptive change is rather unlikely. Since a fundamental ecological turnaround has to change economics, politics, cultural lifestyles and technical infrastructure at the very same time, socio-ecological transformation is confronted with the dilemma of simultaneity. This precarious figuration of an ecological change gives rise to certain quandaries of transformation as capitalism, climate protection, sustainable life conducts and democracy cannot be smoothly reconciled and coordinated. Therefore, realistic transformation strategies should tackle this dilemma from the outset and strive to avoid getting completely entangled in its quandaries. As outlined in the final section of the paper, sustainable infrastructure and strengthening the common good could be viable ways to navigate the dilemmas of socio-ecological change more effectively.

Keywords: Socio-ecological transformation, transformation research, climate change, theories of social change, infrastructure

Effective climate protection has apparently been a largely unsuccessful endeavour which all too often fails to fulfil its own aspirations. In their *2024 State of the Climate Report*, leading climate scientists have once again summarised the dramatic situation that our failures in climate protection have got us into:

> *"We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster. This is a global emergency beyond any doubt. Much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperiled. We are stepping into a critical and unpredictable new phase of the climate crisis (…) Fossil fuel emissions have increased to an all-time high, the 3 hottest days ever occurred in July of 2024, and current policies have us on track for approximately 2.7 degrees Celsius peak warming by 2100. Tragically, we are failing to avoid serious impacts, and we can now only hope to limit the extent of the damage (…) We find ourselves amid an abrupt climate upheaval, a dire situation never before encountered in the annals of human existence"* (Ripple et al., 2024, 1).

The reasons for this kind of an existential failure are widely discussed in academia and the public alike, whether it is about the economic interests of fossil fuel industries and the states that support them, the incompatibility of the economic system of capitalism with nature and climate protection, or the cultural hegemony of a way of life based on constantly increasing amounts of goods and growing consumer options.

* *Sighard Neckel, sighard.neckel@uni-hamburg.de,* University of Hamburg, Germany

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There is nothing wrong with these explanations. However, from a sociological perspective, they are not specific enough to identify the obstacles that purposeful climate policy faces. Sociology generally attempts to explain the structural conditions of human action, characterised by the specific constellations in which social actions are intertwined. Norbert Elias (2006a) refers to this connectiveness of human actions as "figuration" – as specific orders of interdependence, which usually arises from long-term processes of social change.

A characteristic feature of the specific figuration of an ecological turnaround in modern societies is – and this will be the main topic of my paper – that radical changes in very different areas of human action must occur simultaneously within a very short period of time. This unique challenge gives rise to certain quandaries of transformations that are a major reason for the failures in climate policy – quandaries that neither climate research nor sociology or the general public are hardly aware of.

In the following, first I will describe in greater detail the extremely complex point of departure of the urgent ecological change (1.), then I will draw on sociological theories of social change to highlight the extraordinary and unprecedented challenges that characterise an ecological transformation (2.). A comparison with the findings of previous transformation research shows that attempts at radical change in climate and environmental policy lead to a specific socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity (3.). The numerous impasses and quandaries arising from this dilemma (4.) are analysed using the example of the failure of "green capitalism," which ultimately leaves behind only inadequate piecemeal in climate policy (5.). However, the dilemmas of socio-ecological transformation do not mean, that essential progress in securing our planetary livelihoods is impossible. Therefore, the conclusion describes some realistic steps towards an ecological turnaround (6.).

1. The urgency of combating climate change

The starting point of my analysis is a well-known statement made by the IPCC in its last *Synthesis Report* of March 2023 (IPCC, 2023) namely that the key to socio-ecological transformation today lies solely with societies themselves, but that they are incapable of creating the necessary preconditions for effective climate change mitigation. According to the IPCC, combating climate change no longer poses intractable problems from the perspective of the natural sciences, even if prognoses about the impacts of climate change do fall along a certain range. Technologically speaking, there are sufficient ways to decarbonise energy supply, manufacturing facilities, and infrastructures. In terms of finance, immense amounts of capital worldwide are available for investments in sustainability – although the IPCC deplores that financial flows with an ecological orientation have been entirely insufficient thus far. Above all, however, the political will is lacking to use

the existing climate change mitigation tools effectively and to actually tackle the socio-ecological transformation.

These preconditions would be met if there were broad consensus within societies that climate change mitigation and a sustainable lifestyle and economic system were a priority. However, as we all know, this is not the case. Instead, climate change mitigation and sustainability are highly controversial – not only in the political sphere between parties, electorates, institutions, interest groups, and the climate movement, but also in society itself, between different social milieus, various economic interests, cultural needs and normative values.

The fact that all actions for climate change mitigation must be taken simultaneously if the most serious impacts of global warming are to be prevented complicates the situation even more. So once again, the IPCC has called for "rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems" of society in the current decade "to achieve deep and sustained emissions reductions and secure a liveable and sustainable future for all" (IPCC, 2023, C.3). Any increase in global warming, be it ever so small, would drastically boost the risks of climate change, trigger cascades of probably unmanageable states of emergency, and shut the window of opportunity during which it would still be possible to prevent the most serious ecological crises and catastrophes. Moreover, the decisions taken in this decade would not only affect the present and the near future, but also determine the condition of the Earth system "for thousands of years".

The IPCC statement is followed by an extensive list of measures calling for sweeping and, in most cases, immediate steps to curb global warming and comprising practically all areas of economy, society, and policy (cf. ibid., C.3.1.). They include, among others, rapid decarbonisation of industry; restructuring the financial sector towards sustainable investments; low-emission energy supply, mobility systems, and infrastructures; biodiverse agriculture and global protection of water bodies; ecological restructuring of cities; strict climate governance in all political institutions; social actions to enhance resilience; and, finally, reductions of consumption as well as "behavioural and lifestyle changes".

That the IPCC is calling for such rapid and far-reaching change is not only evident from its latest synthesis report. In its previous assessments, it also called for simultaneous action in all societal sectors, as this would be the only way to bring the multiple causes of the climate crisis under control. Other voices in the climate discourse argue in a similar way as well. For example, in its 2021 decision on climate change mitigation, the German Federal Constitutional Court said that in the interest of respecting future freedom "in all areas of life – production, services, infrastructure, administration, culture, consumption –" developments of purposeful climate change mitigation need to be set in motion to initiate the transition to climate neutrality in good time (cf. BVerfG, 2021).

2. An unlikely transformation

What governments, civil society, and the private sector are being asked to do here goes far beyond everything that modern societies have experienced in terms of social change, and this in multiple ways: First, changes are not to be made incrementally, that is, gradually and step by step, but disruptively, that is, directly and discontinuing previous development paths; second, not as a self-directed process that defies overall planning, but as one that is intentional and governed; and third, not as a series of societal changes in individual areas at different times, but as necessary transformations in all areas of society at the same time.

From the perspective of Norbert Elias's sociology, this kind of a planned social change in such a short period of time can only be described as an illusion. According to his theory, social developments are certainly structured, but unplanned overall (Elias, 1977). Even planned human action is always directed anew into completely unplanned tracks, since action in figurations has a certain autonomy and is therefore confronted with countless unintended consequences. Moreover, Elias understands social change as a long-term development, at least over three generations, as he has emphasised at various points (see for example Elias, 2006b, 109). However, three generations from now would be far too late for the urgent turnaround in climate policy.

Another complicating factor is the global dimension of this rapid transformation fundamentally affecting all societies worldwide and in particular countries of Europe, North America, East Asia, and other major emitters. However, the conditions for initiating this transformation are completely different in each of these countries. Moreover, every implementation of transformation steps in one country is dependent on developments in other countries or regions of the world, just as the success of climate protection can ultimately only be measured in global terms, which individual countries can influence only to a limited extent. This is a hyper-complex type of interdependence to which a sociology without globalisation such as Elias's approach has hardly an answer.

The Paris Climate Agreement addresses this global dimension of the ecological challenges by means of a system of temporal stages of emission reductions. Joint responsibility for the climate is to be executed through different speeds of reduction, whereby the countries that industrialised early on and those with the highest emissions are assigned a pioneering role. Nevertheless, the heterogeneity of global spaces introduces a completely new level of complexity to the ecological turnaround never seen before. The unlikeliness that ecological change can take place simultaneously all over the world within just one decade does not become a realistic expectation if it is staggered over time.

Taking a glimpse into the history of modern societies shows how low the probability of such a socio-ecological transition is, even in individual countries. Social

change has mostly occurred as processes driven by internal dynamics whose complex consequences hardly anyone was able to predict and which were often unintentional and even undesired. Few people could have imagined what the World Wide Web would mean, for example. Even in 2001, some futurologists predicted that the Internet boom would soon come to an end (Der Standard, 2021). What is more, social change has often taken place slowly and bit by bit, and was often noticed only when it had actually already occurred long before. Thus, historical research has shown that the cultural upheaval in the West associated with the year 1968 had already begun in the second half of the 1950s (Kraushaar, 2008). Wars and revolutions are exceptions to such slow transitions, but it is true of them too that their consequences have rarely matched the respected expectations. Finally, many areas of life have remained stable even in phases of accelerated social change, whereas others have radical changed within a short time. The globalisation of markets that started after 1990 still has not reached every corner of local life-worlds.

The socio-ecological transformation, by contrast, intends to achieve a planned transition across the board in a short time because incremental changes are too slow and too uncertain to be able to limit global warming at least to less than 2 degrees. Furthermore, it demands simultaneous transitions across all sectors since there is practically not a single area of society that does not contribute to the climate crisis in its own way. In the age of the Anthropocene, the causes of global warming are intertwined with human activities to such a profound and complex extent that hardly any sphere of action can be excluded from the pressure to achieve rapid change. These simultaneous causes of climate change are matched by its catastrophic consequences, which are described in climate research as the simultaneous mega-crises of a "climate endgame" (Kemp et al., 2022), accompanied by a social collapse that could be the last in the long human history of societal breakdowns (cf. Kemp, 2025, 303 ff.).

The socio-ecological transformation is therefore situated in a circle of simultaneities, and we do not know whether it might prove to be a vicious circle: through their emissions, practically all social systems are inducing climate change which in turn can take the form of simultaneous extreme climate events. Climate policy can react only by attempting to change all these systems at the same time. Since a fundamental ecological change of society means that absolutely everything is interconnected, it inevitably leads to conflict with many strongly articulated interests in society and provokes resistance on all sides. The enormous scope of a socio-ecological transformation gives rise to countless conflicts that cause heated debates about every single measure in every conceivable area of life. When have modern societies ever been in a comparable situation, where literally everything, from the rules of economic activity to technical infrastructure to cultural lifestyles have been called into question? When have modern societies – to use a term from Elias – ever been entangled in such a "double bind", in which ecological dangers create tremendous pressure for change, to which societies in turn can only react with immense levels

of stress, leading to a probably uncontrollable cycle of escalation? When have actors ever been in such a precarious figuration?

3. Transformation research

Societal figurations that would even be roughly comparable to the challenges of the socio-ecological transformation are extremely rare. If we seek examples in more recent history, we find certain areas of political science in the 1970s that already used the term "transformation research" (for an overview: Merkel, 2010). This research addressed the changes of political system in countries such as Greece, Spain, Argentina, and Portugal following the overthrow of longstanding dictatorships. However, the sudden transformation concerned only the political system and the introduction of democracy, whereas the economy and cultural lifestyles remained largely untouched.

This was somewhat different after the collapse of the Soviet Union and during the system change in former state-socialist countries, which initiated a second wave of transformation research. The post-socialist societies found themselves confronted with having to change the political and the economic system at once. This meant establishing capitalism and democracy simultaneously, although capitalism had never been established by democratic means and always preceded democratisation.

In 1991, following a central idea of the Norwegian sociologist Jon Elster, Claus Offe described this quandary in a seminal essay:

> *"A market economy is set in motion only under predemocratic conditions. In order to promote it, democratic rights must be held back in order to allow for a healthy dose of original accumulation. Only a developed market economy produces the social structural conditions for stable democracy and makes it possible to form compromises within the framework of what is perceived a positive-sum game. But the introduction of a market economy in the postsocialist societies is a "political" project, which has prospects of success only if it rests on a strong democratic legitimation. And it is possible that the majority of the population finds neither democracy nor a market economy a desirable perspective. If all of those propositions hold true at the same time, then we are faced with a Pandora's box full of paradoxes, in the face of which every "theory" – or, for that matter, rational strategy – of the transition must fail"* (Offe, 1991, 881).

According to Offe, particularly during the phase of its establishment, capitalism gives rise to serious social upheaval. That is why it is hardly possible to introduce it through democratic processes: if capitalism depends on public support in places where it does not yet exist, then most people will decide against it. Yet after 1990, the establishment of capitalist markets was politically wanted. For this reason, the new economic order required a certain legitimation – but democracy stands precisely in the way of obtaining it. Offe called this complex situation where various goals block each other the "dilemma of simultaneity" (ibid., 872): if capitalism and democracy do not develop one after the other, but at the same time, they impede each other.

The extent to which this dilemma of simultaneity hampered the further development of post-socialist countries became apparent in the following decades. Under Putin's rule, Russia saw the emergence of a mafia-like form of plunder capitalism with neo-imperial goals. Other Eastern European countries sacrificed the principles of liberal democracy to nationalism and combined neoliberal economics with autocratic governance. In many countries and regions of the former socialist bloc, right-wing extremists have won relative majorities in elections.

4. The uncertainties of socio-ecological transformation

In comparison, the turbulences that makes the socio-ecological transformation necessary in the age of the climate crisis seems less fundamental at a first glance. The simultaneous transition "across all sectors and systems" of society, which the IPCC is calling for, concerns neither introducing an entirely new economic order (which in this case would amount to abolishing capitalism) nor replacing the democratic political system with a different one. Neither capitalism nor democracy are to be superseded by other systems. However, what is not the aim of an intended societal change may well be its unintended side effect – desired by some, but not by others.

Whether capitalism is even capable of surviving a shift away from an economic system based on unconditional growth and to achieve sustainability is an open question. Parts of the climate movement and supporters of degrowth or eco-socialism advocate a sustainable economy beyond capitalism, but ultimately hold a minority position in the climate debate (cf. for example Schmelzer et al., 2022; Brownhill et al., 2021). Others expect capitalism to collapse under the weight of environmental destruction and be replaced by a state-directed ecological war economy (cf. Moore, 2015; Saito, 2024).

Just as uncertain is the fate of democracy. Some critics of growth economy view democracy as nothing less than the very cause of the climate crisis, as it is unable to prevent citizens raising their ambitions to ever higher levels of prosperity. Some of these critics argue in favour of a kind of an ecological rule by elites that is intended to restrict people's needs and desires (cf. Blühdorn, 2022). This corresponds to numerous views in the public that democratic politics, due to its dependence on elections and its timing in legislative periods, is hardly in a position to sustain a basic ecological orientation in the long term and to grasp the enormous time horizons of climate change at all (for a critique, see Battistoni & Britton-Purdy, 2020). Views of an "ecological ungovernability" could allow authoritarian forces to dismiss the rules of modern democracy as incapable for crisis management. Dictatorships and autocracies thrive on states of emergency: they give them the opportunity to use a distress situation to readjust the rules of governance and secure largely unlimited powers for themselves.

In light of the climate crisis, capitalism, the protection of ecological livelihoods and democracy could come into conflict with one another, with one being sacrificed

for the other. The dilemma of simultaneity has now returned in the form of a trilemma, as the repugnance of no less than three factors that cannot be reconciled. If, within a decade, the economy is to be committed to sustainability and political institutions to climate protection, if infrastructure must become emission-free and cultural lifestyles as sufficient as possible, then disruptive changes will occur in a variety, profoundness and urgency that cannot be coordinated smoothly. Politics and economy are joined by technology and culture – such a programme of radical change has never been on the agenda before!

5. The supremacy of the piecemeal approach

Even today, the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity is to be seen in more than a few episodes of current climate policy. Take, for example, the concept of 'green capitalism', which most Western governments are pursuing when it comes to ecological matters. The assumption is that further economic growth and the ongoing expansion of markets, production and consume can be harmonised with climate protection by means of ecological modernisation, that is technical innovations and market instruments. These ideas have dominated the Western world in particular for more than twenty years.

What this concept has achieved so far, however, is more than disappointing. In 2023, global greenhouse gas emissions hit a new record high, oil consumption continues to increase every year, in 2022 more coal was burned than ever before in human history (CLICCS, 2023; Friedlingstein et al., 2022). Not even green capitalism has been able to change these trends. In the US and the European Union, emissions have decreased slightly, but far too little to achieve the climate goals that these countries have set themselves (Statista, 2025a; EEA, 2023). According to recent climate research findings there is a 50 percent probability that the global CO_2 budget remaining to achieve the 1.5-degree target will be exhausted in just five years if no significant changes are made (CLICCS, 2023). As it stands today, in order to stick to 1.5 degrees, the global economy would have to be completely climate neutral by 2030 – which is a completely unrealistic assumption.

Where sustainable technologies are actually applied, they often do not contribute to climate change mitigation. Resource efficiency comes to nothing if it is eaten up by increasing amounts of goods. Even green capitalism's flagship project of emissions trading has proved to be a failure in many cases, or at least has not really been able to actually halt climate change. Since emission certificates can be sold at a profit, it is not surprising that emissions trading has not yet achieved sufficient carbon reductions and in practice serves at least as much to enable emissions as to prevent them. In this respect, experts speak of the so-called "waterbed effect": if emissions are depressed in one place, they rise in others because there is still an oversupply of emission certificates as not to harm business interests.

Since climate damages due to greenhouse gases are so enormous, carbon prices would have to rise very sharply, which could wreck down entire industrial sectors and also large population groups that cannot afford such an increase. Carbon pricing could only work in a just way if it goes hand in hand with far-reaching economic redistribution – but this is exactly the opposite of what the liberal proponents of emissions trading want.

Thus, if the economy were restructured to pursue green growth, then emissions and environmental damage would not be reduced sufficiently to slow down the climate crisis. But if climate protection were given top priority and energy prices were increased significantly to remove fossil fuels from the market, there would be immediate resistance from large population groups who would lose a significant amount of income because of high carbon prices. Climate policy would be the driver of increasing inequality and a further alienation from democracy. If, on the other hand, the goal were to achieve an economic redistribution at the expense of the rich in order to finance effective climate protection, the economically strongest interests would use their political veto power precisely to prevent this. Decarbonisation would thus be pushed further into distance, just as ecological emergency regimes could approach under the sign of an impending climate catastrophe. Thus, there are many reasons to believe that, from a sociological perspective, 'green capitalism' is similar to the theoretical model of 'Schrödinger's cat' in physics: a state in which it is both alive and dead at the same time.

Very similar problems arise with regard to civil society and its diverse forms of life conducts. Raising the prices of environmentally harmful practices such as air travel or meat consumption and setting ecological limits on mass consumption and emission-intensive mobility would have little impact on the wealthy, who can afford high prices for climate-damaging activities. In lower classes, on the other hand, renunciation is seen as an attack on social participation and calls for sustainability are viewed as an attempt to undermine the respectability of their way of life. Conversely, despite their high consumption of resources, green middle classes regard mass consumption as complicit in environmental destruction and discredit it as irresponsible. Thus, disputes over life conducts leads to divisions in the efforts to preserve the ecosystem as long as these efforts cannot be transformed into a social project for a better life of all.

All of this teaches us that the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity will not be resolved by attempting to take all conflicting interests into account or even to fulfil them alike. After all, the dilemma consists precisely in the fact that this will hardly be possible if we do not pursue illusions or pipe dreams. Using the example of poorer countries, Albert O. Hirschman (1973) once demonstrated that realising multiple major development goals at the same time turned on a far-reaching precondition. According to Hirschman, societies seeking to achieve both economic growth and a just distribution of income could do so only sequentially:

first economic development, later growth in prosperity. This required, however, that large population groups would accept serious inequality for a long time and understand that prioritising economic growth would support their hope for a better life in the future.

Hirschman's insights into the problems of achieving multiple goals simultaneously also apply to processes of social change that are not geared toward economic growth but, conversely, toward preserving natural resources. Even a socio-ecological transformation seeking to achieve climate protection without a severe economic decline and massive social upheaval must also rely on hopes for a better world leading to the acceptance of crises and stressful cultural change. However, the yellow vest protests years ago in France or the most recent resistance in Germany against the first attempts of a decided climate policy demonstrated that such hopes must not be taken for granted. Unless it dissolves into pure ecological ignorance, the dilemma of simultaneity in the climate decade will most likely transform into a patchwork of individual piecemeal, not directed by intentional plans but the most powerful interests. This will certainly not be enough to really prevent the climate crisis.

6. Is there a way out?

Is there a way out of the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity, this very precarious figuration? Probably not. Trapped in this dilemma, capitalism, the protection of natural livelihoods, and democracy seem widely incompatible and mutually obstructive. So far, effective climate protection has largely failed to overcome these blockades, being crushed by the social conflicts and opposing interests arising from most attempts at ecological change. There is no comprehensive solution in sight, no collective actor or global institution that could remove these barriers and successfully set a "great transformation" in motion. Other analyses share this realistic view. Jens Beckert considers climate change to be a "wicked problem" that the institutional and cultural structures of capitalist modernity are almost inevitably doomed to fail (Beckert, 2025). If the incentive structures of social action are politically geared toward votes, economically toward profits from growth, and culturally toward increased consumption, we will probably continue to endure half-hearted climate protection and rising temperatures.

Therefore, a completely planned ecological turnaround in all "sectors and systems" of modern society, as the IPCC propounds out of sheer desperation, is unrealistic. However, that does not mean that certain important advances cannot be planned and achieved. Even these important advances, which cannot be anything other than intended and planned, will certainly lead us into some unplanned tracks. But this cannot be a reason to omit them. Accordingly, one should strive to devise transformation strategies that are aware of the dilemma of simultaneity from the outset and aim to avoid getting completely entangled in its quandaries. What matters here is organising steps towards change, the implementation of which will equally

strengthen a green economy, democracy, and sustainable life conducts. Neither market-driven green capitalism nor ecological emergency regimes, and certainly not the countless appeals to individuals' ecological responsibility, are able to accomplish this.

What is more promising is to rely on the transformative leverage of sustainable and inclusive infrastructures which should be available as commons. In a situation like today, in which the many conflicting demands and interests threaten to obstruct an ecological turnaround, the most reasonable approach is to start with the most important issue in climate protection, which also has the broadest support among various population groups. This can only mean a determined reorganisation of society's infrastructure, i.e. the basic material supply of energy, heat, water, transport, buildings, natural goods and social care based on compliance with planetary boundaries, ecological precaution and the common good for all**.**

Publicly owned sustainable infrastructure, ranging from power supply, mobility systems, digital networks, and housing to natural resources and social services, can align politics, economics, and life conducts with the common good and the protection of the planet's livelihood. The most urgent climate goal of decarbonisation would benefit best from this. In Germany, energy supply, industry, transport, agriculture and housing account for 70 percent of all greenhouse gas emissions (Statista, 2025b). Decarbonising these infrastructures would do the most for climate protection. This can only be enforced through government policies that provide sustainable infrastructure as a public good when private-sector interests conflict with climate protection.

This is particularly true of energy companies. The failures of green capitalism and the ongoing investment in fossil fuels by rich investor groups have shown that effective decarbonisation cannot be expected from the private sector. It is therefore time for the public sector to become much more involved in energy supply. Economist and human geographer Brett Christophers (2022) has made compelling arguments in support of this: only the state possesses the planning and coordination capabilities necessary for an energy transition across the entire supply chain – from power generation and transmission to distribution and end-customer delivery; only the public sector is capable of this kind of networked and coordinated thinking and planning at the necessary speed.

Fossil fuel companies seem all-powerful, capable of resisting the energy transition at every turn. But even here, there are opportunities for real change that can be pursued. In Germany, the Federal Constitutional Court's ruling on climate protection sets the stage for effective decarbonisation. It calls for political control of greenhouse gas emissions in order to limit global warming to at least 2 degrees. It is up to governments to take advantage of such rulings and incorporate them into legislation and policies. Private property rights should end where their exercise deliberately damages the common good of the ecosystem, on which all people are

equally dependent. Exclusive disposal rights to fossil fuels encourage the selfish destruction of natural goods such as air, water, and the atmosphere, while collectively agreed-upon rules on the use of natural goods provide better protection for these global commons (cf. Ostrom, 2015). In the case of fossil fuels, this has become a matter of planetary survival. Therefore, socialising the energy sector is imperative if private companies continue to destroy the climate and persistently exceed climate policy guidelines.

None of this is revolutionary romanticism or an exaggerated hope for the state – the public sector is much more than just state government. Property rights are currently under debate for many goods that are part of basic needs. In urban areas, housing corporations are confronted with citizens' initiatives demanding socialisation if they fail to demonstrate any public benefit. In turn, some European cities and municipalities have taken away energy supply from private companies. Municipalities are buying back their electricity or setting up their own communal utilities. The municipalisation of electricity and heating has taken a visible upturn, primarily due to renewables. This also benefits citizen cooperatives that organise their energy needs locally in a sustainable way. A faster energy transition will be facilitated by this, paving the way for effective decarbonisation. First successful results of municipalising sustainable infrastructure are already visible. Copenhagen, for example, will achieve climate neutrality in the coming years, against all odds, thanks to a corresponding policy (Republik, 2025). Since sustainable infrastructures as common goods contribute to overcoming fundamental ecological problems that cannot be solved by markets, the state, or individuals alone, they enable social alliances across conflicting interests and values. The "new municipalism" (cf. Forman et al., 2020) is one example of this.

Sustainable infrastructure as a common good is also an important prerequisite for large population groups to support ecological change. If we are serious about protecting the planet, socio-ecological transformation will, at best, allow for further growth in private wealth for those in the lower income classes. The well-being of households should primarily be strengthened through public welfare so that good living conditions are not dependent on continuous increases in private goods, which the Earth's system is increasingly unable to sustain. This decoupling of societal wealth and increased volumes of commodities is served by sustainable infrastructure as commons, without being associated with deterrent demands such as renunciation. Instead, they promote general prosperity, making climate protection acceptable to the majority. Infrastructure as commons contributes to social justice in the distribution of fundamental goods; it strengthens welfare, sustainability, and, not least, democracy without requiring a complete "system change" of capitalism that is simply unrealistic. The socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity would be considered without being able to avoid it completely, but also without being entirely at its mercy. Compared to the current standstill in climate protection and sustainability, this would represent real ecological and societal progress.

Of course, sustainable infrastructures and the strengthening of the common good would not resolve all the problems and dilemmas of socio-ecological change. As Max Weber once put it, capitalism is the "most fateful power in our modern life" (1988 [1920], 4) which has long since taken control of the climate and the environment. But our modern lives are not shaped by capitalism alone. Social security and public health are just as little a matter of a capitalist mindset as voluntary fire brigades, municipal waterworks, cooperative wind farms, the German football team of FC St. Pauli or the study of sociology. Since the middle of the 20th century, the capitalist market economy has been restricted in many ways by social policy, which has led to improvements in the lives of poorer classes and reduced social inequality for several decades. If we could achieve a comparable ecological containment of capitalism in the struggle against climate change, this would certainly not win everything, but at least some of the battle.

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Marta Gospodarczyk*

Accepting the maelstrom? Emotional responses to drought in farming households in Poland and the involvement–detachment continuum

Abstract

This article focuses on responses to drought among Polish farmers. Framed by the concept of the involvement–detachment continuum, as proposed by Norbert Elias, this article shows the unbreakable bond between natural occurrences and social life, especially of a specific social group of farmers. Drawing on interviews and participant observations in two research locations in Poland, purposefully chosen to reflect the diversity of the sector in the country, the article describes a response to drought dubbed "weary acceptance".

Based on Elias's essay "Fishermen in the maelstrom", the article argues, that when certain structural conditions are met, an objective assessment of the possible actions against drought is being made by the farmers. Based on this assessment, a position of passivity is assumed, wherein the unpredictability and uncontrollability of drought are being accepted as part of the course for farming, and stoicism in the face of hardships is seen as a part of legitimised farming habitus.

Keywords: drought, climate crisis, Poland, Norbert Elias

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1. Introduction

In the summer of 2025, the European Drought Observatory noted worsening drought in Central and Eastern Europe, while in the Southeastern Mediterranean, drought conditions remained critical (EDO 2025). The situation in Australia remains dire (Nicholas, 2025), and even more so in sub-Saharan Africa (Toreti & Bavera et al., 2025). Media headlines with similar information have been present for decades now, and the persistence and severity of drought remain one of the more easily noticeable effects of the climate crisis. While global chains of food supply make it so that large parts of the population, especially in the countries of

* *Marta Gospodarczyk (m.gospodarczyk@is.uw.edu.pl),* University of Warsaw, Poland.

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the Global North, may not experience the most direct consequence of a lack of water – hunger – drought is a natural occurrence of paramount importance for social life.

The increased frequency and severity of droughts in Poland (e.g., Ghazi & Salehi, 2025; Somorowska, 2009), which, along with other unpredictable weather occurrences, are undoubtedly caused by the climate crisis, constitute the primary context of this article. Another is the acknowledgment that vulnerability to drought is experienced and felt differently across social groups. Therefore, in studying the social implications and impacts of drought, this article focuses on the emotional responses to drought among adult members of farming households (hereafter referred to simply as farmers, since farming labor is often undertaken by all members of such households). Around 9 % of the workforce in Poland is employed in agriculture (Eurostat, 2022), pointing to the significant role of the profession in the life of the country.

The point of departure for this paper is that farmers are among those most vulnerable to drought, as they work closely with nature and are materially dependent on it. The paper will show that they respond negatively to the uncontrollable and unpredictable occurrence that is drought, with emotions such as anger, self-doubt, and hopelessness. However, some employ certain rationalising strategies to lessen their emotional engagement with drought and are more likely to exude a posture of "weary acceptance." This "weary acceptance" is a strategy aimed at emotional survival – admitting that there is no way of controlling drought may, paradoxically, serve as a defence mechanism against experienced hardship.

Using the framework of the involvement–detachment continuum proposed by Norbert Elias (2007), this article will show, first, that members of farming households, due to their proximity to and dependence on nature and land, are among the social groups most likely to experience an intense emotional response to crises such as drought. The uncontrollability and unpredictability of nature emphasise a truth: that no matter the scientific achievements that increase human control over all aspects of life, it is not possible to control everything – and in that truth lies the source of pain. Second, it is proposed that while some emotional responses take the form of rebellion against this painful truth, others take the form of recognition and acceptance of it, as a means of protecting one's well-being. Lastly, the importance of the structural conditions of agriculture in the investigated communities for shaping these emotional strategies will be emphasised.

2. Norbert Elias's involvement and detachment

This article will focus on one particular aspect of the data collected in the research process, namely an emotional response that is, in this paper, called "weary acceptance" or "resigned acceptance," framed by Norbert Elias's conceptualisation of the involvement–detachment continuum. The involvement–detachment contin-

uum forms the basis of Elias's theory of knowledge and science. He notes that human control over non-human forces and actors is growing (and so is, of course, the self-control that we as humans exercise as well); this growth results in the proliferation and strengthening of a detached perspective on reality (Elias, 2007).

This detachment is, in short, an objective perspective of an individual who is able to observe the social and natural processes surrounding them in an analytical way, carefully considering the interplay between corresponding factors and actors. Emotions are, in this case, pushed aside, and assessments are made on the basis of the observed reality. Natural events are understood and perceived as impersonal results of a chain of events bounded by objective laws of physics, biology, gravity, etc. Involvement, then, is an emotional, subjective perspective of an insider to the process. For example, an involved perspective on a sea storm would be to perceive it as divine punishment, rather than the result of the interplay of currents, Earth's rotation, and air temperature.

While it is perhaps tempting to treat these categories as rigid and dichotomous, the notion of a continuum serves as a reminder that there are innumerable stages between these two ends, and no individual or society can be readily and unequivocally described as either detached or involved at all times. The positions on the continuum are not static. In fact, as Elias writes, usually only very young children can be completely emotionally involved, with no regard to material reality or any semblance of facts, and only very few people, in turn, can be completely unmoved by what is happening around them (Elias, 2007, 61). In the civilising process, detached models of understanding the world and oneself became a part of sociopsychological structures, a "second nature", although one's position on the involvement-detachment continuum may, of course, shift as a result of many conditions and contexts, as well as rising and falling social and mental pressures (see e.g. Loyal & Quilley, 2005, 816–817).

In Elias's essay "Fishermen in the Maelstrom", which is published as a part of Involvement and Detachment, he uses Edgar Allan Poe's short story "A Descent into the Maelstrom" to illustrate the overarching themes present in involvement and detachment. The essay starts with an image taken from Poe's short story: we have two brothers on a boat on a stormy sea, and a maelstrom – a powerful whirlpool sucking in everything in its way – is forming. The boat that the brothers are on is circling closer and closer to the edge of the whirlpool, and fear is paralysing them. At some point, however, one of the brothers manages to snap out of the fear-induced paralysis and notices a regularity in the workings of the maelstrom – namely, that smaller, circular objects move slower than larger ones. The observant brother therefore makes a decision to tie himself to a barrel and jump out of the boat; the other one, still paralysed, remains on board. The boat with the unlucky brother gets sucked in and sinks, while the barrel with the other sibling circulates

slower and slower until the whirlpool ceases. The observant brother survives (Elias, 2007, 45–60).

What does this story mean when it comes to questions of control, fear, distance, and involvement? Elias points out that the brother who managed to shake his fear and observe the regularities of the maelstrom did so because he managed to observe his surroundings as if he were not involved in them – but from a distance. He was able to perceive himself as a "figure on a chess-board forming a pattern with others (…) turn his thoughts away from himself to the situation in which he was caught up" (Ibid., 46). Then he was able to – after cool observation – understand the uncontrollable process enough that he used the elements of said process to ensure his own survival (Ibid., 46).

The maelstrom – or an uncontrollable crisis, a process that has a negative effect and causes a strong affective response – can then be managed and/or controlled, affectively as well, by positioning oneself in a detached manner. While there are, as Elias points out, situations in which such a detached emotional position is close to impossible to achieve, the parable of the two fishermen shows us the circularity of the "physio-psychological and socio-psychological double-bind" (Ibid., 48). In short, uncontrollable crises bring with them strong emotional responses that hinder the ability to detach oneself from the situation and subsequently the ability to survive it, which again increases the negative emotional response, and so on and so forth. The affective structures and the natural structures are bound together – the interdependencies of human and non-human nature are inescapable, and to adequately analyse societal structures, one must do away with ontological dualism, or the idea of a rigid split between human and non-human nature (Ibid., 48–49).

3. The double-bind: social impacts of the natural

The question pertinent to this particular article is this: can drought be a maelstrom? It is, undoubtedly, a crisis, in that it endangers an individual's material standing, emotional well-being, and indeed even physical well-being. Regardless of the media and political framing of climate change at large, and drought as one of its symptoms, the consequences – especially for social groups dependent on nature, such as farmers – can range from simply negative to dire.

Margaret Alston, for example, finds that drought has a detrimental effect on mental health, even contributing to suicides among rural men in Australia (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008). In her other research, she notes that the mental strain caused by drought may factor in the increase in incidents of domestic violence in rural areas (Alston, 1997). These findings were corroborated by research in India (Dehingia et al., 2023) and sub-Saharan Africa (Aguilar-Gómez & Salazar-Díaz, 2025). Other consequences of drought may include, of course, the breakdown of local economies (Fleming-Muñoz et al., 2023), but also increased consumption of alcohol and tobacco, as well as other substances, especially among men (Mosberg

& Eriksen, 2015). The emotional response to drought may be strengthened by its unpredictability and uncontrollability, as emphasised by Rebecca Jones (2018), or by narratives, be it political or media, attempting to "shock" the individuals into action by emphasising the damaging impact of climate crisis (see e.g. Höijer, 2010; Rutledge-Prior & Beggs, 2021).

While it is common to think of crises, disasters, and catastrophes as relatively short and violent events – such as earthquakes, hurricanes, or indeed maelstroms – one must also consider the processual nature of such happenings, even in a longue durée perspective (Williamson & Courtney, 2018). The temporal nature of drought as a crisis – namely, that it does not happen overnight and can last for years at a time (as exemplified by the Australian Millennium Drought, or "The Big Dry," between the late 1990s and 2009) – makes the affective response to it even more torturous and less apparent.

This article proposes to look at and analyse drought as a maelstrom – or rather, a perpetual maelstrom of varying intensity, a threat of its forming. It focuses on the social group most prone to experiencing the negative effects of drought by virtue of the profession of its members, namely farmers. Their professional habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), structuring and binding together their lives, self-perception, and mentalities, determines (to an extent) the way in which they drift on the uneasy sea. Drought is the maelstrom – the uncontrollable crisis that threatens to suck the farmers in. While, as Elias wrote, there are some who are able to observe the process from a detached perspective and act in such a way that allows them to remain on the surface, I posit that some, while observing, choose to accept their circumstances in an attempt at psychological and emotional survival. In short, resigned or weary acceptance, often based on detached observation, is a survival strategy as well and is often employed by those whose repertoire of action is structurally limited. I will elaborate on these structural limitations in the next part of the article.

4. The Context: Polish Agriculture and Its Idiosyncrasies

This part of the article gives an arguably limited but necessary overview of the context in which the investigated farming households function. Polish agriculture, while embedded within the global structures of the free market since the fall of communism in 1989, and even more so after accession to the European Union in 2004, is also influenced by long-lasting cultural scripts warranted by the historical developments of the country. The legacy of feudalism, which lasted until the latter half of the 19th century, with its stark division between the serfs and the nobility, has resulted in Polish agriculture being dominated by small, family-run farms (the average farm in Poland is less than 12 hectares of arable land in size, as per Agencja Restrukturyzacji i Modernizacji Rolnictwa, 2024). The collectivisation efforts of USSR-backed post-war governments were largely unsuccessful, to the point that

– in stark contrast to most other Eastern Bloc countries – the majority of farms remained privately owned (Gorlach, 2000). Communal farms were mostly concentrated in a few areas of the country, usually in the west and north, on formerly German territories. Based on such historical developments, regional differences in agricultural structures are abundant, and this research largely hinges on the acknowledgment of these contextual differences.

The emotional component of farming hinges, first, on the role of family in agriculture. Farms were, and still mostly are, operated by individual farmers, usually with substantial workforce contributions from family members. In this vein, succession becomes immensely important – the farm is somewhat of a collective legacy to be passed on to another generation, usually in a patrilinear succession (Dudek, 2016; Gorlach & Drąg, 2019). Second, the farm can be perceived – especially in regions of Poland where, after the Second World War, collective forms of farming were not as common, or not common at all – as one of the last spheres of individual autonomy and influence. This emotional component of farming as a profession is a result of longue durée structures of the relationship between individuals and the land they operate on (Bukraba-Rylska, 2008).

It is, then, useful to consider the notion of professional habitus, as proposed by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992). Habitus relates to internalised dispositions and meanings shared by members of a social group (Raedecke et al., 2003, 69). As Sutherland and Darnhofer (2012) note, habitus is created by the interplay between free will and structures over time, framing the actions of those who act in accordance with said dispositions. It is possible to speak of a farming habitus, that is, a specific habitus emerging in the field of agriculture, dictating the "rules of the game" (Ibid., 233) of what it means to be a good farmer. As this paper will show, these habitus may differ locally, as they are influenced by structural conditions.

Decisions made by individual Polish farmers regarding their farms are made in an environment of possibly clashing logics and rationalities: the loss–gain logic of modern capitalism and the emotional underpinnings that stem from long-term psychosocial structures. These decisions are also dependent on a usually detached assessment of the existing and available repertoire of choices – the composition of agricultural structures in a particular local context can, as will be elaborated later, influence these decisions and judgments of rationality profoundly.

5. Methods

The empirical material at the basis of this article comes from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between August 2023 and March 2025. In the course of the fieldwork, which was conducted in two purposefully chosen locations in Poland, 30 individual interviews with adult members of farming households were collected. The interviews aimed to answer two main research questions: first, what strategies are undertaken by farming households when faced with drought; and second, how

these strategies are decided upon, also regarding the internal gendered hierarchy within the households. The interviews lasted between around 50 minutes and over three hours. Coupled with the interviews were participant observations, during which I set out to observe everyday life and labor in the field sites, as well as important community events. I aimed to obtain a rich picture of the way labor is structured and decisions are made. In the course of the research, it became increasingly clear, that I had not anticipated and imagined the degree to which drought was only one of many interloping crises, happening almost simultaneously. Among them were: the war in Ukraine and its economic consequences, cost of living crisis and high inflation, especially in 2023, hailstorms and torrent rains… The concept of polycrisis, first defined by Edgar Morin and Anne Brigitte Kern (1999), and recently elaborated on by Michael Lawrence et al. (2024) seems applicable here. To extract the thread of drought from all the other happenings was difficult, as it seemed as everything was connected and formed a Gordian knot of sorts. It is then paramount to keep this in mind while reading the article, that drought in the farmers' narratives of their experiences is merely one of the many ongoing crises.

To situate the paper in the broader context, a brief overview of the socio-demographic and geographical characteristics of the research areas is needed. Of the two field sites, one – Adamowo – is located in the eastern part of the country, some 80 kilometres from the Belarusian border; the other, Celinowo, in the northwest, around 100 kilometres from the German border. Due to concerns about anonymity, the names of the locations and participants are changed in published writings. The reasoning behind choosing these particular places as field sites was to give the research a comparative character, in that the field sites were to reflect the diversity of Polish farming and rural areas.

Adamowo, a commune of around six thousand inhabitants living in twenty villages, is dominated by livestock farms as well as some fruit plantations. The farm size is, on average, smaller than the national average, which is small in itself (12 ha; the average in Adamowo is 8 ha). There is little land available for sale or lease, and therefore expansion into a large-scale farm that can easily compete with others in the free market is difficult. The lease system is largely unregulated and hinges on informal agreements between participants, i.e., retirees lease some portion of their fields to active farmers for a fee. These agreements are often made without any paperwork, thereby guaranteeing little security for those involved. An issue reported to me by interviewees is land fragmentation – for example, one of my participants operates on approximately 30 hectares of land divided into a dozen plots scattered within a 13-kilometer radius, which hinders labor effectiveness. Due to the conditions previously explained, many male farmers are, in fact, bi-professionals, supplementing their income from agriculture with other endeavours, i.e., construction businesses or work in nearby towns' public sectors. In farming households, care work and housework are delegated to women, who are rarely employed "outside" the home.

Celinowo is a community of some three thousand people gathered in twenty villages, and its farming sector is dominated by plant production. In the years immediately following the Second World War, it experienced significant population turnover, with the German population being forcibly relocated, and settlers from central and eastern Poland, as well as formerly Polish territories now belonging to Ukraine and Belarus, migrating in their place. State enterprises of collective farming were established in the commune. The assets of collective farms were subsequently privatised following the fall of communism in 1989, and as such, the lines of succession are much shorter than in Adamowo. Farms are larger on average (over 40 ha) (Statistics Poland 2025), with some farmers operating on over 200 ha. Land fragmentation is an issue as well, though not as prominent as in Adamowo, and the lease agreements are much more secure, as they are often made between a governmental agency and the individual farmer. Therefore, farming in Celinowo is structurally better conditioned to invest in and expand agricultural operations. In the course of the research, it became evident that women in the farming households are more likely to work outside of them, mostly because the larger farm owners can afford seasonal and administrative help, making women's labor not as necessary as in smaller farms.

Both of these locations share some crucial characteristics: they experienced droughts of varying intensity throughout recent years and are located on soils of poorer quality. The poorer quality of soil results in susceptibility to drought, and both Adamowo's and Celinowo's soils are marked on official maps as either susceptible or highly susceptible. Another common characteristic is that farming remains an important part of the local economy. In 2022, almost 40 % of Adamowo's households derived over 50 % of their annual income from farming; the corresponding figure for Celinowo was almost 60 % (Statistics Poland, 2025).

All in all, the two field sites diverge in terms of both agricultural production and the organisation of labor. In Adamowo, long-lasting structures of (usually) patrilinear succession have resulted in the proliferation of small, fragmented farms that struggle to compete on the market. The conditions within which they operate shape, to an extent, the psychological response to drought, as will be presented in the subsequent sections of the article. In Celinowo, with larger and more concentrated farms, the repertoire of actions at farmers' disposal – be it investing in machinery or innovative techniques – is broader, impacting the psychological response to drought as well.

6. Fighting Against the Current – Drought and Emotional Response References

This section of the article provides an analysis of the empirical material described in the Methods section. Its focus is the involved, emotional perspective and response

to drought, emphasising the deep impact this natural occurrence may have on the well-being of those whose livelihoods depend on it – specifically, farmers.

Emotional responses to drought were articulated by my research participants, usually touching upon emotions such as anger or disappointment. An example may be this excerpt from an interview with Karolina, a 40-year-old female farmer from Adamowo:

> *Researcher: "I wanted to talk to you about stress connected to the weather. How would you…"*
> *Karolina: "Stress? It's, you know, I'll speak frankly – you go fucking crazy. Because you see the clouds – like today: 'Oh, it's going to rain, let me check my phone.' It's like this: spring, all the way until the harvest, is the worst time for us, farmers. We look for the rain like it's salvation (…) Looking at the phone, all the time. There was a cloud on the way, passed us by, it rained over there, like 'Oh God, why did it rain in [another village] and not here?' You get so angry."*

The above quote shows the multitude of negative emotions triggered by drought. The frustration and anger are connected to the lack of control and the unpredictability of the crisis, which is underscored by the action of constantly checking one's phone for weather updates. The updates are sometimes inaccurate as well, adding to the emotional strain. The impossibility of complete control – something contemporary societies were, to an extent, promised through the civilising process and the growing influence over natural forces (see e.g. Loyal & Quilley, 2005) – is laid bare by the fact that even the most sophisticated meteorological instruments cannot always accurately predict rainfall patterns.

Rain is, in a way, described as if it were a sentient being. The observed weather patterns that some of my interviewees spoke of – where rain falls in one village but not in the neighboring one – can, in this involved way of thinking, be perceived almost as personal slights.

While Karolina's negative emotional state was expressed in a very direct manner, another interesting form of involved response to drought reflects what Elias would call "childhood patterns of thinking," wherein an individual turns to a higher power for explanation and/or a solution to the crisis. One example of this is participation in Roman Catholic prayers for rain.

Poland is a predominantly Roman Catholic country, with over 70 % of the population self-reporting as believers of this faith in the 2020 census (Statistics Poland, 2025). To this point, prayers for rain in times of drought have been staged periodically, most notably in the Polish Parliament's chapel in 2006. While this instance was widely ridiculed and publicised, many parishes still include rain and good weather in their Sunday mass intentions, and I propose that attending them constitutes an emotional response to drought. One of my interviewees from Celinowo, Ryszard, said this of his brother, who is also a farmer:

> *"They went to mass in [another village] (…) they were going to the church, there was a mass on Saturday so that the rain would fall, right? And I told him, how am I supposed to go, I'm drying out my hay. (…)*

But I went to the mass, then it didn't rain for another two days, and then it started again. (…) They prayed so hard, the rain wouldn't stop falling all the way through the harvest."

While the tone of the quote is slightly amused and not wholly convinced of the logic or productivity of such an action, there seems to be an acknowledgment of the emotional importance of participating in a ritual designed to bring about the desired solution to the problem of drought. In other words, while no clear process of cause and effect can be observed here – and the narrative strategy of the interviewee is to distance himself from the ritual (note that Ryszard admits to going to the mass but then uses "they" to describe the praying persons) – there is an admission that participation in such social rituals "cannot do harm" and is, to a degree, understandable.

Emotional responses to drought can include feelings of anger, resentment, and hopelessness. The involved perspective on drought also includes perceiving the occurrence as almost a personal slight or as the doing of a higher power – all of which highlight the deeply emotional and social dimensions of facing environmental uncertainty.

7. Giving into the maelstrom? "Weary acceptance" in the face of drought

The adult members of farming households in Adamowo, when asked about the feelings they experience in times of drought, express the unpredictability of nature and the fact that life in the countryside and working in agriculture are closely bound to it. This is exemplified by this quote from Barbara, a 60-year-old female farmer:

Barbara: *"When it's dry? When you live in the countryside it's like… how do I put it… you know you can't get over some things. You just live in peace with nature, what else can you do? (...) We can water, or hoe, fertilise, whatever, but some things you can't get over, you have to make peace with it, that's it. You do what you can, give the plants what you can at the right moment, and so on, but you can't break down, cause what good would that do? That wouldn't change anything. You have to, like I said, make peace with it. You can't get around it. It's not for a farmer to do. What he can do, he does. (...) No other way around it."*

The emotional response – or "breaking down," in other words, an overly involved perspective – is presented here as useless, as it will not change anything. Nor will, of course, the detached perspective; however, it helps to save oneself some emotional turmoil. This disposition is presented, in this quote, as a part of farming habitus: being close to nature makes one familiar with its unpredictability, internalising it. Another part of professional habitus is evident in the narrative of having to "give the plants what you can at the right moment," or acting in a way that follows the legitimised rules of the profession and its self-perception as custodian of the land and the plants.

Similar expressions can be found in this excerpt from a 50-year-old Maria, a female farmer:

Maria: "*We have no control over how it goes – drought, hailstorm, whatever. Take hailstorm. We had times when we had beautiful potatoes, corn, and they suffered. It was beautiful, I remember. (…) Two days later, a hailstorm came, knocked all of it down, smashed it (…) Well, what, nothing more left, failure...*"
Researcher: "And then you..."
Maria: "Well, what, words fail. You have to move forward, not look at it. Many such instances. What to do?"

Being able to move past the failures one cannot control is, again, presented as part of the professional habitus in farming, due to its inherent connection with uncontrollable nature. Maria emphasises feelings of profound loss by declaring that the crops, which were exceptionally good, were still wiped out – this time not by drought but by hail. The loss is even greater when one grows attached to and proud of their crops.

The perception of farming as a profession in which one is perpetually endangered by natural occurrences is also evident in this quote from an interview with a 35-year-old couple, where the husband, Kamil, says:

Kamil: "*Drought is like… it's just farming. Can't plan anything (…) it's all fortune-telling (…) you do what you can, what's possible (…) you can put fertiliser on the field with a little spoon, but without water, you can't do anything."*

Here, once again, unpredictability and instability are presented as the main characteristics of the farming professional habitus. Another crucial part of it is the deep connection to the soil and to the crops – a theme present in previous quotes but once again clearly visible in another quote from Kamil:

Kamil: "*It just doesn't give you satisfaction. When drought kills the plants. When it's beautiful out in the field, when it's growing, your heart is happy, you want to keep going, keep evolving. But we have nothing on drought so far. Maybe we can try to water [the crops]."*

There are, of course, ways to mitigate the adverse effects of drought, as signified by the last sentence of the above quote. Among them are new farming techniques more suitable for dry periods, such as the strip-till method; using irrigation equipment, such as drips or rain sprinklers; and switching plant varieties and crops to those that are more resilient when water is lacking. These methods and actions, resulting from scientific progress and innovation, can be described as products of a detached mode of thinking.

In the course of my research, it became evident that these methods were much more broadly adopted in Celinowo. In Adamowo, very few of my respondents told me that they adopt – for lack of a better word – active strategies to counter drought, instead turning, much more often than in the second location, toward the described "weary acceptance." In the next section of the paper, I will argue that such differences are a result of the structural makeup of their respective economic and social environments, which to a degree restrict the repertoire of available actions.

8. Structural explanation of "weary acceptance"

In the course of the research, I have asked my interviewees about the strategies they adopt when faced with drought. In Celinowo, strip-till – a soil cultivation method that, in short, prevents the soil from drying out quite so quickly – was popular among my interviewees, used by almost all of them. When asking about these methods in Adamowo, I received different answers. Virtually none of my interviewees admitted to using what can be called active strategies, such as new methods of production. I pose that the reluctance to do so stems from structural factors limiting the available repertoire of actions.

Quoting Kamil again:

> *Kamil: "To buy a new sprinkler, you'd have to pay around 100 thousand PLN. And now to see a return… If I knew for sure how much I'll get for the potatoes, at least 1.50 PLN per kilo, then I'd buy two sprinklers, because I'd know that I'll have the money. "*

The investment needed to have the appropriate machinery to water the fields is unworthy of the perceived risk due to – again – instability that is perceived to be an inescapable part of the farming professional habitus. That instability, as previously discussed, stems from natural causes but also from the volatility of the market, with – as my interviewees perceive it – few guardrails from the government. Therefore, the nature of contemporary farming as a profession is perceived here as limiting the repertoire of possible actions, making weary acceptance the safer strategy.

The structure of farming in Adamowo, with land fragmentation and usually small-scale production, is limiting in itself as well. As a married couple in their fifties, Michał and Grażyna, who operate on 12 (!) plots of land within an 8-kilometer radius, explain their reluctance to water the fields:

> *Michał: "If I had my farm in one place, I'd do the paperwork and buy a sprinkler. For one well. If I were to do a well on each of my fields (…) I'd be doing separate fieldwork on all of them. "*

The amount of labor required to install wells on 12 plots of land is perceived as not worth the expected gain. To further the argument of structural limitations, the system of private land lease, which is highly unstable and unregulated, also prohibits farmers from Adamowo from investing in proactive anti-drought measures:

> *Kamil: "To have a well on leased land… doesn't make sense. The owner tells you "Goodbye," and what now?"*
> *Researcher: "And do you have a lease agreement?"*
> *Kamil: "Only verbal."*

The structure of agriculture in Adamowo hinders the farmers' ability to invest in and use the techniques, methods, and machines to mitigate the negative effects of drought. Therefore, when the structural conditions do not appear to allow for taking certain actions, "weary acceptance" becomes a strategy of emotional survival when, realistically, there is little action to be taken. Structural issues such as land fragmentation, limited available arable land, and unstable lease conditions influence

the habitus of Adamowo's farmers, making it so that a certain stoicism and passivity in the face of drought are perceived as the only rational strategy. This contrasts with the second fieldwork location, Celinowo, where my interviewees usually have more assets at their disposal (larger farms, often more stable lease conditions, more income to invest in new technologies), and the professional habitus seems to be aligned more closely with the capitalist logic of activity and progress.

9. Discussion

Relating back to the Eliasian framework of involvement–detachment, this article outlines three categories of responses to drought among Polish farmers. First, an involved, emotional perspective, wherein drought provokes untamed emotional turmoil, sometimes treated as a personal slight or a sign from above, perhaps only for God to solve. Second, a more detached position, connected to the active use of technological advancements and objective, scientific knowledge. Practices associated with this position include investments in new methods of soil cultivation, irrigation systems, or switching to plant varieties that are less susceptible to drought.

Finally, the disposition that was the focus of this article is a detached, yet passive one – a position of stoicism and acceptance of the unpredictability of nature with all of its consequences. This article argues that such a position results from a detached process of assessing available resources and strategies, and that the fact it is more prevalent in one of the two research locations is caused by the structural conditions of farming in the local context. Interviewees from Adamowo are able to assess their situation similarly to one of the brothers in Elias's *maelstrom* parable – from an outside, detached perspective – and recognise that the structural conditions of the region in which they farm, such as land fragmentation, limit their range of choices. Since there is no way, the interviewees say, to secure a stable, long-term lease on more arable land; since the farm is scattered across a dozen small plots; since the productivity of a small farm is insufficient to generate resources for modernisation and investment; and since any attempts to control drought are, of course, futile – the only choice to shield oneself from emotional turmoil and suffering in times of drought is to accept the situation as it is.

This specific brand of stoicism therefore forms part of a locally specific farming habitus. The unpredictability of nature and acknowledgment of the profession's dependence on its whims dictate a measured, almost stoic response to hardship, coupled with an imperative to shake off failures and keep going. These findings emphasise the need to understand involvement–detachment in Eliasian terms as a spectrum. To perpetuate an oversimplified binary – passive, emotional, involved perspective versus active, detached, objective one – is to overlook the fact that sometimes a detached assessment may lead to the conclusion that doing nothing may be seen as the best course of action for survival.

An intriguing alternative or, rather, complimentary interpretation of the research funding could be based on Becker and his Terror Management Theory (TMT). Janis L. Dickinson (2009) outlines a convincing argument on why is it that the awareness of a danger (i.e. climate crisis) does not necessarily lead to change in practices and behaviour. She uses TMT, which is an emanation of Becker's idea on the management of death anxiety in the context of Western society's distant (detached!) relationship with nature during the accelerating climate crisis, to show that – depending on the pre-existing immortality projects (or systems of meaning beyond death) – responses to climate change may include climate change scepticism, denialism, minimalisation of its' impacts, but also increased striving for self-esteem, for example in form of consumerism and firmly entrenching oneself in one's beliefs, contradictory as they may be (Dickinson, 2009). This may also be an explanation as to why some farmers refuse to substantially change their practices.

10. Conclusion

Using Norbert Elias's conceptualisation of the involvement–detachment continuum, this article has sought to present the complexity of Polish farmers' responses to drought, and the ties between the socio-psychological and the economic/structural. The inclusion of the Eliasian framework, along with the parable of the fishermen in the maelstrom, served to highlight the connection between human and non-human nature, and the affective implications of this double bind. A strong affective response to crises of varying degrees of severity can limit the possibility of objective assessment, which in turn hinders the ability to find a solution – perpetuating a feedback loop of frustration and despair. To form a detached, objective perspective, Elias writes, is to be able to find a way out of the crisis.

Drawing on empirical material gathered through individual interviews with farmers in two Polish locations, as well as participant observation, this article described manifestations of the involved, emotional position toward drought. Its main focus, however, was the position of "weary acceptance," in which passive acceptance of one's lack of control over drought emerges as a result of a detached, objective assessment of structurally limited resources and repertoires of action.

"Weary acceptance" is more prevalent in Adamowo, a field site shaped by specific structural conditions of agriculture. These conditions make it – in the assessment of farmers – irrational or impossible to invest in new technologies and production methods to mitigate the effects of drought. On the other hand, engaging in an overtly emotional response – or to "wail," as Elias (2007: viii) would say – is perceived as useless and nonsensical. Therefore, a position of stoicism, coupled with an ethos of resilience, emerges – one in which the uncontrollability of drought and the unbreakable dependence of farming on nature are accepted as *par for the course*.

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Vincenzo Marasco, Angela Perulli*

Social habitus and climate change: Rethinking demand-side mitigation through Eliasian figurational sociology

Abstract

This article explores the analytical potential of Norbert Elias's notion of *social habitus* for understanding resistance and change in everyday practices relevant to demand-side climate mitigation. It unfolds in two steps. First, it revisits the concept of *social habitus*, emphasising its value for interpreting the emotional and figurational dimensions of social practices. Second, it applies this theoretical lens to focus group data collected in Italy to examine how emotions, identity, and social interdependencies sustain high-carbon habits despite widespread environmental awareness. By integrating theoretical and empirical analysis, the paper shows how the *habitus* can serve as a key interpretive tool for understanding the emotional foundations of resistance to behavioural change.

Keywords: Social habitus, emotions, demand-side climate mitigation, social action

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1. Introduction: Social habitus and the challenge of demand-side climate mitigation

In this article, we seek to explore the analytical potential of the concept of *social habitus*, as developed within the tradition of Eliasian figurational sociology, as an analytical tool for understanding both resistance and transformation in everyday practices and consumption patterns in the face of the threat posed by climate change driven by greenhouse gas emissions.

As is known, the concept of *social habitus* has resonated and spread primarily due to its conceptualisation and use made by Pierre Bourdieu (Wacquant, 2016). Although there are elements of convergence and contact between the theoretical proposals of the two authors (Déchaux, 1993; Bowen, van Heerikhuizen & Emirbayer, 2012; Dendasck & Lopes, 2016; Ernst et al., 2017), our focus here is on the Eliasian formulation and the role it plays within figurational sociology.

* *Vincenzo Marasco (vincenzo.marasco@unifi.it),* Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy.
Angela Perulli (*angela.perulli@unifi.it*), Università degli Studi di Firenze, Italy.

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The *habitus* undoubtedly constitutes one of the pivotal conceptual nodes of Elias's sociological framework; yet it may be argued that this remains a field in which critical elaboration has not yet achieved a degree of systematicity commensurate with its theoretical weight. The notion of *social habitus* points to a specific mode of constructing sociological discourse – one that assumes that social practices find their intelligibility in enduring dispositions, sedimented over the course of extensive historical processes.

This perspective has been productively tested at the level of the "survival units" of nation-states (Mennell, 2007; Feuerhahn, 2009; Kuzmic, 2013; Ernst et al., 2017; Kuzmic et al., 2020; Bucholc, 2024). Within this line of inquiry, theoretical attention has primarily focused on what can be attributed to such dispositions – namely, to what extent *habitus* can supplement or replace situational explanations – and on the ways in which these dispositions are reconfigured by shifts in power balances and intergroup conflicts.

Although the *social habitus* takes shape in a range of everyday practices that, as Elias insightfully demonstrated (Elias, 1939/2012), include dietary habits, hygiene practices, and, more generally, the relationship with the surrounding environment, its connection with practices of consumption – particularly with those individual practices oriented toward climate change mitigation – has been less thoroughly investigated. Our interest in this concept, read through an Eliasian lens, stems from its capacity to illuminate two aspects that we consider crucial for the sociological understanding of individual consumption practices. First, the *habitus* allows us to highlight how a portion of our practices is interwoven with sedimented affective dimensions that remain relatively impervious to discursive reflection. Second, it shows how these affective dimensions are themselves sensitive to the relational and power dynamics that individuals perceive as implicated in the practices themselves.

In recent years, as political attention has increasingly turned toward achieving a transition to climate neutrality, the social sciences have increasingly engaged with issues of demand-side mitigation. This shift in focus reflects a growing awareness of the impact that individual consumption behaviours and lifestyles exert on overall emissions. According to several estimates, private and household consumption accounts for a predominant share of global emissions – around 72 % – with particularly high contributions in the sectors of mobility, housing, food, and waste management (Dietz, 2014; Hertwich & Peters, 2009; IPCC, 2023). Fostering profound and lasting transformations in consumption patterns, especially in high-income countries, thus appears to be an essential condition for addressing the climate crisis in a credible manner.

From this perspective, one of the main challenges concerns the persistence of routine practices even when individuals are aware that – at least from a climatic standpoint – it would be preferable to act differently. A broad interdisciplinary literature has identified multiple social and psychological mechanisms that help account

for the persistence of unsustainable behaviours (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002; Abrahamse, 2019). Our starting point is that research on individual practices often tends to reduce actions and behaviours to the outcome of a decision-making process – a tendency that is particularly evident in approaches grounded in psychological and economic perspectives. Within this framework, the embeddedness – institutional, material, and relational – of all human action is often relegated to the status of an external factor influencing decision-making, rather than being recognised as a constitutive dimension of practices themselves (Shove, 2010; Hargraves, 2011).

Building on these critical insights, we wish to draw attention to the importance of recognising the constitutively social and emotional nature of consumption practices that affect carbon emissions. Both the social networks within which action acquires its meaning and the emotional charge that, inevitably, accompanies every action cannot be regarded as mere disturbances to individual calculation and intention. On the contrary, they constitute a generative dimension of practices, as they orient the perception of situations, the evaluation of what is appropriate and desirable, and even the very definition of what counts as comfort, security, status, or care. From this perspective, the *social habitus* emerges as a privileged analytical tool: not a simple repertoire of preferences, but a complex of embodied dispositions – cognitive, bodily, and affective – that make evident the historical nature of feeling and judgement, linking them to individual trajectories, class and generational belongings, gender divisions, and configurations of power.

The *habitus,* focusing on what Elias referred to as "the drag effect" and which in the Bourdieuian lexicon appears as hysteresis or as the Don Quixote effect (Sieczka, 2025), makes it possible to understand why high-impact practices – such as private mobility, domestic heating, food consumption, and waste management – often resist change even in the presence of climate unsustainability awareness. They are sustained by sedimented and socially shared emotional "investments", by tacit rules of feeling and appropriateness that confer value and normality on certain ways of living, and by collective images and identifications still largely anchored in the national dimension (Sommer, 2011). At the same time, it can also clarify the dynamics that lead to their transformation when material contexts, symbolic hierarchies, and power configurations within which dispositions take shape undergo change. Understood in this way, emotions are not the private property of isolated individuals, but the outcome of communicative dynamics whose patterns are rooted in historical processes and in the tensions between individuals and groups. In this sense, exploring the features of the *social habitus* as conceived within the Eliasian corpus can provide an important contribution to the traditions concerned with how our societies might achieve a sustainable level of carbon emissions.

Our exploration of the concept of *social habitus* will proceed in three steps. First, we will reconstruct the theoretical functions it fulfils within the broader architecture of Elias's sociological framework. Second, we will selectively highlight some features

that are particularly fruitful for our purposes, with special attention to the emotional dimension. Finally, drawing on the analysis of several focus groups conducted as part of an ongoing research project, we will test its heuristic potential.

2. Social habitus between sociogenesis and psychogenesis

While the prominence of the concept of *habitus* among scholars in the social sciences is largely linked to the international diffusion of Bourdieu's thought, it is worth recalling that the notion has a long-standing tradition within Western intellectual history. The term entered philosophical reflection through Thomas Aquinas's Latin translation of Aristotle's *hexis* (Wacquant, 2016). From there, it re-emerged in contemporary philosophy and went on to play a significant role within the phenomenological tradition – particularly in Husserl, with whom Elias studied, albeit briefly.

Although in episodic forms and with varying degrees of systematic elaboration (Wacquant, 2016; Corchia, 2020), the concept also appears in classical sociology, where it plays a meaningful role both in Durkheim's reflections on pedagogy and in Weber's studies on the spirit of capitalism (Camic, 1986). In his analysis of the role of habit within pre-Parsonian classical sociology (ibid.), Camic argues that the term *habitus* was often employed in a broad sense, as

> *"the durable and generalised disposition that suffuses a person's action throughout an entire domain of life or, in the extreme instance, throughout all of life – in which case the term comes to mean the whole manner, turn, cast, or mold of the personality"* (ibid., 1046).

The term appears to have entered Elias's lexicon through this very tradition. The fact that it appears as part of a shared sociological heritage, together with the author's well-known reluctance to dwell on lengthy theoretical discussions of concepts outside the empirical problems he sought to address, may help explain the absence of a single, clear-cut definition of the concept in Elias's corpus. Most commentators emphasise that *habitus* designates a set of learned and internalised practices and dispositions, taken so much for granted as to appear self-evident – what is often referred to as a "second nature" (Mennell & Dunning, 1996). This expression underscores how the "socially acquired" character of such dispositions is coupled with their "automatic" and pre-conscious functioning, as if they were directly inscribed in the body. A few further specifications can be added to this initial feature. The concept of *habitus* serves to explore these dispositions and practices not as episodic or random occurrences, but as expressions of an "affective economy" encompassing the entire structure of individual personality. Finally, taken together, these actions constitute a *social habitus* inasmuch as they are expressed through individual codes of feeling and conduct, whose social parameters vary across generations and between social groups.

Despite their brevity, these remarks allow us to grasp how, even though Elias never devoted systematic discussions or operational definitions to it, the *social habitus*

nonetheless occupies a prominent place within process sociology. Before examining in detail, the dimensions of the concept that are central to our purposes, it is perhaps worth pausing to reflect explicitly on this key role. This, in turn, may help clarify why the concept under consideration can serve as an important analytical resource for strands of research – such as those on demand-side mitigation – that often rely on individualistic and cognitive assumptions. Two key points can usefully be highlighted from the outset in order to clarify the place this issue occupies within Elias's overall sociological project.

The first concerns his very conception of sociology's object. In his persistent refusal to engage in any abstract discussion of what the human being is or what its essential characteristics might be, Elias conceives human experience above all as an experience of dependence – dependence on the surrounding environment, certainly (and thus on the tools and organisational arrangements through which human beings relate to that environment), but above all dependence on other human beings (Elias, 2010). The concept of *figuration* expresses Elias's intention to make sociology the study of these social formations – of varying scope and scale – in which human beings are bound to one another through specific forms of reciprocal interdependence, thereby generating a shifting balance of tensions. Within this framework, habitus captures the mark that this web of interdependencies leaves, over the course of historical processes, on human personality. It does not refer to a set of norms "possessed" by society and then "transmitted" to individuals, but rather to a process through which individuals acquire the capacity to act "successfully" within a structured network of interdependencies, and thereby become the peculiar persons they are. Through *habitus*, processes of individualisation and socialisation are thus inextricably intertwined:

> *"his 'individuality' and his 'social conditioning', are in fact nothing other than two different functions of people in their relations to each other, one of which cannot exist without the other"* (Elias, 2010, 59).

In short, the concept of *social habitus* – understood as the psychological level of mediation of social interdependence as historically and situationally determined – constitutes the key instrument through which Elias seeks to reformulate the long-standing sociological problem of the relationship between "system" and "action" (Van Krieken, 2000). There is no need for a set of concepts to explain how the *system* transmits its purposes to *individuals*, for this transmission is already inscribed in their interdependence, in their mutual need. What is required, rather, is a concept capable of grasping how the organisation of interdependence is reflected in personality in a durable form.

The second key issue also concerns one of the classical dichotomies of sociological thought – one that is even more central to the argument we develop here: the opposition between "rationality" and "passion," between "cognition" and "emotionality." Every social bond, in Elias's framework, is emotionally charged. Precisely because it is built upon dependence – and therefore constitutes both a resource

and a constraint – it necessarily involves the organic-psychic dimension that is part of the human condition. To capture this dimension, Elias later resorts to the concept of *valencies* (Elias, 2010) to identify the emotionally charged character of the structured relations of interdependence in which individuals are embedded. The processes of change that affect human figurations, therefore, are not primarily reflected in "culture" or in "ways of thinking," but in the person as a whole; they must be understood in terms of their capacity to mould affectivity within interpersonal relations.

It is at this level that *habitus* operates – as a conceptual level that allows us to think of intersubjective relations not through psychological categories taken as constants of an immutable human nature, but as variables always dependent on the demands of each social formation, and on each individual's movement within such formations, on their own "figurational destiny." Along this path, Elias can revisit Weber's notion of rationalisation – interpreting it as an effect of the civilising process – and root it directly in the emotional constraints that human beings impose upon one another in historical change, producing a succession of distinct and historically specific rationalities (for instance, the *höfische Rationalität* to which *The Court Society* [Elias, 1969/2006] is devoted). In this way, the emotional and cognitive dimensions no longer appear as opposites but as two ever-present – albeit historically variable – sides of all action, which need not be abstracted at the analytical level. Against a sociological tradition that has persistently privileged the cognitive side of human action, *habitus* provides a tool for linking cognition and emotion within a single conceptual framework – one that encompasses both emotional impulses and more detached orientations, and that pervades every form of action in a "balance" to be assessed empirically each time.

The *habitus* – or, so to speak, the "hinge" function it performs between nature and culture, between the individual and society – thus constitutes a central element of Elias's theoretical construction and of his broader attempt to develop a sociology capable of dispensing with a series of problems rooted in a profoundly dichotomous epistemological tradition (Perulli, 2011). It does so through an instrument that aims to be "realistic" in capturing the nexus between "structural dynamics and the identity dynamics of social life" (Buccarelli, 2011, 75, *our translation*).

3. Habitus and emotions: The historicity of our relation to the world

Having highlighted the theoretical functions that the *social habitus* performs within Elias's thought, we would now like to emphasise some of its main features that are particularly relevant for understanding the specifically social and emotional dimensions that we seek to bring into focus in domestic consumption practices.

The first concerns the level at which these dispositions should be grasped. Although the expression "second nature" immediately evokes the unreflective or "blind" dimension of these general dispositions, we should not make the mistake of restrict-

ing the field in which a *social habitus* manifests itself (Kuzmic et al., 2020). Especially in his most well-known work, *The Civilising Process*, Elias refers primarily to a psychic *habitus*, interpreted through the categories of Freud's second topography (Freud, 1923), whose transformations are expressed mainly through the analysis of manners, and thus in the rising thresholds of repugnance and shame (Elias, 1939/2012, 129ff.). In this sense, it might seem sufficient to conceive of the *habitus* merely as a "sensibility" automatically inscribed within our psychic mediations. Yet, while it is certainly true that a psychic *habitus* expressed through a "code of feeling" (Fletcher, 1997, 17) manifests itself in a particular sensitivity, a much broader interpretation of the concept is possible – one whose significance becomes increasingly evident in Elias's later works.

To apprehend this aspect, it is useful to broaden our view and consider how the *social habitus* is constructed across Elias's works. What becomes sedimented in a *habitus* are the long-term evolutions of relations among groups, institutions, rituals, and – above all – of the symbols and "means of orientation" through which human beings navigate the world. It is, in effect, the embodied outcome of the historical development of these processes. A shared *habitus* is shaped, for instance, by the changing power balances within institutions such as the monarchical court (Elias, 1969/2006), by the forms assumed by rituals through which violent impulses are expressed (Elias, 2006; Elias, 2007, 130ff.), as well as by variations in the vocabulary through which experience is articulated, or in the social experience of time itself (Elias, 1939/2012: 115; Elias, 2007). Each of these developments leaves a mark on the personality of individuals belonging to those social groups, forming a *social structure of personality* that acts either as an enabling condition or as a constraint on action. In Bourdieu's terminology, one could say that the *habitus* constitutes a form of "practical reason" through which human beings move, shaping the image that individuals construct of themselves and of others. In essence, the *social habitus* concerns the subject's relationship with self and world as inscribed within psychophysiological dynamics. In fact, it assumes some of the functions that, in other sociological traditions, are attributed to "common sense." The *habitus* simultaneously constrains and enables action; it assigns meaning to things and phenomena; it appears natural, self-evident, obvious. Yet – unlike "common sense" – it does not refer merely to "representations of the world," that is, to something purely cognitive, but to a mode of *feeling* itself.

It is precisely this *feeling* that leads us to the second point we wish to emphasise. This point has already emerged in our discussion, but it deserves to be explored more fully in its implications. As we have seen, it identifies a particular relationship with the self and with the world – one that operates through emotional dynamics. Once again, this does not mean identifying "emotional actions" as opposed to "rational" ones. In Elias, emotions do not constitute a separate sentimental sphere; rather, they represent a mode of relating to the world and to other human beings, one that is interwoven with the cognitive dimension (Elias, 2009). In this sense,

Elias invites us to recognise that every discursive dimension is always traversed by a variable degree of emotional charge. As he clearly shows in his studies on national *habitus* (Elias, 2013), this set of dispositions also carries within it the history of defeats, hopes, and specificities of a given human group. It thus finds expression in an internalised image of the group itself – what Elias calls the "we-image" and "we-ideals" – as well as in the images of the groups from which one distinguishes oneself ("they-images"), reflecting mechanisms of identification rooted in representations that are deeply imbued with emotion.

From an analytical standpoint, we can thus distinguish three levels that the *social habitus* allows us to identify in relation to emotions. On the one hand, there is a more immediate dimension, manifesting itself in a range of deeply ingrained reactions – such as disgust, embarrassment, or the sense of an invasion of personal space – that operate as genuine *emotional barriers* to action. On the other hand, there is a dimension that refers to cognitive schemata objectified in practices and symbols: the sense of time, representations of natural forces, or conceptions of honour that together form an interpretive and evaluative grid through which we relate to the world. Finally, this second dimension in turn shapes the *valencies* of our relations with people and groups, intensifying some while weakening others, and delineating spaces of exuberance alongside demands for self-control or restraint, according to figurational balance.

We have seen, then, that the *social habitus* makes it possible to investigate a range of emotional dimensions of action, shaped by the sedimentation of long-term social processes. Before proceeding further, a few final remarks are in order regarding two possible critical issues that may arise when approaching empirical investigation through this conceptual instrument. These two issues, closely intertwined, concern the potential limited flexibility of a tool such as the *habitus* – conceived as a set of "resistant" dispositions that extend beyond particular social situations and that "suffuse every aspect of a person's action."

The *social habitus* links our experience to that of a specific reference group within which processes of personal growth and experience have unfolded. This means that, since an individual belongs to multiple social circles, it is possible at the analytical level to examine multiple *habitus* – that is, to consider that a person's personality structure may not form a single unified layer but rather the outcome of different *strata* (Elias, 2013; Kuzmic et al., 2020). This, in turn, opens up several interesting possibilities: for example, that different *habitus* may come into conflict, and that such conflict may itself generate internal psychic tensions within the subject. More generally, the *habitus* is therefore neither necessarily coherent nor does it exclusively reflect adaptation to the structure of social relations (Ernst et al., 2017).

Finally, and consequently, it is also neither fixed nor static over time (on these qualities of the *habitus*, see also Wacquant 2013, albeit in reference to Bourdieu's work). This is not only because, as a historical product, it naturally changes with

the historical vicissitudes of the reference group, but also because it is always, at least in part, influenced by the "situation" (Elias, 1939/2012; Kuzmic, 2000). In other words, it is affected by the tensions between groups within figurations: for example, a specific threat experienced by one layer of the *habitus* may prompt its mobilisation, bringing it to the foreground; or, in cases of intergroup conflict, certain aspects of the *habitus* may be activated as resources, becoming salient for the purposes of social distinction and acquiring a particular emotional charge (Elias & Scotson, 2008; see also the essays collected in Bucholc, 2024). In this sense, the *habitus* should not be understood as a "constant and immobile foundation" of action, but rather as a "basic perceptual schema" that reacts to and is modulated by changing circumstances.

To summarise, the *social habitus* makes it possible to keep the emotional dimension of action consistently within the analytical framework. It does so without the need to posit a motivation that is alternative to rationality; rather, it enables us to consider the emotional dimension in a properly sociological way. Understood as a "social structure of personality" and as the product of long-term processes, the *habitus* shows that what we perceive as our most "inner" being – and therefore as seemingly separate from sociality – is in fact shaped by human interdependencies and their continuous interplay. At the same time, it keeps both sides of the question open: on the one hand, it allows us to analyse how emotional dispositions are formed and transformed; on the other, it shows how they contribute to processes of collective affiliation and disaffiliation, as well as to the drawing of boundaries between groups. The *habitus* thus stands as a tool capable of offering an original contribution to the sociology of emotions as a whole, going beyond both an approach centred on social norms and the emotional compliance of subjects with those norms, and a perspective reducible to a mere cultural history of emotions.

4. The habitus in action: Insights from the Italian case

As we have seen, adopting the perspective of *habitus* makes it possible to broaden our understanding of the resistances and continuities underlying behaviours that may appear irrational. That the nature of the practices enacted by social actors is deeply rooted in emotional and collective dimensions can perhaps be illustrated – albeit only partially – through insights emerging from twelve focus groups. During the extended discussions that took place in these groups, a widespread environmental awareness was generally observed, although it did not always translate into consistent everyday practices. The focus groups were conducted during 2024 in four Italian regions (Lombardy, Tuscany, Lazio, and Campania) and involved participants from diverse social and territorial backgrounds as well as different age cohorts (young adults 18–30, adults 40–55, older adults 60–70).

The aim of the analysis that follows is to test the analytical usefulness of the category of *social habitus* by examining the participants' narratives in order to

identify whether, and to what extent, elements attributable to the concept of *habitus* can be discerned in their accounts of consumption practices. We seek to determine whether employing the *habitus* lens can help us to better understand the phenomenon of environmental inertia (Marasco & Perulli, *forthcoming*), which seems to characterise Italian society as well. Among the many cues that may be interpreted as manifestations of *habitus*, we will focus on those that are most evident and that directly contribute to articulating the persistence of resistance toward the adoption of "rationally" desirable behaviours – those that are, in principle, more ecologically sustainable. While our broader research also addresses mobility and energy savings, this paper focuses on food practices to better illustrate our argument.

Before delving into the narratives themselves, two methodological clarifications are in order. First, what we analyse here are accounts *about* consumption practices rather than the practices as actually performed. In this sense, our discussion concerns references to the "second nature" as they emerge in the justificatory discourses through which individuals explain their actions and their willingness – or reluctance – to change. We proceed from the assumption that these narratives inevitably reflect what, at a deeper level – namely within the *habitus* – is perceived as desirable and socially acceptable. The underlying hypothesis is that even in imagining and recounting one's doing (and not-doing), what has become sedimented and crystallised within the *habitus* plays a crucial role. For our purposes, this is significant in itself and, in a certain sense, reinforces our argument, as it represents what "instinctively" (i. e. pre-conscious functioning) stands in contrast to reasoning grounded in rational considerations. Through the analysis of the evidences at our disposal, we can observe how different *habitus* – and the distinct configurations of their internal layers – operate in varying ways depending on the local society, that is, on the figurational flow in which they are embedded (municipalities of large, medium, and small size located in different Italian regions), as well as across generations (young, adult, older). These variations emerge in participants' perceptions and narratives, in the socially perceived expectations, and in the ways in which the sedimentation of *habitus* becomes manifest – more or less consciously – in their statements.

The second premise concerns the distinctive nature of the focus group as a technique specifically designed to elicit oppositional dynamics around particularly controversial issues. From our perspective, this makes it possible to reflect on the subjective and intersubjective variability associated with the different interpretations that actors give to shared elements of a common *habitus*. In other words, the exchanges that take place within the focus groups allow us to observe the non-static and non-univocal character of that "second nature" embodied in the *habitus*. Through these interactions, one can discern the peculiar intertwining that arises from processes of sociogenesis and psychogenesis and from their individual-level "interpretation." The diversity of such interpretations – and the tensions they entail – may, however subtly, open up fissures through which change in the *habitus*

itself can begin to emerge, even if such transformations are not easily visible or observable.

4.1 Social habitus as emotional barrier

The first element to be emphasised is the recurrent presence of the emotional dimension in the arguments that emerged during the participants' conversations. Without any specific prompting from the focus group facilitator, explicit references to emotional experience surfaced in the descriptions of everyday practices and aspirations related to daily behaviours such as diet, mobility, and energy consumption. This does not mean that reasoned considerations or explanations of one's behaviour in terms of rational action were absent; rather, these were often accompanied by qualifications and arguments that can be traced back to what we have identified as the emotional component of the *habitus* – above all in the form of an actual emotional barrier that hinders change toward the acceptance of consumption practices different from those habitually enacted.

The recourse to the emotional component in describing one's everyday actions sometimes appears as a general reference to what makes one feel good; at other times, it takes the form of an explicit expression of a clearly identified feeling – such as disgust (as in the words of Maria: "I haven't eaten meat for three years, not by choice but by necessity. After the coronavirus, I just can't eat it anymore – it smells bad to me, I don't like the taste or even the smell." – adult woman, Pistoia), reassurance (as Leonardo conveyed: "Eating meat is a habit I just can't give up. It's so ingrained in my life that it gives me a sense of normality." – young man, Rome), or frustration stemming from the dissonance between what one feels to be a "dutiful action" and what one actually does (as Riccardo expressed: "I know I should eat less meat, but it's hard. I've always eaten this way, and changing feels strange and difficult to face." – young man, Rome). The sense of estrangement mentioned by Riccardo, the normality referred to by Leonardo, and echoed in the words of other participants, reveal the difficulty of letting go of sedimented and internalised habits that emotionally anchor lived experience – contrary to what would be required by the adoption of a behaviour not yet experienced, not part of one's familial or local tradition, which in turn elicits emotions of fear, uncertainty, risk, and a sense of identity dislocation.

As we have seen, the *habitus* is powerful also because it provides a sense of security and identity. This clearly emerges among our participants, who emphasise the link between habits and resistance to change, as in the words of Giuseppe: "Reflecting on what we eat is essential, but we often feel trapped by our habits." (adult man, Pistoia) Others draw attention to how consumption habits play a reassuring role, grounded in their "naturalisation": "Eating meat is a tradition; it's what we've always done. It's hard to imagine changing it." (young man, Rome) "In the end, eating is a way to feel at home, even though I know there are more sustainable alternatives."

(young man, Milan). This sense of reassurance persists even when such habits are recognised as harmful: "Meat is part of our culture. It's hard to think about changing that, even if we know it's bad for us." (adult woman, Pistoia).

The social *habitus*, in its expression as traditional action and as consolidated habits naturalised through emotional forms of expression, thus appears as a potential component inhibiting change, even when anchored in logics of rational action. This inhibition of change is visible both on the level of personal convenience (health) and on that of broader collective interest (environmental sustainability). In both cases, what seems to manifest is a genuine *emotional barrier* capable of restraining any impulse toward change – especially when such change requires distancing oneself from what is experienced as "normal."

The emotional barrier becomes even more evident when behavioural change would require a shift in what Elias identified as the "threshold of repugnance": a sensibility deeply connected to the most ingrained layers of the *habitus*, perceived by individuals as natural and manifesting itself in an immediate, unreflective, bodily response. A significant example of this emerges from the discussions in the focus groups about alternative foods that are nutritionally, economically, and environmentally sound but rejected because they evoke disgust – such as the repeated references to the use of insects for human consumption. Even in this case, participants display a certain degree of awareness, observable across the national territory and within different local figurations. As Mattia put it:

> *"Insects instead of meat – it's something we should really start considering!"* [young man, Milan]

Riccardo expressed a similar view:

> *"There are proposals, like using insects as a source of protein, that we should seriously explore."* [young man, Rome].

And Franca, from a small town in Lombardy, stated:

> *There are also innovative solutions such as the consumption of insects, which in other cultures is already a common practice and could be a path to follow* [older woman, Sant'Angelo Lodigiano]

However, this awareness often struggles to translate into concrete action that would put alternative courses of behaviour into practice, as is clearly illustrated in the following dialogue among participants from Naples:

> *M.: It took me a while to find a certain balance [in my diet…]. For now, I'm not changing – I'm just not willing to.*
>
> *R.: Also because this whole topic often comes with the idea of a "new kind of food," you know, like insects that are supposed to replace meat.*
>
> *M.: Everyone's gone crazy with this cricket flour thing!*
>
> *R.: Yeah, and that, let's say, kind of works as a deterrent. Because you think you have to deal with something that doesn't belong to you, so it sort of puts you off. Even though I've thought about cutting down on meat… But then you're like, 'Well, if that's the alternative…'* [adults, Naples]

This alternative, however, is actually practiced by one participant, who highlights how processing methods can obscure the origin of the food, thereby allowing one to bypass the reaction of disgust, as recounted by a participant from Florence:

> *I lived in Milan during the Expo years, and I ate insect-based flours… fantastic! Because cricket flour is black, you don't actually see the insects – you're just eating flour. I have to say, it's really high in protein and gives you energy, just like eating meat. They're not available yet, though.* [adult man, Florence]

When the threshold of repugnance cannot be overcome – that is, when maintaining certain standards of living and consumption would require a deep detachment from the emotional strata sedimented within the *habitus* – the alternative that tends to emerge is a modification of consumption in quantitative rather than qualitative terms:

> *The conclusion we've come to is that it's not so much about what you use to heat your home or to get around, but that, fundamentally, you must choose to do less – heat less, buy less, eat less.* [adult woman, Pistoia]

4.2 Emotional rigidity, burden of responsibility, and defensive mechanisms

In the passages examined so far, the weight of the emotional dimension takes the form of emotional reassurance, which also translates into rigidity – resistance manifests itself, in other words, as a denial of all those possibilities which, though perceived, would require a significant emotional readjustment. One participant, for instance, made a particularly revealing statement, declaring that he was not willing to change his eating habits despite being aware of environmental issues, while also emphasising an emotional distance from potential alternative choices and practices.

> *I can't imagine a meal without meat. It's so deeply rooted in me that the idea of becoming a vegetarian feels strange and distant.* [adult man, Pistoia]

When faced with the need to contribute to addressing broader issues such as those related to the climate crisis, participants seem to activate reaction mechanisms that, in various ways, interrupt the flow from rational awareness and reflection to a genuine willingness to modify their habits – especially when such change is perceived as disruptive to the sense of identity sustained by remaining within the "natural" boundaries of the *habitus*.

As Barbara put it:

> *Eating pasta is a ritual for us. It's like coming home. Even though I know I should eat differently, it's hard to give up something that's part of my life.* [adult woman, Pistoia]

Anna echoed this sentiment:

> *Changing my eating habits is like being asked to change a part of myself.* [young woman, Milan]

Nor does rational awareness of the health risks appear, in itself, sufficient to undermine this rigidity. This suggests that the obstacle lies not only in the unwillingness

to make sacrifices for a collective good, but also in the difficulty of detaching oneself from what is experienced as a "second nature." As Riccardo put it:

> *Meat is carcinogenic, but I can't imagine a meal without it. It's an inner struggle…* [young man, Rome]

a struggle that, as we would put it, is often fought by resorting to considerations that appear rationally grounded:

> *Meat is carcinogenic, sure, but there's also the question of quantity – what's the actual risk if I eat a steak once a week? […] Meat is carcinogenic, but my consumption is just a tiny part of the problem, like smoking or air pollution.* [young man, Rome]

In other words, within a cost–benefit calculation, the perceived health risks are not sufficient to prompt individuals to move beyond their reassuring habits. Or rather, potential risks are minimised so as to avoid the need to change one's behaviour.

When minimisation is no longer possible – when the level of awareness of the need for change is such that adopting different consumption practices would appear as the logical consequence – the *emotional barrier* proves capable of activating new defensive mechanisms. The first of these is a feeling of powerlessness. Statements such as "What can I do?" or "It's too big a problem" recur frequently, and can be read as expressions of a weak positioning within social figurations: subjects who perceive themselves as having little control over the interdependencies in which they are embedded, and who view their capacity for action as too limited or ineffective to justify a change in their habitual behaviours.

> *Sure, all those intensive farms, the animals and everything, they definitely contribute to pollution – we know that. But right now, I'm not willing […] to make sacrifices or change my habits […]. I mean, no, I'm not willing [to do it] just to reduce pollution – you know, for something that feels bigger than me.* [adult woman, Naples]

This is not only a cognitive issue but also an emotional and identity-related one: recognising one's own impact often means coming to terms with a sense of responsibility experienced as unbearable or guilt-inducing – regarding something perceived as beyond one's control and as positioning oneself in opposition to other groups.

> *But the feeling of discouragement is like being in a rowing race where – out of thirty people in the boat – I'm told, 'You need to row harder, we're losing!' and then I see the person in front of me rowing in the opposite direction… it's kind of disheartening.* [young man, Rome]

The emotional weight of the divergence between what one knows should be done and the persistence of behaviours that contradict it is often lightened by identifying other culprits. In the focus group narratives, we frequently find a tendency to shift the responsibility for change onto other groups – and particularly onto those perceived as emotionally distant, such as developing countries, which often become full-fledged scapegoats:

> *"If all countries did their part, then we could do it too. But as long as there are countries polluting without any control, there's no point in me changing."* [young man, Rome]

Among the countries most often accused of being impermeable to environmental concerns, China occupies a special place, despite what is actually being done there to reduce CO_2 emissions:

> *Sure, I do my part, but then I see countries like China that pollute much more. Why should I make sacrifices if others don't?* [adult woman, Pistoia]

> *I can take shorter showers, brush my teeth, turn off the tap – but then I look at China's example and I just have to smile. Yes, I do it, I do my part, I try to do my best*. [young man, Milan]

4.3 Emotional sustainability, external control, and intergenerational conflict

Alongside the scapegoating mechanism, another form of responsibility-lightening emerges in the demand for external direction. When assuming responsibility seems to trigger a deep friction between the cognitive and emotional dimensions, higher-level collective bodies (primarily political ones) are invoked as points of reference to ease the emotional burden connected to inaction in the face of one's own awareness of responsibility:

> "*I feel that change has to start with those who have more power, not with us."* [young man, Milan]

The weakness – or even absence – of institutions capable of supporting and guiding change in behaviours and consumption practices is often experienced as a sense of powerlessness, particularly among younger participants:

> *What I feel is that we have no real power to do anything… we're many voices, a kind of chorus, all saying the same things, but we still feel we have no power in our hands.* [young woman, Rome]

The sense of powerlessness, combined with the emotional barrier that inhibits the adoption of behaviours different from established ones, often translates into explicit demands for greater regulation by the state. This reveals a willingness to submit to external control rather than to initiate changes in behaviour and consumption patterns that would require trust in other generations and in other people. From this perspective, the words of Aurora, spoken during the Rome focus group, are particularly revealing:

> *I think we need stricter laws. If the government imposes taxes on emissions, we'd probably think twice before using the car. […] The solution would be for the government to put a 40 % VAT on meat – people would drastically reduce their consumption.* [young woman, Rome]

To this, Simone added:

> *Without laws and regulations, we can't expect people to change their habits.* [young man, Rome]

Among younger participants, the perceived weakness of institutions – as the source of their unwillingness to take responsibility for low-emission behaviours – is accompanied by a generational claim. The irresponsibility of previous generations toward a crisis perceived as irreversible, and as the result of long-standing irresponsible

practices, becomes a motivation to resist the adoption of environmentally sustainable behaviours, revealing a profound and significant intra-generational conflict.

> *Us – meaning the 20 % of the population who are young people. Because if we're the only ones who have to do something, it doesn't make sense… I'll just enjoy life, do what I want, and go with the flow of those who came before me. After all, there'll be no one after me anyway… so I might as well make the most of it.* [young man, Rome]

Young participants express frustration toward previous generations, feeling the weight of responsibility for the planet's future while at the same time experiencing anxiety over their inability to plan for it – or even to imagine it. This theme pervades the narratives of the younger participants, though with differing nuances and emphases.

> *No one talked about eco-anxiety, which is becoming more and more common – especially among younger generations who ask themselves, 'Why should I bring children into a world that's basically disappearing?* [young man, Rome]

> *I think it's a problem for everyone. It's a challenge for today, and even more so for tomorrow – and it's only going to get worse in the days to come.* [young man, Rome]

In conclusion, many participants stated that they "know what should be done," yet still find themselves unable to change their habits: "I know I should use the car less, but without it I can't get to work"; "I'd like to eat less meat, but in my family that's unthinkable." These statements highlight emotional and symbolic barriers that do not stem from ideological refusal, but from a configuration of practices that are deeply rooted, embodied, and experienced as "natural." It is the *habitus* at work – unseen yet effective – imposing shared schemes of action and perception that are difficult to dismantle through simple moral appeals, as these are embedded in ways of acting and feeling perceived as integral parts of the self, of personal and group identity.

5. Conclusive remarks

The figurational approach proves particularly fruitful for analysing ecological inertia. This perspective invites us to interpret pro-environmental action as the product of historical, social, and emotional interdependencies, in which individuals move within dynamic and not always visible configurations. The brief passages analysed suggest that the *social habitus* operates as a "second nature" that structures the field of what is possible and acceptable, activating emotional dynamics that "confer meaning" upon individual choices.

By foregrounding this aspect, the *habitus* as an analytical tool enables us to grasp dimensions of action that often remain marginal in the literature on the contribution of everyday practices to climate change. First, by rejecting the tendency to individualise ecological responsibility, it situates individual practices within the meanings they acquire in broader frameworks that encompass dominant socio-cultural models, power relations, and the identity configurations that sustain and reproduce

them. Second, it recognises emotions as a structural component of social action and, as such, as a decisive factor in forms of resistance or openness to change – an approach that transcends the rigid dichotomy between rationality and emotionality. Third, it opens up a possible path for investigating the historical processes in which our behaviour is rooted, thereby avoiding certain cognitive shortcuts that lead to moralistic interpretations of climate change.

The analysis conducted through the lens of habitus reveals that to facilitate the adoption of practices capable of disrupting, if not reversing, the trajectory toward environmental catastrophe, it is essential to engage not only with economic incentives and cost structures but also to activate the emotional dimensions of social action. This includes fostering a collective identity, reinforcing social affiliations, and leveraging the strength of social ties. Moreover, it is crucial to promote trust and solidarity within communities, encourage shared responsibility, and facilitate participation in collective "sacrifices", i.e. change habits and practices. Addressing the emotional barriers requires the proposal of acceptable alternatives while being mindful of various social positions and interdependencies that shape individual and collective behaviours.

Through our analysis, we have sought to show how a *habitus*-based perspective helps to reveal the strength of the emotional dimension in shaping and giving meaning to everyday practices, and how this emotional force intertwines with figurational, identity-related, and group dynamics. Further efforts aimed at adapting this framework to the study of *demand-side mitigation* could help to uncover the historical formation of the *habitus* in relation to various practices (Shove et al., 2012) and their entanglement with figurational processes, as well as to explore how it – or parts of it – may be activated in the conflicts between groups surrounding the climate transition. In our view, such developments could contribute to the refinement of a crucial analytical tool for illuminating an as yet insufficiently understood dimension of attitudes and resistances toward carbon-related behaviours.

Through this lens, emotions emerge as repositories of the historical traces of power relations and collective identifications, while everyday practices appear as the terrain on which these sedimentations are reproduced or disrupted. Viewing the ecological transition through this lens means recognising that it can neither be entrusted solely to information nor conceived as the sum of virtuous individual behaviours. Understanding and addressing this process requires questioning the transformations of the collective *habitus* – that is, the ways in which societies feel, evaluate, and desire. Only from this level can a genuine capacity for sustainable change arise.

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Fritz Reusswig, Wiebke Lass*

Figurations of socio-ecological decline: The climate crisis as a process of de-civilisation

Abstract

Climate change is one of the most important pieces of evidence for what is currently discussed as 'the Anthropocene', the age of human domination of the planet. At the same time, it poses a real threat to the survival of human civilisation. This article draws on Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation to describe this threat as a process of de-civilisation. To this end, the core analytical dimensions of (de)civilisation processes used by Elias – the state's monopoly on the use of force and control of emotions – will be modified and expanded. Mechanisms and interrelationships of socio-ecological processes will be identified that could bring about the possible collapse of human civilisation in a scenario of severe climate change, combined with a significant decline of social and political adaptive capacities. The emergence of populist narratives and movements is reconstructed in terms of the internal dialectics of the civilisation process that can accelerate this collapse. Finally, the article addresses the question of whether and how re-civilisation could avert collapse and complement the in fact only halved Anthropocene.

Keywords: Civilisation process, de-civilisation, climate crisis, collapse, populism

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1. Introduction

Human civilisations around the globe have been developing under a rather stable climate, known as the Holocene, occurring at about 12,000 years back from now (Blümel, 2009). With the recent exceeding of the global mean temperature of 1.5 °C, anthropogenic climate change has exceeded a critical threshold beyond which 'dangerous climate change' begins, defined by the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and its concretisation in the 2015 Paris Climate Agreement. Given the speed of human-induced climate change and

* *Fritz Reusswig (fritz@pik-potsdam.de),* Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK) & futurlogic, Germany
Wiebke Lass (wiebke.lass@pik-potsdam.de), Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research (PIK), Germany

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the massive consequences it has for humans and ecosystems, it can no longer be ruled out that the future will also herald the demise of the human species. Climate change could prove to be humanity's 'endgame' (Kemp et al., 2022). This is particularly true when there are actors and tendencies within society that actively oppose effective climate policy or sustainable development at large. Modern populism can be interpreted as such a force – even if it is by no means the only driver.

In this article, we pursue the thesis that anthropogenic climate change has the potential to destroy human civilisation. The concept of civilisation used here is based on that of Norbert Elias (2000), but at the same time advocates substantial changes and extensions. These modifications are necessary in order to take account of the changed civilisational realities of the 21st century. Even during Elias's lifetime, his book was the subject of controversial debate. The main points of criticism concern the question of the scope of his findings (do they only apply to Western Europe or can they be generalised?) and the question of de-civilisation (was German National Socialism a minor setback of historical progress, or are important driving forces already inherent in the process of civilisation itself?).

Therefore, in the next chapter (Chapter 2), we explain the nature of our recourse to Elias and the modifications we consider necessary. We then use this expanded concept of civilisation to reconstruct the de-civilising effects of climate change. We see this risk above all in the case of particularly severe (high-end) climate change (Chapter 3). Subsequently, we would like to work out the de-civilising potential of modern populism, which – at least in many of its variants – appears as a project of decidedly anti-climate societal and political agenda (Chapter 4). Despite all the criticism of populism, however, our argument is that it should not be overlooked that the climate crisis has so far been caused by social driving forces other than populism. Populism carries the risk of (dramatically) exacerbating these, but it also offers opportunities – sometimes against its will – to halt the process of de-civilisation. If we seize these opportunities, we can, according to our concluding thesis, save modern civilisation from a self-inflicted downfall in high-end climate change (Chapter 5). However, we will only succeed in doing so if we continue to develop human civilisation. The core prerequisite for this is the restructuring of the core institutions of civilisation in the sense of a further substantial ecologisation of both their structural and individual dimensions. Only by 'threading' nature into civilisation can we succeed in overcoming the self-destructive tendencies of the modern Anthropocene and move from a halved (humankind is a dominant influence destroying the environment) to a true Anthropocene (humankind is able to live within planetary boundaries) (cf. chapter 5).

2. (De-)civilisation expanded

There are various reasons for drawing on Norbert Elias's work to interpret the de-civilising potential of anthropogenic climate change, which we would like to

briefly outline here – without claiming to be exhaustive or to be Elias philologists. First, Elias attempts to overcome the dualism of individual and society by thinking in terms of interdependencies and figurations, which can better account for the complexity of the phenomenon of climate change than individualistic or collectivist approaches. Second, Elias attempts to overcome the dualism of structure and process in a historical sociology or sociological historiography that makes long-term processes analysable in a common framework. On the one hand, he uses figuratively specified general models or mechanisms (e.g., the 'monopoly' or 'king mechanism') to explain specific historical phenomena. On the other hand, he also places current structures in a dynamic historical context and attempts to explain their emergence (Albert, 2013). That fits well with a reconstruction of the *longue durée* of human civilisation history, but also with thinking in scenarios and models, as is typical in climate research. Thirdly, long before the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences (Clough & Halley, 2007), Elias regarded the interplay of individual affect control and the development of social institutions (mainly: a state monopoly on the use of force) as two core mechanisms of the process of civilisation. Neither the current climate crisis nor the rise of populist movements and forces can be adequately understood without reference to affective-emotional resonance spaces interplaying with political processes and decisions. Fourthly, Elias considers the tension between engagement and distancing, which we believe is necessary for a critical scientific engagement with the climate crisis (Linklater, 2019).

In his book on civilisation (2000), Elias argues that the monopoly on violence and the control of emotions, in their interaction, are the two central processes that have shaped (Western) European civilisation since the end of the Middle Ages. The debates surrounding this diagnosis already suggest that it is necessary to go further here for reasons inherent to the social sciences. The two main criticisms are Eurocentrism and a lack of dialectics in the concept of civilisation (Bogner, 1989; Kallis, 2020; Pepperell, 2016; Treibel et al., 2000). In addition, it is necessary to go beyond the two factors defined by Elias in order to actually raise the concept of civilisation to the required descriptive and normative levels (Senghaas, 2002; 2004). In particular, Elias's narrow focus, according to which engagement is ultimately defined by proximity and affective bonds, must be corrected (Drucks, 2011; Quilley, 2020). Normative orientations themselves imply a certain degree of (cognitive) distancing and critical reflection on one's own preferences, which makes it possible to critically examine not only ways of life, but entire civilisations (Jaeggi, 2018). However, this immanent critique is also necessary because there are good reasons to consider the project of European civilisation contradictory and incomplete for social and ecological reasons, as long as its hegemonic universalisation goes hand in hand with the destruction of its own foundations of life – and those of others.

Our proposal is therefore that the core elements of the civilisation process in Elias must be clarified or corrected internally and expanded both internally (socially) and externally (ecologically). In the context of peace and conflict studies, Senghaas

has suggested to extend Elias' dimensions of the civilisation process, leading him to suggest a 'civilisatory hexagon'. This approach served as a source of inspiration here and was modified for the present context. In the following, we outline the clarifications (1,2), the internal (3–6) and the external (7) expansions.

(1) *State monopoly on the use of force.* For Elias (as for Hobbes and Weber), the monopolisation of physical force by the state is also a core dimension of the civilising process. But this is at best a necessary condition (Graeber & Wengrow, 2021), and by no means a sufficient one. History has shown too often that the modern state can also use its means of force against individuals and groups in society. Additional institutional safeguards are needed here to prevent the state from becoming an instrument of violence and oppression (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2019).

(2) *Affect control*. As important as it is for the process of civilisation to bring aggressive feelings in particular under the control of the subject, it remains unclear whether this also applies to all affects and emotions. Here, too, the further history of the 20th and 21st centuries has shown that affect control can also be associated with specific pathologies (Bösel, 2023). Particularly with regard to anthropogenic climate change, a certain lack of affect can be observed in view of the objective risks, which is also normatively problematic (Barker, 2025; Slaby, 2023). Non-dualistic concepts of affectivity are needed here (Fuchs, 2024). In our view, the guiding principle for civilisation would therefore be a differentiated and expressive culture of affect (Bösel: 'affect ecology') instead of mere affect control.

(3) *Rule of law*. Critical civilisation research cannot be satisfied with the emergence of a state monopoly on the use of force as a civilisational achievement. Since the concept of the rule of law ('*Rechtsstaat*' in German) began to develop at the beginning of the 19th century – and was only politically established much later (Böckenförde, 1976) – it does not play a major role in Elias's work. But it is only its constitutional constraints that prevent the state's monopoly on the use of force from being turned against its citizens. The rule of law includes human and civil rights, the separation of powers, legal protection by the courts, and the legality and predictability of administrative action (Dreier, 1991).

(4) *Democracy*. In order to be considered a step forward for civilisation, the state must not only monopolise power, it must also submit it to the people as sovereign. Only when those affected by the law are also its authors can law and justice prevail. The rule of law and democracy are mutually dependent and enable each other (Habermas, 1998). From our point of view, it can remain open for the time being whether a liberal, republican, or radical theory of democracy is advocated here to ensure this (Machin, 2022; Sartori, 1987).

(5) *Public sphere, civil society, knowledge*. Civil societies are irreducibly pluralistic or are at least able to deal constructively with plurality and conflict. There is

opposition, but no enmity (Mouffe, 2013). The party that is defeated in a democracy (the opposition) must have the opportunity to publicly promote its views. A democratic culture of debate and conflict gives rise to political and social innovation. In addition, environmental concerns have a better chance of being heard by those in power if civil society movements take them up. A civilised public discourse gives voice to rationality (Wesche, 2014) and seeks scientific expertise where it is needed by the sovereign to make informed decisions – without ignoring uncertainties and expert disputes (Pamuk, 2021), and without slipping into an expertocracy (Lucky, 2023).

(6) *Social justice*. Although the concept of (social) justice is also notoriously controversial, we consider it necessary in order to give the civilisational process a normative orientation. This includes the protection from hardship, poverty and hunger as well. Social inequality can be conducive to a prosperous economy within certain limits, but large inequalities in income and wealth eventually undermine political equality in democracy (Ali & Caranti, 2021).

(7) *Ecology and planetary boundaries.* In Elias's work, as in many social science theories, nature primarily comes into play as an object of domination for the purposes of reproduction and civilisation (Elias, 2001). Unlike when Elias's book on civilisation was published, we are now confronted with a multitude of ecological crises on all scales (UNEP, 2019). Human civilisation has entered a stage where its future reproduction has become uncertain due to the transgression of various ecological thresholds, sometimes termed 'planetary boundaries' (Richardson et al., 2023; Rockström, 2025). From a critical social science perspective, the planetary boundaries concept ultimately refers to social processes and conditions that are forcing humanity to leave a safe operating space and are leading to an ecological crisis with a catastrophic core (Brand et al. 2021). It seems imperative to us that any discussion of the process of civilisation must include this interplay between social and ecological dimensions of human development. Planet Earth must be considered in its own materiality and temporality as a co-acting force of humans (Chakrabarty, 2019; Clark & Szerszynski, 2020; Schroer, 2022).This inclusion must take place in all the dimensions of the civilisation process mentioned so far, for example in the sense of ecological democracy or an ecological extension of property rights (Biermann, 2022; Heidenreich, 2023; Wesche, 2023).

Since the ecological dimension is orthogonal to the others, and since humanity has already exceeded the planet's 'safe operating space' in some areas in a self-endangering manner, it is no longer possible to speak of civilisational progress – regardless of how appropriate or inappropriate the notion of progress might be from a purely inner-social point of view (Jaeggi, 2025). Against this background, the related concept of an Anthropocene seems to be structurally flawed. It had been originally developed by the atmosphere chemist and Nobel prize winner Paul Crutzen in the

early 2000's in order to propose a new geological epoch: one dominated by the impact of human activity on planetary systems. These impacts include anthropogenic climate change, biodiversity loss leading to mass extinction, and the ubiquity of microplastics in terrestrial and marine ecosystems. While the geologic community until now rejects to officially recognise the concept, it has been stimulating a lot of debate both in the natural and the social sciences (Hickman et al., 2018; Wallenhorst, 2023). The vivid debates about the question of timing (when did the Anthropocene start?) are closely related to the question of its causation and ultimate social drivers (with candidates such as capitalism, colonialism, fossilism, masculinity, modernity…). Our major caveat, however, refers to the *effects* of the Anthropocene or the diagnosis of its current *status*. It is described as human (capitalist, fossilist….) *domination* of planet Earth's ecosystems. But this 'domination' is in fact deeply failing in a very specific sense, leading to widespread depletion of resources, overuse, degradation and, in many regions, destruction of ecosystems. It is true that these negative to disastrous environmental outcomes have not been intended by social actors – in a similar way as social order is a consequence of individual actions without being its intentional result, as Elias tirelessly repeats. But this is exactly the reason why 'domination' is the wrong term. Too many unintended and potentially disastrous 'side-effects' of this 'domination' have accumulated, still more very critical ones are still to come, e.g. the so-called 'tipping points' of the Earth system, triggering irreversible detrimental dynamics at the planetary scale (Rockström et al., 2025). To pick up on a thought by Walter Benjamin: We may 'master' nature, but we do not master our mastery of nature (Feenberg 2011). As long as 'anthropos' (whatever concrete social agent might reside under this umbrella term) undermines its mere future existence by 'mastering' nature, the 'Anthropocene' is just a halved form of domination – and a form that can be characterised as a de-civilisation process in the (expanded) sense of the term introduced by Elias.

3. High-end climate change as de-civilisation process

Despite all the binding climate targets agreed, anthropogenic climate change is continuing. In the (new) record year of 2024, the global mean temperature exceeded the 1.5 °C limit agreed in the Paris Climate Agreement of 2015 as the lower limit of just tolerable climate change for the period towards the end of the 21st century (Hausfather, 2025). Global greenhouse gas emissions have been rising steadily to date, occasionally interrupted by brief phases of economic or political crises, such as during the 2020/21 COVID-19 pandemic (Friedlingstein et al., 2025).

It is therefore not surprising that fear of the consequences of climate change has increased worldwide in recent years (Clayton, 2020), often combined with grief over the loss of or massive damage to landscapes, or a longing for the restoration of their former state (Albrecht, 2019). Doomsday scenarios are booming, not

only in the world of science fiction (Davidson, 2023). Collapsology, deep adaptation (Bingaman, 2022; Monios & Wilmsmeier, 2021), prepperism (du Plessis & Husted, 2024) and the post-apocalyptic environmental movement (Malmqvist, 2024) are similar phenomena in this context. Parallels to religious apocalypticism are unmistakable (Flannery, 2024), which also offers points of reference for possible ways out and rescue attempts (Mackenthun, 2021; Milner & Burgmann, 2020). In a way, the images and stories presented there represent a necessary corrective to the complicated, complex, abstract and emotionally unengaging scenarios of climate science. Especially as climate research has under-researched high-end climate scenarios (Kemp et al., 2022).

3.1. Can societies collapse?

In particular, if we take the mainstream social sciences as an example, the interplay between the systemic risks of climate change and the internal dynamics of social systems over a longer period of time is under-researched. The social sciences are ill-prepared to deal with such issues because the study of disasters and disintegration processes is not part of the core sociological canon. Although there is a sociology of disasters, it is leading a rather marginal existence in the concert of hyphenated sociologies (Clausen, 1994). And even in the major theoretical drafts, considerations of social decay are not at the center, as sociology since its beginnings has generally been concerned with explaining the emergence, preservation and further development of social order, not its decay. Since the focus was on emancipation from nature, natural factors were excluded from the legitimate realm of sociological explanation. Analogous to the return of the repressed, they are now coming back into focus through the back door of climate impact research and transdisciplinary research on socio-ecological systems (e.g. Jørgensen et al. 2024). Civilisational crises and collapses represent a real possibility of a modernity that cannot get a grip on its own natural conditions (Böhnert et al., 2025; Neckel, 2021).

But is there any 'causal influence' of nature on social actors and systems? And can't societies protect themselves from the negative consequences of climate change by learning and adapting? It is not necessary to postulate a direct causality between physical and social systems in order to be able to conceive the detrimental impacts of climate change. Societies have a logic of their own that makes the direct causal impact of climate change on social systems a borderline case that can occur at the very end of an ecological catastrophe, when a social system no longer has any degrees of freedom. Nature and natural systems normally have an indirect, mediated effect on social systems. Responses to climate change will reflect the specific internal social dynamics of societies in complex and multiscalar ways (Gronenborn et al., 2020; Naylor et al., 2020). Environmental impacts do not determine social systems, but are received by them as an irritation and processed according to internal system rules (Luhmann, 1996) or generative mechanisms (Archer, 2015). The environment limits the degrees of freedom that the system has and within which it can make

decisions. Nature generates social resonance (Rosa, 2019), it does not cause something quasi-mechanically in a social system. But as materially and energetically open systems, societies depend on natural processes and resources. Their socio-ecological metabolism enables their internal functioning. The materiality of the human body, the physical infrastructures and the technology of societies thus offer a variety of entry points for socio-ecological interdependencies. And the degree of sustainability of social reproduction and production determines whether, how and for how long social systems can exist in a finite and ecologically interdependent world. History shows that civilisations can undermine their own livelihoods and extinguish themselves via the 'detour' of an ecological catastrophe (Diamond, 2005; Tainter, 1988). While one might be tempted to argue that past civilisation collapses as results of climatic changes have been rare, looking at the past may be a poor guide to a future outside the stable climate of the mid-Holocene (Xu et al., 2020). The globalising modern civilisation has made itself dependent on global ecosystems and resources, whose inherent logic and limits thus co-determine its future.

Societies can know and anticipate all of this. They can learn from mistakes, they can try to adapt in order to become more resilient, i.e. to be less affected by 'external' shocks or to recover better afterwards. However, learning and adaptation do not happen 'just like that' or equally in all societies, but under system-specific conditions. If, for example, discourses are determined by hegemonic social actors and interests so that consensus or dissent pathologies arise, this results in certain learning blockages or forms of authoritarian, defensive, ideological or regressive learning (Miller, 2002). According to Miller, consensus pathologies exist when only state authorities or certain privileged groups are allowed to provide legitimate knowledge as learning content in a society. Dissent pathologies occur when certain views are declared 'taboo' or certain arguments are rejected only because they come from certain groups. The rejection of the bearer trumps the examination of the argument. This means that the quality of public discourse, which is internally linked to the civilisational facets of democracy and the rule of law, determines a society's ability to learn. We will come back to this in connection with the de-civilising potential of populism.

The same applies to adaptation to climate change. Adaptation requires awareness of the problem and requires efforts – including financial resources. The more severe the expected climate change impacts, the more expensive adaptation becomes. In addition, incremental adaptation (the gradual increase of already established measures, such as raising dykes) is not sufficient in the case of severe climate change. It is rather transformative adaptation that is then required (e.g. renaturation of river or coastal areas) (O'Brien et al., 2012; Warner et al., 2019). However, even transformative adaptation can reach its limits in the event of very severe climate change (Siders et al., 2019). The IPCC (2023) distinguishes between hard and soft limits to adaptation. Soft adaptation limits occur when possibilities exist in principle but are not available to the affected actor here and now, hard limits

exist where measures are fundamentally insufficient to avoid/substantially mitigate intolerable risks. High-end climate change leads societies first to the soft, but then to the hard adaptation limits. In such cases, the only solution is for humans to withdraw from particularly exposed regions (e.g. resettlement away from the coast). However, such a retreat is not a simple event, but a complicated and lengthy process (keywords here are property relations and compensation issues), which involves conflicts and requires lengthy planning – and can therefore also fail, e.g. if public planning is understaffed, underfinanced, or legally not capable enough.

The decisive factor here is the *adaptive capacity* of a society. This is determined by social and political factors that are closely related to the core civilisational dimensions we outlined in Section 2, such as the degree of social cohesion and trust in a society, horizontal and vertical policy coordination, among other things (Reusswig et al., 2026). Most integrated climate models assume that adaptation can take place and mitigate potential damage. However, adaptive capacity itself can be subject to societal restrictions, and it can negatively be affected by climate impacts (Bostrom, 2019; Callahan, 2025; Serdeczny et al., 2024; Sharma, 2023). Not least for this reason, adaptation measures themselves have a kind of 'half-life period', beyond which they become prohibitively expensive, ineffective and/or socially unacceptable (Haasnoot et al., 2021). Air conditioning systems, for example, reduce heat mortality. Entire regions such as the southwest of the USA could not have been populated as they are today without air conditioning (and long-distance water and energy supply) after the Second World War. With rising temperatures and heatwaves, the demand for electricity for air conditioning systems will increase – for the USA alone by 13–15 % with global warming of only 2 °C (Obringer et al., 2022). However, the demand for cooling buildings will increase, especially in developing and emerging countries already affected by heat – despite the fact that the poorer classes will not be able to afford air conditioning (Davis et al., 2021). This will increase both heat mortality and the demand for electricity in the countries affected. In view of their generally more fossil-intensive energy mix, this leads to a massive increase in CO_2 emissions, additionally driving climate change (Colelli et al., 2023). Given the relatively poor condition of the electricity grid infrastructure in countries of the Global South, a sharp increase in electricity demand for cooling during hot spells brings with it the risk of power outages (Sherman et al., 2022).These and other limits to adaptation grow more severe when one considers other compound and interconnected risks. For example, international trade has been proposed as an adaptation option in the context of food security. Possible reductions in agricultural production in one area may be compensated by surpluses in other ones. But globally synchronised production shocks compromise such trade networks by damaging crops in major breadbasket regions worldwide at the same time (Kornhuber et al., 2020), making it difficult to compensate one area's losses with surpluses from another. Resulting massive food price increases would hit the lower and the middle-

income groups more seriously, once again indicating that existing social inequalities are major climate risk amplifiers.

3.2. High-end climate change as de-civilisation process

If it is not possible to reduce anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions to zero very quickly, a further increase in the global mean temperature can be expected. By the year 2100, this would mean an increase of around 3 °C compared to pre-industrial levels in the event of a medium increase in emissions, and additional 4–5 °C in the event of a very strong increase (IPCC, 2023). In the event of severe climate change, we argue, societies will more or less quickly reach hard adaptation limits, especially if they are unable to build or maintain a sufficiently strong adaptive capacity for internal or external reasons, including learning restrictions. At the end of this more or less rapid process of de-civilisation is collapse.

We define civilisation collapse as the loss of societal capacity to maintain essential reproductive and governance functions, especially maintaining security, the rule of law, and the provision of basic necessities such as food and water (Steel et al., 2022). Civilisation collapses in this sense could be associated with a loss of self-control, civil strife, violence and widespread scarcity, and thus have extremely adverse effects on human welfare. Climate change induced de-civilisation also includes the undermining of social justice and the challenging of democratic institutions. It is important to conceive civilisation collapses as processes, not (only) as events. And it is also important to highlight the fact that societies as well as individuals and organisations according to their conditional autonomy, do have degrees of freedom to modify their institutional settings (e.g. by political changes or individual behavior changes). Collapse is thus a possible trajectory, but not an inevitable necessity. Collapse as a socio-ecological figuration will most probably unfold in typical stages, including the subsequent stages of irritation, crisis, first breakdowns, major system-wide dysfunctions, more or less (chaotic) managed retreat to the complete removal of a specific civilisation. Whether or not the remaining population will be able to build up a new civilisation remains open.

Collapses can be wider or narrower in spatial scope, so one can consider not only different phases, but also different patterns over time. Detrimental climate impacts will be limited at first, leading to local collapses: climate change causes collapse in specific, vulnerable locations while civilisation elsewhere is largely able to adapt to climate impacts or at least can cope with it. In a next phase, urban- and sometimes even national-level collapses become widespread, but some large urban centers and national governments still exist in less affected regions. ‚Less affected' does not mean ‚intact'. Given the level of climate change that has been reached at that point, even these still existing and more or less functioning centers experience negative climate impacts such as persistent water and food scarcity, labor productivity losses or more heat-related deaths. This phase – one might term it a semi-broken or

fragmented world – will be a very volatile and contradictory one, generating a lot of conflicts between more and less affected regions or civilisations.

To give an example: Currently only 30 million people live in areas with an annual mean temperature (AMT) of more than 29 °C – extremely hot areas, covering only 0.8 % of the Earth's land surface, primarily in the Sahara Desert and the Gulf region. Under a high climate change scenario (SSP3–7.0 emissions), these extremely hot places will expand, and by 2070 about 2 billion people are expected to live in these extreme environments, by then including regions such as Pakistan, parts of India, South-East Asia or the northern parts of South America. This will most probably increase the pressure for both internal and international migration – which is supposed to grow by about 400–500 % by the end of the century due to increasing droughts alone (Smirnov et al., 2022).

But while large portions of people from the global South will probably try to migrate to the North, the economies of the Northern countries will also be affected by direct and indirect climate impacts on their economies. Under a high-end climate change scenario, economic damages could lead to a reduction of per capita income of about 40 % by 2100 – with higher damages in the Southern hemisphere (Neal et al. 2025). Given the central role of economic growth to modern societies these numbers indicate a massive assault to material wellbeing and legitimation of political order.

With higher levels of global warming tipping points of the Earth system might occur, such as rapid collapse of Antarctic ice sheets, releases of methane from permafrost or forest diebacks (Rockström, 2025; Steffen et al., 2018; Winkelmann et al., 2022; Wunderling et al., 2024). They might combine with negative social tipping elements. Spaiser et al. (2024) have identified five of those tipping elements that, induced by climate change, do negatively affect the internal 'fabric' of society, impeding on a society's adaptive capacity: anomie, radicalisation and polarisation, displacement, conflict and financial destabilisation. Societies more vulnerable to climate change are likely to experience such negative social tipping points earlier, but this will inevitably have knock-on effects globally. As the consequences of climate change intensify, societal trust, cooperation, and altruism may erode due to increased competition for scarce resources, displacement of populations, and other climate-related challenges. The risk to civilisation is not from direct climate impacts alone but rather those impacts occurring together with dysfunctional social feedbacks and other destabilising factors. This holds especially for violent conflicts and war. Already in the recent past (1995–2020), environmental scarcity due to climate change has driven small-scale conflicts within countries, while geopolitics and environmental scarcity have also led to internationalised intrastate wars (Buhaug & Uexkull, 2021; Ko et al., 2024). Wars in turn do have negative side-effects on the natural environment, carbon emissions, and public budgets (Crawford, 2022; Nazir et al., 2025).

At this point, a global collapse of civilisation is conceivable: most large urban areas across the globe and most nation states are confronted with enormous climate impact damages and resource scarcities (food, water, habitable zones, productive soils…), leading to a massive erosion of statehood (Kareiva & Carranza, 2018; Xu et al., 2020). Adverse climate change impacts, especially on food production, may cause political conflict and dysfunction that undermines capacity for adaptation while leading to actions, such as bans on food exports, that spread destabilisation and hasten collapse (Beard et al., 2021; Richards et al., 2021). Once the harmful effects of biophysical system failures accumulate to the point where they directly endanger the immediate lifeworld of citizens forcing states to respond one can assume states to be endangered as well. They would be overwhelmed with demands to cover mounting and uninsurable damage costs in the face of a shrinking revenue base and social unrest. It is then no longer 'only' democracy that is in danger, it is the rule of law and the state monopoly of use of force. As many places and regions are affected, help from others can no longer be found, leading to hopelessness, widespread fears, desperation and anger. Scapegoats will be looked for – and found. The chains of commercial, emotional and cognitive interdependence shorten. The internalisation of social norms does no longer find anchoring points in society, and collapsing affect control leads to violent action. Social order can, at the end of this process, no longer be provided by the state, and the Hobbesian war of all against all is re-opened. New (or rather: old) forms of social order may establish, e.g. a feudal or tribal system (Clark 2020). However, given the disruptive and unstable character of reproduction in a situation of global collapse, all new forms of social order will remain intrinsically unstable (Kaven, 2020; Scheffran et al., 2025).

It is difficult to say how long this process of climate change-induced de-civilisation will take. Depending on the efforts and successes of climate policy worldwide, it may not even come to that. But the first steps have already been taken. In the next section, we would like to take a closer look at a social driving force that is already triggering decivilising effects today and – if it retains its character and continues to increase its global influence – could make a decisive contribution to the collapse of civilisation in the face of climate change: populism.

4. The de-civilising potential of populism

Elias views the process of civilisation as an objective and purposeful event (albeit not intended by anyone), but he also reckons with counter-forces and setbacks – for example with regard to German National Socialism (Elias, 2013). Despite his detached observer stance, Elias often describes processes of de-civilisation as a relapse into 'barbarism' (Linklater 2020). It cannot be denied that this underestimates the ambivalences and internal contradictions of the civilisation process itself (Arnasson, 2022; Dépelteau et al., 2013; Kallis 2020). The internal contradictions and counter-tendencies of modern civilisation must therefore be addressed more

strongly than in his book on civilisation when looking at the destructive consequences of climate change. It is helpful to consider 'neighboring' authors such as Horkheimer and Adorno (Bogner 1989) or Zygmunt Bauman (Catlin, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the rise of populist parties, movements and attitudes lends itself to doing better justice to this concern of strengthening the 'dialectic of enlightenment' in the process of civilisation. Initial attempts to explain populism with recourse to Eliasian figures of thought are available (e.g. Voelz, 2022), but do not address the climate crisis and do not take sufficient account of the ambivalences of populism. We use the term populism to describe parties and movements, but also ideologies, discourses, strategies for gaining power or the attitudes of individuals. Despite all the differences, many attempts to define populism converge in that there are two core dimensions that characterise it: Criticism of elites and anti-pluralism (cf. Heinisch et al., 2021; Kaltwasser et al., 2017; Oswald, 2022; Stockemer, 2019). The first core element, elite criticism, consists of the distinction between the 'good' or 'morally pure' people and an aloof, corrupt (political) elite that has abandoned the common good, essentially serves its own interests and 'sells' this as a policy with no alternative. The mass media, often also characterised as 'bought' ('lying press'), are described as vicarious agents who manipulate the people with their ideologically distorted news. The populist critique of elites focuses almost exclusively on the political and media elites and does not derive its standards from universalisable principles, but rather from an assumed power to interpret what is presented as the 'true will of the people' or the will of the 'moral majority'. The second core element of populism, anti-pluralism, consists of the distinction between an equally good 'we' and the 'others', whereby the 'others' are not simply the corrupt elites, but refer to an internal differentiation in the empirical (electoral) people – thus addressing not the vertical (hierarchical), but the horizontal (egalitarian) level. For regardless of the assumption of a 'morally pure' people, according to this perspective there are always groups in society that have divergent attitudes and interests – and on whose approval the ruling elites can often rely. The people are therefore victims of an alliance between the political establishment and social minorities, and the sovereignty of the people is threatened not only by the establishment, but also by 'cultural strangers'. Depending on the political orientation, these others can be migrants, 'wealthy urban ecologists', 'feminist activists', 'do-gooders' of all kinds, 'international finance capital' or the 'Jewish world conspiracy'.There are different varieties of populism, such as left-wing and right-wing, and there are transitions between right-wing populism and far-right positions. It should also be noted that populist parties can change their goals and argumentation patterns depending on whether they are in opposition or in government. Populism can also strengthen democratic forces and institutions, mostly against its will (Caiani & Graziano, 2021; Jones & Menon, 2024; Koch, 2024; Tushnet, 2019). In section 2, we have expanded the concept of de-civilisation to include additional dimensions. Taking up this extension, the following de-civilising effects of populism can be identified:

(1) *State monopoly on the use of force*. The power-political advantages of the state monopoly on the use of force are attractive to all political currents and forces – except perhaps for anarchism, which, however, hardly plays a role in today's political world. The various populist parties and movements at least strive for state power (Weyland, 2024). Along the way, this can also lead to the mobilisation of extra-state violence, as the examples of Bolsonaro and Trump show (Ignatieff, 2022). Populism in power usually expands the power of the executive and uses the state's monopoly on the use of force to combat unpopular parties and social movements. To do so, they can rely on forms of political tribalism, combining a Manichean worldview that defines politics as the ultimate war between 'good' and 'evil'; anti-pluralism; and authoritarianism that empowers the leader of the tribe via unconditional trust. Tribalist leaders, while talking about the 'people' as a homogenous concept, use divisive social identity categories and strategies, fueling antagonism and hostility between political ingroups and outgroups (Krekó, 2021).

(2) *Affect Control.* Populism is an affective strategy that combines emotional integration of 'the people' with affective antagonistic othering. Populist actors use performative styles of proximity in order to construct intimacy to 'the people' and thus offer an affective community (Abellan, 2025). This emotional setting not only reconnects people to their 'good old' and 'normal' fossil lifestyles, but also reinforces their feeling of togetherness with like-minded people together with an increased self-efficacy perception (Eversberg et al., 2024; Spissinger, 2024). A computer-based analysis of the AfD discourse on climate change found that negative emotional terms and phrases are very often used by party officials, and that anger is the dominant emotion, followed by fear, sadness and disgust. Positive emotions, such as enthusiasm, joy, pride or hope only occur when anti-climate policies are referred to (Stede & Memminger, 2025). Affective polarisation can undermine trust, social coherence and the functioning of democratic institutions (Scherer, 2022), especially if reinforced by social media (Arguedas et al., 2022; van Krieken, 2024). In any case, populism as a strategy mobilises affects like discontent, anger, and fear in order to fight 'the establishment' (Tietjen, 2023), thus attracting voters that experience a lack of control over one's own life (Heinisch & Janesberger, 2024). Their emotional reaction towards 'the establishment' is measurably very negative (Schumacher et al., 2022). Populism can thus contribute to an affective mobilisation that leads to the targeted dismantling of self-control vis-à-vis governments and social groups branded as enemies, including open abjection, de-humanisation, and self-justified use of physical violence (Gaufman & Ganesh, 2024).

(3) *Rule of law*. The political ideology of populism advocates a strong and rigid version of popular sovereignty and clearly opposes the checks and balances of liberal democracy. At best, populists accept the rule of law in a very formal sense (legal form of political action) (Adamitis, 2021; Krygier et al., 2022).

Populism in power tends to strengthen the power of the executive in order to weaken the (political) opposition and reduce restrictions on the rule of law; this applies in particular to right-wing populism, which dominates in Europe (Tushnet & Bugarič, 2021), but also to left-wing populism, which is prevalent in South America (Carrión, 2022). Populism in power particularly restricts the rights of independent constitutional courts and uses various strategies to bring them into line with the government (Kovalčík, 2022). The rule of law ensures that state power is not directed against the people and especially the current minorities – and that the exercise of state power is civil. By undermining the rule of law, populism is working to de-civilise the exercise of state power (Frankenberg & Heitmeyer, 2025).

(4) *Democracy*. Other than fascism, populism is not only a 'legitimate child' of modern democracy, it also defends democracy, promising to re-new it by taking it back from the corrupt elites in the name of 'the people' (Kaidatzis et al., 2024). But it is exactly the populist configuration of the people as a (socially, ethnically…) homogeneous and 'moral' majority that brings it into conflict with democracy. Despite its pledge for a revival of real democracy, populism's ontology and cosmology are incompatible with democracy, based on pluralism and a non-essentialist definition of the 'majority' (Müller, 2016). Empirical studies on European populist parties in power reveal that various outcomes are possible once populist parties have gained power after democratic elections: radicalisation, compromise and moderation, splintering, or loss (Calani & Graziano, 2022). But this is mainly an effect of the political environment, not of an internal evolution of the populist ideology. Populism in power has a tendency toward autocracy that is inherent in populist governance logic. This may manifest itself 'only' in democratic backsliding or regression, that is, in a deterioration of the quality of democracy, but it can also lead to autocratisation (Muno & Pfeiffer, 2022; Peruzzotti, 2017). Empirical studies show that populist voters are highly supportive of forms of unconstrained majoritarian rule (Zaslove & Meijers, 2023). They also often show higher correlations with racist, xenophobic and anti-democratic attitudes (Zick et al., 2023). Populism thrives on a politics of enemies. It takes the crisis it provokes as a proof of the need for its authoritarian prescription. It is a major challenge to the survival of democracies today (Mounk, 2018; Runciman, 2018; Ziblatt & Levitsky, 2018).

(5) *Public sphere, civil society, knowledge*. Due to its specific form of framing the political majority and the Manichean duality of 'good' and 'evil', populism is against a pluralist public and an open debate – despite its rhetoric in defense of freedom of speech. This has led to a clear preference of populists for social media and their echo chamber-like reinforcing of prejudices and fake news (Gerbaudo, 2024). Populism is also challenging science, deeming the common sense of 'ordinary people' superior to the knowledge of 'academic elites' (Eslen-Ziya & Girogi, 2022; Mede et al., 2024). Populists in many countries are major

drivers of climate skepticism and denialism. Again, the social media offer a well-suited space for anti-climate hate speeches and other forms of emotional arousal (Hochacka et al., 2025). By undermining the rationality of the public discourse and by de-legitimising science, populism with its irrationalism contributes to the de-civilisation of modern societies.

(6) *Social Justice*. Populists usually frame their fight against the political elite as a fight for more justice. And many analysts trace populism back to growing (economic) inequalities (Gradstein, 2024). However, populism has at least a mixed effect on social justice. While left-wing populists tend to be more inclusive, right-wind populists are more exclusive, often supported by labor market insiders, and usually adopt neo-liberal ideological set pieces together with welfare chauvinist stances (Greve, 2021). The anti-pluralist ideology leads populists to fight against institutionalised rights of social (minority) groups, mostly framed as 'cultural wars' (Moran & Littler, 2020). Next to this direct political influence, populist parties, especially if in government, do also have indirect detrimental effects on social justice issues. In a populist environment, firms divert resources away from broad-based corporate social responsibility (CSR) (Hartwell & Devinney, 2023). In sum, the populist effect on social justice seems clearly negative with respect to right-wing populism.

(7) *Ecology and planetary boundaries*. The populist ideology is clearly oriented against environmental policies and against environmental movements. While it may be accompanied by some aspects of right-wing versions of nature protection, its major thrust lies in the fight against environmentally motivated social transformations (Buzogány & Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2022; Huber et al., 2021; Küppers, 2022). This is the reason why especially climate change policies and climate science are under heavy attack by populist actors (Haas, 2024; Reusswig et al., 2022; Singha & Singha, 2024; Selk & Kemmerzell, 2022; Sommer et al., 2022). Populism in power tends to dismantle environmental policies and expand extractivism, even to the degree of establishing sacrifice zones, and it actively fights environmental as well as indigenous movements (Ofstehage et al., 2022). Populism can be seen as the current spearhead of 'green backlash' (Bosetti et al., 2025). By downplaying the global ecological crisis and by actively fighting environmental movements and policies, populism is a major driver of de-civilisation in times of the Anthropocene.

Fletcher (1995) has identified three criteria for de-civilisation processes: a shift from self-control to constraints by others, secondly a decay of social standards of behavior and feeling, and thirdly a decrease of mutual identification. The potential of populism to de-civilise modern societies contributes to all of them. Nevertheless, it would be misleading to blame populism for the current environmental crises. Some of these crises arose long before populists came to power. It is also important to refrain from equating the attitudes of voters for populist parties with the parties'

programs or the positions of their leaders. Populist positions can be found to a greater or lesser extent among voters of all parties, and even among voters of populist parties, climate-progressive attitudes can be identified (Dannemann, 2024; Zick et al., 2023). Populism is therefore, at least to date, more a symptom than a cause of the process of ecological de-civilisation. But in the same way as the complex global phenomenology of populism asks for a complex theoretical explanation (Diehl & Bargetz, 2024), one should refrain from attributing it to a single underlying cause or social driver, e.g. capitalism, globalisation, or post-democratic tendencies in modern society.

5. Civilising the Anthropocene in a multipolar world

Speaking of 'de-civilisation' does not imply to assume a current high level of civilisation. Given the high degree of environmental degradation and the future risks associated with it, we would hesitate to call our current state a 'civilised' one. For the same reason we would term the Anthropocene as a Half-Anthropocene at max (Reusswig 2022). Our 'Half-of-the-Anthropocene' diagnosis considers that, undoubtedly, human civilisation has reached a historical level of conquering planet Earth and manipulating its structures and flows that no former civilisation has ever achieved. Modern technology, 'modern' energy, modern organisational and political structures do have, together with economic growth, led to an unprecedented height of mastering nature. But at the same time humans have not managed to establish a mastering of their mastery over nature. We are good in controlling nature, but we are bad in controlling the way we do it. If selling five slices of cheese is possible only by transforming the world's oceans into plastic dump sites that destroy large and essential ecosystems, then there must be something wrong with our civilisation. Viewed from an Eliasian perspective, civilisation is lacking self-reflection and self-control.

Elias himself, although not being an ecological thinker, has highlighted how the process of civilisation and the control of nature are connected:

> *„Control of nature, social control and self-control form a kind of chain ring; they form a triangle of interconnected functions which can serve as a basic pattern for the observation of human affairs. One side cannot develop without the others; the extent and form of one depend of those of the others; and if one of them collapses, sooner or later the others follow" (Elias, 2001, 138f.).*

Although populists do fight environmentalism, don't they have a point in criticising modern societies? Their angry rejection of crisis narratives and doomsday scenarios – can it not also be interpreted as an affective defense against the subtle experience of loss of control that is expressed in them? Their emotional accusations against corrupt and selfish elites – aren't they even remotely accurate? Their call for more democracy in the face of technocratic politicians entrenching themselves behind alleged practical constraints – does it not resonate with justified criticism? The problem of populism would thus not be its emotional energy, the upswing of

wrath, but rather its channeling into wrong directions based upon ideological shortcomings.

But how can the 'right' direction be achieved? We have started this article by stating that Elias's theory of civilisation could be used in order to analyse socio-ecological de-civilisation processes, but only if we modify and expand the analytical dimensions used by Elias. Ecological collapse can thus be reconstructed as a figuration of de-civilisation. While safeguarding against populist appropriation, the expansion of the dimensions of civilisation is also narrowing the candidates that might pass a 'civilisation test'. This seems to further reinforce the accusation of Eurocentrism leveled already at Elias's original version. We can only offer a few preliminary attempts as an answer to this question:

- In view of Europe's (and North America's) historical ecological 'guilt' – for example in terms of greenhouse gas emissions – as well as the West's still great economic and political importance for the 'rest of the world', it is an indispensable duty of the West to do its 'homework', reduce its own planetary footprint and thus fundamentally demonstrate that civilisations are capable of ecological self-limitation. This is all the more so as self-distancing, self-criticism and self-doubt are part of the core of Western civilisation – including the often associated, partly romantic, partly colonialistically coded exaltation of foreign civilisations (e.g. in Tacitus or Rousseau) (Gordon, 2017).
- Incidentally, this also means that the project of Western civilisation is unfinished in many respects. As mentioned, the West itself is not yet sufficiently civilised if it does not succeed in guaranteeing economic prosperity and social justice without long-term ecological self-endangerment. There has been much talk of the collapse of historical civilisations. But it should not be forgotten that a large number of non-European civilisations have managed to ensure their reproduction largely in harmony with nature – well beyond romantic transfigurations (Anderson, 1996; Mackenthun, 2023).
- Even without assuming the unilinear development of the world, it can be assumed that the principles of Western civilisation have also been and are being adopted and incorporated – modified – in other civilisations, at least in part. Western consciousness has been split between a dominant universalistic perspective that sees civilisation as a Western civilisation encompassing the whole world, and a pluralistic perspective that sees Western civilisation (variously defined) as coexisting with and interacting with other civilisations (Cox, 2001). Especially when one assumes a multiple modernity (Eisenstadt, 2002), similarities and mixtures can be found that suggest accepting the Elias criteria, as expanded by us, at least as (e.g., functionally equivalent) nuclei for entirely unique spellings of civilisational processes. The concept of eco-civilisation, for example, recently put forward by the Chinese government as a model for China's industrial

development, provides a good basis for discussing the ecological dimension of civilisation between the West and China (Xiao et al., 2023; Zhang & Fu, 2023)

Civilising tendencies may take centuries to build up, but they can be undermined much faster (Mennell, 2002). Civilising and de-civilising tendencies can occur simultaneously in particular societies, and analysts must discern the relative weight of each (Mennell & Goudsblom, 1998). The currently ongoing rapid climate change undermines the very civilisational process that has brought it about. Social and political trends such as populism operate as risk-multipliers. Having emerged from the Western model of democratic civilisation, these tendencies cannot be 'othered'. If they lead to a 're-barbarisation' (Elias), their de-civilising potential stems from the civilising process itself (Kochi, 2023). But there is no automatism of decline built into the civilisation process, its contradictions do offer entry points for change and restructuring. Change and restructuring themselves are, as Elias and many other social scientists have taught us, non-intended systemic effects of intentional actions of individuals, groups, and organisations. It is thus important to identify these actors that support change, to understand their motives, intentions, strategies, and limitations (Engels et al., 2024). In addition, it is also important to think about possible intervention points (issues, framings, windows of opportunity, spaces…) that would broaden a possible coalition of actors for a social change towards a more sustainable civilisation – both at a national and an international level. This will imply to move beyond a single, restricted notion of a sustainability transition and open up the debate in the spirit of a plurality of sustainable futures (Lauer et al, 2025). Finally, given the reality of an increasingly (politically) relevant populism together with the fact of a variety of populisms and populists (Jones & Menon), it will be necessary to win back at least parts of the populist electorate, not only by new narratives, but also by new, democratic emotional underpinnings (Hillje, 2025).

Taken all together it is not by less, but by more civilisation, that we can hope to escape from collapse (Esjing, 2022; MacKay, 2017). A renewed civilisation will have to include nature in order to complete the halved Anthropocene we are living in. It could utilise the 'populist moment' not only in order to defend, but to critically expand the current state and fabric of civilisation. Elias, among others, can be a very helpful theoretical companion to this endeavor.

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Kerrin Langer, Frank Reichherzer*

(Not) all is fair in love and war: Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation, military violence, and the protection of the environment in war

Abstract

Military force has historically shaped human societies and their environments, often leaving profound and lasting ecological impacts. The environmental consequences of military activities – even in peacetime – can endure for generations. This paper examines the environmental dimensions of warfare in relation to the development of rules and regulations under international humanitarian law that constrain violence against the natural environment during war and armed conflict. We situate military practices and legal constraints within Norbert Elias's framework of the civilising process and explore the intertwined processes of de-civilisation and civilisation inherent in modern warfare. We argue that acts of *ecocide* represent, on one hand, a regression into unrestrained, primal destruction that de-civilises humanity's relationship with extra-human nature. On the other hand, particularly since the Second World War, humankind has been engaged in a process that establishes boundaries rendering environmental destruction by the military both definable and recognisable as a transgression. In this way, such destruction is neither ignored nor left unacknowledged; it is no longer regarded as self-evident or inevitable, nor defined as a necessary evil or mere 'collateral damage' but rather understood and treated as a 'wrongful act'. This evolution signals an expansion of ethical and legal boundaries consistent with Elias's insights into the codification of restraint in human behaviour.

Keywords: International humanitarian law, environmental protection, ecocide, Norbert Elias, human-environment nexus

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1. Introduction

"All wars are destructive – to people, to countries and to the environment", said UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan on the International Day for Preventing Exploitation of the Environment in War and Armed Conflict in 2003 (United Nations, 2003; Jensen, 2005, 180). To minimise this destruction and restrain the violence associated with war, nearly all societies from antiquity to today have established rules and norms regulating warfare. These norms, rules and customs can be interpreted as expressions of societal development towards increased indi-

* *Kerrin Langer (kerrin2.langer@tu-dortmund.de),* TU Dortmund University, Germany
Frank Reichherzer (FrankReichherzer@bundeswehr.org), Bundeswehr Centre of Military History and Social Sciences, Germany

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vidual self-restraint and are thus aspects of a civilising process as defined by Norbert Elias. On the other hand, warfare often results in transgressive uses of military force, excesses of individual and collective violence, and ruptures in existing norms (Elias, 1989 [2013], 231). However, such ruptures can nevertheless lead to (re-)negotiations concerning legitimate and illegitimate as well as legal and illegal forms of violence in warfare; these may culminate in some form of conventional or customary international humanitarian law (hereafter IHL) (Kalshoven & Zegveld, 2011, 4). IHL can be defined as "a set of rules which seek, for humanitarian reasons, *to limit the effects of armed conflict* [emphasis in original]" (ICRC, 2004). Examples include the codification of the ban on the use of chemical and biological weapons after the First World War, the acknowledgement and criminalisation of genocide as a crime against humanity following the Second World War, or debates about ecocide and subsequent provisions against environmental destruction during and after the Vietnam War (Kalshoven & Zegveld, 2004). These developments within IHL illustrate that evolution of societal self-restraint – together with broadening moral concern and mutual identification, which Elias identified as essential components of civilising processes – expanded significantly during the twentieth century.

In general, IHL in the nineteenth century was primarily concerned with humans – non-combatants, wounded soldiers and, later, prisoners of war. However, within the context of racialised thinking, regulations under IHL did not apply to all humans or all states but only to those perceived as 'civilised' by European and other Western powers. During colonial conquest and rule, many peoples were exempt from the norms and laws of war that the West had established for itself. This changed only with the 1949 *Geneva Conventions* (Rockel, 2009, 3–4). Just as states extended the scope of IHL to encompass all humanity, they also broadened its scope to include artefacts through protection of cultural heritage in 1907 (Charlier & Mustafayev, 2022) and eventually expanded it further to encompass the natural environment beginning in the 1970s.

In this paper we focus on this latter aspect. Our aim is to explore how dialectics between civilising and de-civilising processes in wars and violent conflicts interact with military engagements with the natural environment and how these processes shape ideas about legitimate and illegitimate uses of military force against nature. We argue that the integration of environmental protection into customary and codified IHL becomes explicable through Norbert Elias's theory of civilising processes and constitutes in itself an aspect of civilising processes of societies generally and the military-environment nexus specifically.

Five key elements of Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation form the basis for our analysis.

1) The first element concerns the understanding of "civilisation as internalization of restraints" at both societal and individual levels. At the individual level, societal

constraints and external controls give rise to increasingly prevalent patterns of self-constraint (Quilley, 2004, 49–51, quote p. 49; Elias, 1939 [2012], 403–417, 484–488).

2) The second element is the broadening of moral concern and mutual identification, which is interlinked with growing interdependence within societies (Elias, 1987 [2001]). In the context of the human-environment nexus, this entails a renewed recognition of mutual interdependence (Quilley, 2009, 128).

3) The third element relates to control over nature, which Elias identifies – alongside social and psychological control – as one of three "basic controls" integral to every civilising process (Elias, 1970 [2012], 156–157). However, the pacification of nature (Elias, 1939 [2012], 461), together with its objectification and the perception of humans as distinct from it as part of the Western civilising process, has led to domination over nature and the "shap[ing of] the major part of the earth according to their [humans', KL & FR] own needs" (Elias, 1986 [2009], 59–60, quote p. 59).

4) The fourth element recognises that wars are an integral part of civilising processes. Historically, the formation of larger survival units and higher levels of integration were linked to warfare. Although increasing global interdependence in the twentieth century prompted efforts to find new ways to resolve interstate rivalry (Elias, 1939 [2012], 488–489) and despite recognising that violence is not an adequate means for resolving conflict within societies, this stage in the civilisation process has not yet been achieved at the interstate level (Elias, 1989 [2013], chapter 4).

5) Finally, civilising processes are never linear; they do not tell a story of continuous progress or achievement but remain susceptible to reversal. Processes of de-civilisation – triggered by factors such as widening power differentials, uncertainty, competition, the threat of war or war itself – are inherent within civilising processes (Elias, 1989 [2013], chapter 5; Bucholc et al., 2024, 13–17). For instance, wars were essential to the European civilising process while simultaneously demonstrating that "every war, obviously, was a regression to barbarism" (Elias, 1989 [2013], 231).

This dialectical process of civilisation and de-civilisation is equally observable in the development of IHL. At a certain stage of the global civilising process – and in conjunction with normative and structural changes within twentieth-century societies – the transgression or even dissolution of legal, moral and ethical restraints on wartime violence led to negotiations over what was perceived as legitimate or illegitimate acts of violence during warfare, thereby opening the door for new forms of regulation and definition of boundaries. At the same time – and without implying linear causality – these rules and norms of international law can function as a "gentle civilizer of nations" (Koskenniemi, 2001; van Krieken, 2019, 281), because they contribute to the development of societal and individual self-restraint regard-

ing violence both during war and in preparation for it. With respect to this paper's specific focus, the framing of ecocide as a crime, and therefore labelling the destruction of the natural environment as criminal, establishes a normative framework that delegitimises such actions by reframing them not as inevitable damage but as violations of fundamental ethical and legal principles. Consequently, "the latest cosmopolitan stage of the global civilizing offensive" is not, as van Krieken argued, "the organized pursuit of human rights through a variety of international legal and political instruments" (2019, 81) but rather the establishment of international environmental law and the incorporation of the natural environment into the ethics and laws governing warfare.

In this paper we apply Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation and several other of his concepts, such as the *We-I-Balance* or *involvement and detachment* (Elias, 1939 [2012]; Elias, 1987 [2001]; Elias, 1986 [2009]). Although Elias did not elaborate on IHL or international environmental law – indeed, he said little about law at all (van Krieken, 2019, 268) – his reflections on the development of human rights and international law are helpful for explaining both the dual processes of civilising and de-civilising of the military-environment nexus and the shortcomings of IHL. Regarding Elias's theories and international law, we draw on recent research by Marta Bucholc et al. (2024) and Robert van Krieken (2019). Concerning Elias's theories and the natural environment, we refer to work by Stephen Quilley (2004, 2009, 2011) and Linda Williams (2011). To date, no research has examined Elias's theories in relation to international law and the natural environment (Bucholc et al., 2024, 28).

Our paper proceeds in four steps. First, we outline different forms of wartime environmental destruction and environmental warfare. Second, using the Vietnam War as a case study, we demonstrate how civilising and de-civilising processes of restraint towards environmental destruction intersect. Third, we trace developments in environmental protection under IHL arising from increasing interdependencies between humanity and extra-human nature. Fourth, we examine the dialectics between civilising and de-civilising processes evident in the evolution of IHL, drawing on insights from Norbert Elias's theories to explain the inclusion of the natural environment within norms and rules governing warfare, transgressions against these norms during war as well as shortcomings of IHL and obstacles hindering its enforcement.

When referring to the *natural environment* within this paper we follow Emmanuel Kreike (2021) and Anna Feuer (2023), understanding it to encompass cultural landscapes (such as fields, crops or orchards) as well as environmental infrastructure (such as canals, dams or oil installations).

2. Environmental destruction in war – from 'collateral damage' to environmental warfare and excesses of violence

There are elements of warfare that change, such as geography or weapons, but "one of the constant elements of warfare is its degrading effects on the environment" (Jensen, 2005, 146–147). Therefore, war always harms the ecosphere – and, more precisely, not only does war harm the ecosphere; the organisation and (re)production of collective violence within an institution called the military during peacetime also has detrimental effects on the environment. War is usually fought *within* the natural environment, and even cyberwar – which appears to be waged apart from it – can be used for environmental warfare through attacks on environmental infrastructure (Feuer, 2023, 536) or can significantly impact the ecosphere through resource use. It is therefore necessary to distinguish between "passive"/not intended but accepted and "active"/intended and planned environmental destruction (Jensen, 2005).

In the first case, environmental destruction during armed conflict falls under what John McNeill (2004, 401) categorises as "accidental impact of combat". This form of environmental damage is often termed *collateral damage* (Dienelt, 2022, 2). The history of this term shows that in its original usage during the Vietnam War it functioned as a euphemism for civilian casualties thereby framing illegitimate harm as acceptable or necessary. Hence, the term is at least problematic and its use should be discussed if not avoided altogether. However, it draws attention to one specific fact: the acceptance of harm to uninvolved persons and to the environment in order to achieve an objective (Rockel, 2009). Furthermore, terms such as *passive*, *accidental*, or *collateral* should not obscure the severity or longevity of environmental impacts. The twentieth century in particular witnessed massive environmental destruction in war due to changes in weapons technology (McNeill, 2004, 401). Moreover, long-term environmental damage and human health consequences caused by nuclear weapons tests conducted in peacetime provide a striking example (van Munster, 2021).

In the second case, environmental destruction is *active* in the sense that actors deliberately choose to weaponise nature (e.g., Jensen, 2005, 153–154; McNeill, 2004, 401). In this instance, war is fought *with* the environment to harm the enemy – a practice commonly known as *environmental warfare*. One of the first to use this term was the NATO Von Karman Committee (VKC) in the early 1960s (Hamblin, 2013, 138). There are several definitions of environmental warfare. The VKC defined it as "a change in either Man's or Earth's environment for a military purpose" (VKC, 1962). As environmental warfare was discussed by the VKC as a means to an end – the end being "maximizing human death" and winning a war (Hamblin, 2013, 135–148, quote p. 144) – and even possibly circumventing international humanitarian law (Leebaw, 2014, 776), this definition appears rather harmless. Another definition by scientist Arthur Westing who worked extensively

on environmental warfare during the 1970s and 1980s, shows that environmental warfare involves "harness[ing] the forces of nature" and manipulating the environment "for hostile military purposes" (Westing, 1985, 645–646). This can be done in two ways: by "target[ing] the natural landscape directly", or by "us[ing] elements of the natural landscape – including nonhuman animals – as a means of harming enemy combatants or civilians" (Feuer, 2023, 534). Practices such as destroying forests and cultural landscapes – including strategies referred to as scorched earth – the poisoning of wells or diversion of rivers have been employed in military operations since ancient times (e.g., McNeill, 2004, 401; Mayor, 2009, 104–106). More or less sophisticated technologies of weather modification that had their heyday in the 1950s and 1960s (Hamblin, 2013, 130–131, 137) or the use of animals such as military dolphins or bees as bomb detectors (Leebaw, 2014, 775–776) are other forms of the weaponisation of nature (for a broad overview of environmental warfare tactics see Westing, 1985).

While some of these tactics directly aim to kill enemy forces, others employ more indirect forms of violence intended to deny adversaries access to energy resources – energy understood in a broad sense to include food, fuel, water, plants, raw materials, and so forth (Muscolino, 2009, 5) – tactics which we term *energy denial*. By inflicting damage on the natural environment, these measures seek to disrupt the essential inputs required for an adversary's military operations, thereby limiting the operational capabilities of its armed forces (e.g., Feuer, 2023, 538–539; Kreike, 2021, 3, 14–15). Examples include the actions of the Union armies during the American Civil War (Brady, 2005), the environmental destruction by the Wehrmacht on the Eastern Front during the Second World War (Stein, 2025), the destruction of crops in the Vietnam War (e.g., Oatsvall, 2013, 444) and the burning of oil fields during the Gulf War in 1990–1991 (Jensen, 2005, 170).

The common understanding of active environmental warfare is that it aims to harm and terrorise civilians (Feuer, 2023, 534), "to disrupt enemy movements or to destroy enemy forces" (Jensen, 2005, 154). However, we also include military actions against the environment when it is perceived as an enemy within our definition. This is relevant because from an IHL perspective nature can become a combatant (Leebaw, 2014, 774–776). It is also significant because it indicates that militaries frequently perceive nature as something that can be controlled or pacified (Martini, 2012, 265–271). Framing the environment as 'wilderness', thereby emphasising a need to domesticate or civilise the 'wild', has long been a subtext in military culture (Brady, 2005; Gosh, 2021).

Examples of war against nature include combating disease – the most common cause of soldier deaths until the late nineteenth century (Cirillo, 2008) – such as malaria during the Vietnam War in the 1960s (Martini, 2012, 271); pests such as lice during the First World War (Altenstaedt, 2006); or large-scale forest destruction during the Vietnam War (*see below*). The war against nature is, in a strict sense, not

restricted to wartime. For instance, campaigns for herbicides and insecticides conducted by the U.S. Chemical Warfare Service in the 1920s and 1930s demonstrate a "militarization of the human response to nature during peace time" (Leebaw, 2014, 776). One consequence of this militarisation was framing chemical warfare as more 'humane' (ibid., 775–776). This perception strongly influenced U.S. use of environmental warfare tactics during the Vietnam War which we will address in more detail in the next section.

3. Processes of civilisation and de-civilisation in warfare – the Vietnam War

One recurring feature of war is regression of military force into unrestrained violence. However, at a certain stage of the civilising process, such regression can lead to debates about legitimate and illegitimate violence in war as well as re-negotiations of the norms and rules governing warfare. In other words, de-civilising processes do not necessarily progress automatically but can instead serve as starting points for debates on the legitimate use and regulation of violence. Similarly, Ulrich Beck (2016) argued in *Metamorphosis* that the catastrophe of the Second World War and the Shoah were formative events leading to the establishment of the United Nations (UN) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Beck (ibid.) described this development as "emancipatory catastrophism". We understand regression into unrestrained violence – resulting in primal destruction that erodes humanity's relationship with extra-human nature – as processes of de-civilisation. The pivotal case illustrating intersecting civilising and de-civilising processes within the military-environment nexus is the Vietnam War. On one hand, the Vietnam War exemplified regression into unrestrained violence against both people (Rockel, 2009) and the environment. For the U.S. military, Vietnam became a testing ground for environmental warfare tactics discussed within U.S. and NATO circles during the 1950s and 1960s (Martini, 2012, 272–278; Hamblin, 2013, 180). While it remains debated whether the U.S. military perceived Vietnamese nature as an enemy combatant or merely as something that could and should be controlled (Martini, 2012, 265–266), scholars unanimously agree that environmental warfare tactics employed by U.S. troops between 1962 and 1971 constituted a declaration of war "on nature itself" (Oatsvall, 2013, 427).

In the battle against and with nature, the U.S. employed weather modification (Westing, 1985, 649), napalm (Frey, 2013, 4) and fire (Martini, 2012). However, its most destructive weapons were the six so-called rainbow herbicides used to destroy vegetation, forests and crops on an unprecedented scale with short- and long-term consequences for ecosystems and human health even after cessation of *Operation Ranch Hand* (Frey, 2013, 3–6; Westing, 1983). For the U.S., herbicidal warfare was a means to address the problem of excessive vegetation that provided cover for enemy forces (Oatsvall, 2013, 431; Jensen, 2005, 171). In the trade-off

between "trees versus lives", they justified using herbicides by arguing it would save the lives of American soldiers (Oatsvall, 2013). In general, the destruction of the environment was justified as legitimate violence despite the violation of the principle of proportionality or property rights as outlined under IHL (Leebaw, 2014, 776; Droege & Tougas, 2013, 29–33 on the principle of proportionality). However, decision-makers recognised that they needed to convince domestic and international publics of the legitimacy of environmental warfare. They portrayed it as a more 'humane' form of warfare in relation to non-combatants (Leebaw, 2014, 776).

Terms such as *weed killers* and *defoliants* were used to obscure the true extent of environmental warfare tactics and to avoid criticism or accountability under the 1925 *Protocol for the Prohibition of the Use of Asphyxiating, Poisonous or Other Gases, and of Bacteriological Methods of Warfare* (hereafter 1925 *Geneva Protocol*), which the U.S. acknowledged as customary law (Martin, 2016, 347–349; Hamblin, 2013, 183 on use of the term *defoliant*). Both Kennedy's and Nixon's administrations weighed public opinion in their decision-making processes. Regarding dam destruction for example, this led to the rejection of weaponising water as a legitimate tactic of environmental warfare. In contrast, when considering herbicides, military advantage was deemed more important than international norms. Only when reports published in 1969 revealed that Agent Orange could cause significant harm to people was *Operation Ranch Hand* immediately stopped (Feuer, 2023, 543–544).

While concern for humans was the main driver behind U.S. decisions for or against certain environmental warfare tactics, public, scientific and political debates emerged in which both, U.S. actions in particular and "military assaults on the environment as a strategy of war" in general, were increasingly perceived as an illegitimate form of violence against nature (Westing, 1983, 388). Scientists who opposed U.S. environmental warfare tactics criticised the use of herbicides, taking advantage of the momentum President Nixon created with his plan to reintroduce the 1925 *Geneva Protocol* to the Senate for ratification (Zierler, 2011, 2–4, 138–158). In both cases – the criticism of herbicidal warfare and support for ratifying the protocol – they used "environmental arguments" emphasising humanity's dependence on and interconnectedness with the natural environment (Hamblin, 2013, 189). For these scientists, war's consequences for nature could no longer be considered a military necessity or mere 'collateral damage'. They invented a new term: *ecocide*. The term *ecocide* and its similarity with *genocide* was intentional. The goal of Arthur M. Galston, chair of Yale University's Department of Botany, was to frame *Operation Ranch Hand* as contrary to international law and advance his argument that U.S. actions in Vietnam and herbicide use more generally could be banned as environmental war crimes under IHL in the future (Zierler, 2011, 15, 19). It was Richard Falk, Milbank Professor of International Law at Princeton University, who drafted a convention on ecocide, describing "Agent Orange as an Auschwitz for environmental values" (quoted in Zierler, 2011, 25; on the draft convention 24–25). His proposed convention sought to criminalise long-term destruction of ecosystems.

For Falk it was possible that ecocide might occur "unconsciously"; however, intention remained crucial if a state were to be held accountable for committing ecocide (Leebaw, 2014, 778–779).

Since then, scientists, civil society actors and lawyers have advocated for a convention condemning and banning ecocide as the deliberate destruction of ecosystems as a means of warfare. While the original context of this movement was environmental warfare, the environmental movement quickly adopted the term *ecocide* in 1970, broadening its meaning to encompass environmental harm inflicted by humans on the non-human natural world during peacetime – or, as one activist put it, defining it as "the environment murdered by mankind" (quoted in Zierler, 2011, 27).

The regression into unrestrained violence during the Vietnam War not only prompted a re-negotiation of what was perceived as legitimate violence against nature but also led to the first international treaties that directly protected the natural environment during armed conflict (see below). This development cannot be explained solely by those events themselves; rather, it was embedded within broader historical and societal processes – specifically, an expanding mutual identification and network of interdependence among humans as well as between humans and extra-human nature. These developments made it possible to address ecocide as a concern for humanity. In the following section we provide a brief overview of key developments within international (humanitarian) law regarding the protection of the natural environment during armed conflict and how these were embedded within evolving human-nature relations.

4. International (humanitarian) law and the protection of the environment in war and armed conflict

While legal instruments explicitly protecting the environment during war are a relatively recent development, norms and rules to protect the environment, are, like the practice of destruction itself, much older (Kreike, 2021, 8). Demands not to destroy crops and fruit trees in wartime can be traced back to ancient times (Grotius, 1646 [1925], 745–756). Drawing on these ancient traditions, in *De iure belli ac pacis* (*On the law of war and peace*), Hugo Grotius elaborated on the question of environmental destruction during war. Grotius distinguished between aspects of nature that could constitute possessions (such as rivers, lakes, mountains or forests) and elements of nature that could not be possessed by anyone (such as oceans or the atmosphere). For him it was generally legitimate to destroy enemy property – including those parts of nature within enemy possession – as long as such acts were justified by military necessity rather than driven by "hatred" (Grotius, 1646 [1925], 746; Leebaw, 2014, 772–773). However, he considered destroying crops to weaken an enemy legitimate; a view that Norbert Elias later explained through the structure of medieval agrarian society (Elias, 1939 [2012], 189).

Norms and ethics of war that restrain environmental destruction – based on a view of nature as an object that can be possessed by humans – subsequently entered IHL through the regulations of the *Hague Conventions* of 1899 and 1907. By the nineteenth century, a growing consensus had already emerged among legal scholars regarding the environment's victimhood in war (Jensen, 2005, 155). Likewise, the so-called Lieber Code (*Instructions for the Government of Armies of the United States in the Field*, 1863) introduced national regulation prohibiting "wanton devastation of a district" (Art. 16). Both developments influenced the *Hague Conventions*, which established limits on permissible wartime actions, including those affecting the environment (Jensen, 2005, 157–158; Leebaw, 2014, 773). The *Hague Convention* of 1907, for example, contains rules concerning occupied territory (Arts 42, 55, 56), including provisions on protecting and administering forests and agricultural areas (Leebaw, 2014, 773; Droege & Tougas, 2013, 37). A further step in codifying IHL to protect the environment was the 1925 *Geneva Protocol*, which prohibited the use of chemical and biological weapons. Like the *Hague Conventions*, it primarily sought to protect humans; however, it also indirectly safeguarded the environment because such weapons cause environmental harm with potentially long-term effects (ICRC, 2020; Droege & Tougas, 2013, 41). Another crucial moment in developing environmental protection under IHL were the Nuremberg Trials of 1945–49 (Jensen, 2005, 160). There, military personnel were charged with environmental warfare for the first time (ibid.) – for example German General Lothar Rendulic, who faced charges for employing scorched-earth tactics in Norway (Leebaw, 2014, 773–774).

As we have discussed above, the 1925 *Geneva Protocol* played an important role in U.S. considerations regarding herbicidal warfare. While the U.S. administration argued that substances toxic to the environment were not subject to the 1925 *Geneva Protocol*, customary international law indicates that this was no longer the case by the 1960s. As UN General Assembly Resolution 2603 (XXV) of 16 December 1969 shows, the distinction between substances toxic to humans and those posing a threat to the environment was no longer adequate for discerning the legality of herbicidal warfare (Zierler, 2011, 145–146). This reflected a broader shift in human-environment relations that also influenced international law. After centuries of the conviction that humankind could dominate and tame nature through technological progress, increasing numbers of people – including Arthur M. Galston and Richard Falk – came to regard this belief as a fallacy and recognised the need for renewed awareness of humanity's interdependence with extra-human nature (Leebaw, 2014, 777–779).

This new awareness not only led to the "invention of ecocide" (Zierler, 2011) but also, for the first time, to codifying limits on the weaponisation of nature as well as establishing explicit rules for environmental protection under I(H)L that are not tied to property protection during armed conflict (Jensen, 2005, 161–172). The *ENMOD Convention* (*Convention on the Prohibition of Military or Any Other Hostile*

Use of Environmental Modification Techniques) of 1977 banned active environmental warfare "having widespread, long-lasting or severe effects as the means of destruction, damage or injury to any other State" (Art. 1). The 1977 *Additional Protocol I* to the *Geneva Conventions* of 1949 (hereafter AP I), adopted in the same year as ENMOD, contains two articles addressing environmental destruction during international armed conflict. Like ENMOD, AP I restricted active environmental warfare but also set limits to passive forms (Jensen, 2005, 161–172). States committed themselves both to "protect the natural environment against widespread, long-term and severe damage" (Art. 55(1)) and to refrain from using "methods or means of warfare which are intended, or may be expected, to cause widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment" (Art. 35(3)). Two further articles indirectly protect the environment: Article 54 prohibits destruction of environmental infrastructure providing sustenance to civilians, while Article 56 safeguards environmental infrastructure such as dams, nuclear power plants and dykes. Even though environmental warfare has always been part of intrastate conflict as well (Feuer, 2023), only Articles 54 and 56 were incorporated into *Additional Protocol II* to the *Geneva Conventions* of 1949 which applies to intrastate war (Droege & Tougas, 2013, 39).

On the one hand, the regulations introduced in the 1970s represented a major step forward in protecting the natural environment during armed conflict and regulating environmental warfare. On the other hand, they fell short of what Galston and Falk had sought to achieve in establishing ecocide as a war crime; particularly since the threshold set by "widespread, long-term and severe" was both too high and too imprecise to serve as an effective legal instrument (Leebaw, 2014, 778). Despite humanity's recognised interdependence with nature, IHL remained anthropocentric – something Falk himself acknowledged as the main obstacle to any "meaningful ecocentric reform" (ibid.).

It took another decade and a further evolution in human-environment relations to influence the interpretation and formulation of I(H)L towards re-conceptualising nature's status from being an *object* to being a *subject* of international law. At the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, states emphasised that nature possesses intrinsic value, independent of its utility for humans (Leebaw, 2014, 779–780). The *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* "urged states to cooperate in the further development of international law pertaining to wartime environmental protections" (United Nations, 1992). This call was realised through the adoption of the *Rome Statute* for the International Criminal Court (Leebaw, 2014, 779). Article 8(b)(iv) of the *Rome Statute* (1998) defines "intentionally launching an attack in the knowledge that such attack will cause […] widespread, long-term and severe damage to the natural environment which would be clearly excessive in relation to the concrete and direct overall military advantage anticipated" as a war crime. The provisions of the *Rome Statute* formally express the criminalisation of environmental destruction during armed conflict and signify a significant step forward in broadening norms

and rules governing military activities affecting the environment in both war and peace. This process began with the adoption of the *ENMOD Convention* and *Additional Protocol I* in 1977.

At present, 32 rules under international humanitarian law directly or indirectly – through customary or conventional law – protect the natural environment during armed conflict, as outlined by the *International Committee of the Red Cross* in its *Guidelines on the Protection of the Natural Environment in Armed Conflict* (ICRC, 2020). Among these is, for example, the rule of "[d]ue regard for the natural environment in military operations" (ICRC, 2020, Rule 1), which specifically includes measures "undertaken as a matter of policy rather than law. Such actions could include, for example, introducing measures to reduce the carbon footprint of warfare" (ICRC, 2020, 30). Ecocide is addressed under customary law – primarily derived from provisions within national penal codes (e.g. those of Ukraine, Russia or Belarus) – through Rule 3, which establishes the "[p]rohibition of using the destruction of the natural environment as a weapon". To date, no convention explicitly addresses or prohibits ecocide either as a crime in war or in peace, despite continued efforts by lawyers and civil society actors (e.g., Killean & Newton, 2024).

5. Dialectic interdependencies – or: the civilising and de-civilising processes of the military-environment nexus

The shift towards perceiving environmental destruction as an illegitimate act of warfare – and eventually criminalising it – was, as we have shown above, inseparably interwoven with a broader transformation in human perceptions of nature arising from interdependence within more-than-human figurations. This later implied a change in perception from viewing nature as an object to recognising it as a subject as well as the conception of the natural environment as a victim under IHL. These developments align with one of the core elements of civilising processes: the expansion of mutual identification among humans which results from growing interdependencies (Elias, 1987 [2001]).

The interdependencies between humans and the natural environment – and increasing acknowledgement thereof – in other words, the development of an "ecological conscience" (Quilley, 2009, 117), contribute to changes in human behaviour generally and to curtailing human violence towards the environment in particular. These changes resemble what Elias described regarding restraint on human violence (or "Kampfeslust", as he put it) towards other humans "by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints" (Elias, 1939 [2012], 187). The "rules and prohibitions" governing behaviour toward the environment – together with increasing regulation of military actions against it during war and extension of what is perceived as legitimate violence – signal an expansion of ethical and legal boundaries consistent with Elias's insights into the progressive codification of restraint in human conduct. At the same time, humanity not only continues

to destroy the very world on which it depends in war and peace but also faces a backlash in climate and environmental policy (e.g., Nuccitelli, 2025) and weakening or disregard for international law by great and small powers alike (The Guardian, 2025).

While this recent development may appear puzzling at first glance, it becomes explicable when viewed through an Eliasian lens. To elaborate this further, we examine three issues evident in the ongoing military destruction of the environment on the one hand and in the development of IHL aimed at protecting the environment from such violence on the other: the dialectics of civilising and de-civilising processes in war, the shortcomings of IHL, and continued environmental destruction despite existing interdependencies and expanding mutual identification.

5.1 The dialectics of civilising and de-civilising processes

Within the nexus of war, environment and society, it becomes clear that civilising processes do not unfold linearly along a chronological timeline as posited by progress-oriented models. Rather, within the discourse surrounding ecocide, it is evident that de-civilising and civilising forces coexist in dynamic tension, revealing that the temporality of civilisation's progression is multifaceted. Drawing upon a model reminiscent of historian Fernand Braudel's classical stratification of time (Braudel, 1960), it becomes apparent that civilising processes are fiercely contested at the surface, exposing recurrent regressive and de-civilising elements. Moreover, the civilising process itself remains fraught with significant constraints. However, over the *long durée*, there also emerges an attempt to contain the destructive effects of military violence and the use of force. Consequently, the consideration of both, the intended and unintended negative impacts of warfare and the persistence of military violence become a pivotal first step for the discourse on ecocide. This further underscores the shifting boundaries between what is considered exceptional (and therefore illegitimate) and what constitutes the norm. The rules of IHL and discourses surrounding ecocide allow environmental destruction to be addressed as crime – signifying a shift from the acceptance of such environmental destruction as 'collateral damage' to its recognition as an illegitimate act of warfare.

5.2 The shortcomings of IHL

In one of the few instances where Elias himself elaborated on law, he addressed an important problem concerning international law and the regulation of relations between states: "There is [as yet] no [body of [law] governing the relations between states of the kind that is valid within them. There is no all-embracing power apparatus that could back up such an international law" (Elias, 1939 [2012], 267). Therefore, power remains decisive in international relations, with powerful states holding advantage over weaker ones (ibid.).

These observations, written in 1939, remain valid today – despite existing conventional and customary law and the ICC's capacity to prosecute individuals for committing war crimes. So far, "no state has ever been held accountable for environmental destruction conducted during warfare and no individual has ever been convicted for environmental war crimes" (Leebaw, 2014, 771). There are at least two reasons for this. First, aligning with Elias's arguments, humanity has yet to reach the next level of integration that would establish a supranational institution truly capable of enforcing existing law (e.g., Elias, 1939 [2012], 488–490). Second – and scholars as well as international organisations such as the UN or ICRC are unanimous on this point (e.g., Jensen, 2005; Feuer, 2023; Westing, 1985) – the broad wording of existing rules combined with the requirement to prove intent makes it difficult to establish cases against state actions (Leebaw, 2014). In the wake of Russia's war against Ukraine, there have been attempts by the ICC to broaden options for prosecuting environmental destruction through new interpretative guidelines and investigative strategies, but the aforementioned difficulties persist (Villalobos, 2025).

Therefore, one might object to the argument that IHL not only reflects civilising processes but also contributes to them by serving as an external force of coercion that eventually leads to internalised societal and individual self-restraint. Indeed, as Bucholc et al. (2024, 28) have argued regarding the recognition of environmental crimes and their punishment, "they are primarily a 'reflection' of social transformations and struggles […]. They are the legal arm, not the sword, of a process of civilisation." Marta Bucholc (2024) has further shown that despite framing abortion as a global human right, the existing legal framework fails to support a broadening of identification capable of overcoming regional, religious or gender divides.

However, this should not obscure the importance of the small steps from which civilising processes are composed. As Quilley (2004, 55) argues, "civilizing processes at a supranational level – i.e. in relation to pacification and the internalization of psychological restraint against violence" are imperative for a general ecological civilising process. While international climate and environmental governance – such as the *Kyoto Protocol* – serve both as enablers and indicators of a supranational ecological civilising process in general (ibid.), developments within IHL demonstrate a civilising process within the military-environment nexus at the supranational level. First, codification since the 1970s distinguishing legal from illegal actions against the environment – and later the criminalisation of environmental destruction through the *Rome Statute* – means that decision-makers at the national level as well as commanders planning specific operations must consider whether their actions comply with existing norms and rules (Jensen, 2005, 164, 177–178). This signifies a step towards internalisation of norms and rules within the civilising process which are essential in restraining violence against others. In general terms, greater internalisation of these norms at organisational and individual levels increases the likelihood that at least active environmental destruction will be avoided. Certain

forms of environmental destruction now constitute transgressions beyond accepted boundaries of military violence – boundaries defined both legally and through societal discourse.

Second, customary IHL and the perception and framing of military destruction of the environment during war as contrary to existing norms and rules demonstrate that states and civil society constantly condemn such wartime environmental destruction, categorising it alongside other war crimes. For example, in 1993, UN General Assembly Resolution 47/37 on the *Protection of the Environment in Times of Armed Conflict* explicitly referred to the destruction of oil wells by Iraqi forces and raised "deep concern" about the environmental consequences. In 1999, environmental destruction caused by NATO's aerial bombing in Kosovo was condemned by several members of the UN Security Council on normative (Russian Federation, 1999b) and moral (Namibia, 1999; Russian Federation, 1999a) grounds. Recently, Ukraine has actively undermined the legitimacy of Russia's war of aggression by meticulously documenting environmental destruction (Ukraine, 2025). Poland condemned the destruction of the Nova Kakhovka dam as "a grave violation of basic norms of humanitarian and environmental protection law and an apparent war crime" during a session of the UN Security Council (Poland, 2023). The ICC has been called upon to include environmental destruction in Ukraine within its investigations (Chin, 2024), while environmental damage – including harm to the climate system – has been listed as a claim category in the *Register of Damage* (Council of Europe, 2024), which is the first step towards a compensation mechanism enabling Ukraine to claim reparations from Russia (Council of Europe, 2025).

This indicates that despite the lack of a powerful supranational organisation capable of enforcing these rules, IHL influences the civilising process of military-environment relations because it defines illegal wartime actions against the environment. It thereby shifts boundaries of moral behaviour with consequences for states failing to abide by established rules and norms of war. This can be explained through a general "increase in conduct regarded as criminal" (van Krieken, 2019, 277). Van Krieken shows that this is linked to developments in social relationships towards greater equality and higher expectations regarding moral standards and self-restraint. Failure to meet these standards results in social repercussions (van Krieken, 2019, 277–278). This observation holds equally true for relations between states and likewise for relationships between humans and extra-human nature.

At present, the consequences for states or other actors failing to abide by environmental norms and rules of war consist mainly of political costs – meaning that these actors lose domestic or international support (Feuer, 2023, 540–541) and international prestige. However, these political costs should not be underestimated. During the Vietnam War, the weighing of such costs influenced U.S. decision-making regarding certain forms of environmental warfare. While concern for civilians proved more decisive than concern for the environment – a point emphasised by

Anna Feuer (ibid.) to argue that norms and rules protecting the environment in war and armed conflict are only as strong as the protection of humans entailed within it – the U.S. decision-making process in the 1960s highlights two important aspects. First, there were considerations about environmental impacts even though no laws existed at that time prohibiting environmental warfare. Second, the U.S. military approach to both the environment and environmental warfare in Vietnam remained rooted in a perception of nature as an object and something one could and should control and "impose order" upon (Martini, 2012, 265–269, quote on p. 269). This perspective was therefore grounded in the centuries-old "ecogenesis" (Quilley, 2011), which had influenced the European civilising process. The necessary steps within this civilising process – changed patterns of interdependence between humans and nature, acknowledgement of this interdependence, and expansion of mutual identification – were, as the debate on ecocide demonstrated, already underway; yet common perceptions of nature had not evolved to an extent sufficient for the U.S. to incorporate environmental concerns into its decision-making.

5.3 The ongoing destruction of the environment

Humanity has a strange relationship with nature. On the one hand, there exists an all-encompassing interdependence – and, perhaps more importantly, an increasing acknowledgement by many people of this interdependency – together with an expanding we-identity encompassing the non-human natural world (Quilley, 2009, 128). On the other hand, there is an ongoing destruction of the natural environment in peace and war that appears to contradict this broadening of mutual identification and expanding network of interdependence.

Before we examine reasons for this contradiction, a few words should be said about the correlation between the human-environment nexus and the military-environment nexus. Soldiers as well as civilian military personnel bring their life experiences, norms, beliefs and moral restraint concerning the natural environment into their professional sphere. Therefore, individual self-restraint regarding the environment, shaped through civilising processes, also influences the military-environment nexus. At the same time, it is plausible to assume that civilising processes of the military-environment nexus, for example through norms and rules established under IHL, also promotes greater self-restraint among soldiers and other military personnel, as they are equally shaped by moral and legal restraints embedded within the military.

Regarding the tension between a broadening of mutual identification on the one hand and the ongoing destruction on the other, we can observe precisely what Elias himself remarked as one of the "curious features" of the mutual identification of humans within a single humanity. Writing during the Cold War and under the latent threat of nuclear war, he observed that "the we-identity of most people, lags behind

the reality of the integration actually achieved; the we-image trails far behind the reality of global interdependence" (Elias, 1987 [2001], 203). Not only "[is] the sense of responsibility for imperilled humanity minimal" (Elias, 1987 [2001], 203), but so too is concern for the planet, its biodiversity, its rivers and mountains and oceans, minimal. Elias explained this latter phenomenon as stemming from a lack of awareness of the former: as long as humanity remains unconscious of its obligation to take responsibility for its own survival, it will find it even more difficult to take responsibility for the survival of the extra-human world (Elias, 1986 [2009], 65). Thirty years on, humanity appears to have recognised both – the whole of humankind as an identification level and its role in destroying the very planet upon which it depends (Quilley, 2011, 83). However, such recognition does not automatically translate into meaningful action to protect that planet.

There are at least two explanations for this lacking "sense of responsibility" and the absence of an all-encompassing identification with the natural environment from an Eliasian perspective. First, the process of detachment from extra-human nature over past centuries has been a consequence of humanity's mastery over nature and its "scientific objectification" (Williams, 2011, 91–92, quote on p. 92). The creation of the dualism between humanity and nature, the objectification of nature, its construction as 'other', and the belief that it can be controlled fostered a view of nature as an object to be exploited in order to sustain and suit humanity's needs (Elias, 1986 [2009]). Michelle Williams identifies these developments as the cause of "the immediate crisis in the deterioration of the nonhuman world" (Williams, 2011, 91–92, quote on p. 92).

The second reason are persistent power differentials and inequalities within human-nature relations. This mirrors what van Krieken (2019, 275) described regarding violence of those states who perceived themselves as 'civilised' against those deemed 'uncivilised', which he attributes to a missing "identification with the different humanity of others" and "the threat they pose to the achievements of civilization" in the perception of the 'civilised' state. As long as humanity's we-identity does not include more-than-human figurations, human violence against extra-human nature will likely persist.

Therefore, as a precondition for continuing civilising processes, humanity needs to acknowledge its involvement in and interdependence with nature (Williams, 2011, 92, 94). The notion that humanity is independent from nature is a fallacy. Despite all the technology available today "modern society remains embedded in and dependent on ecosystem earth, just as the future of ecosystem earth depends on humanity" (Kreike, 2021, 6). Elias himself acknowledged that while detachment from nature was an important step for humanity, "nothing is more justified and even more necessary" than an "'involved' interest in 'nature'" and concern about its destruction, enabling humanity to take the responsibility for protecting the natural environment on which it ultimately depends (Elias, 1986 [2009], 64–

65, quote on p. 64). Humanity requires an "ecological civilizing process" characterised by a new level of integration termed the "Anthro-ecosphere" by Stephen Quilley (2011, 85–86). This implies that humanity's we-identity includes the natural environment (Quilley, 2009) if humans are to take responsibility for the world they inhabit.

The paradox lies in the fact that control over nature and detachment from it were integral components of the European civilising process and that it is interdependent with the two other "basic controls": psychological and social control (Elias, 1970 [2012], 156–157; Quilley, 2011, 73–74). Furthermore, social and psychological developments associated with this civilising process were intertwined with transformations of "socio-ecological and energy regimes", fostering forms of control and exploitation of nature that have had and continue to have a profoundly destructive impact on the ecosphere (Quilley, 2011, 74).

Consequently, the way of life produced by the European civilising process appears incompatible with the consequences attached to humanity's next level of integration – one encompassing both the human and the non-human world: namely, behavioural change alongside increasing societal and individual self-restraint concerning interaction with nature (Quilley, 2011). In relation to the we-identity, it is already challenging for humans to broaden their we-identity to other humans for example on religious, gender or regional divides (Bucholc, 2024), let alone achieve mutual identification with the more-than-human world given its very distinct nature (Quilley, 2009, 132–133).

However, humanity – having evolved as the dominant species – is the only species both capable of and obliged to take responsibility for the survival of Earth (Elias, 1986 [2009]), because "it is possible that the species with the greatest capacity for destabilizing impacts on extra-human nature, may yet prove to be the only species capable of exercising evolutionary self-restraint – the semi-political and semi-conscious internalization of restraints in relation to nature and environment" (Quilley, 2004, 54–55). Quilley (2011, 85) was quite pessimistic about the prospects for "an ecological civilising process". For him, "the inculcation of much more demanding standards of habitual self-restraint, though possible, seems unlikely". The backlash currently observable regarding environmental and climate policies, for example under the second Trump administration (Nuccitelli, 2025), appears to support Quilley's pessimistic view. Rather than signalling an ecological civilising process, this trend instead suggests a renewed cycle of an ecological de-civilising process accompanied by setbacks in the broadening of mutual identification.

6. Conclusion

The dual processes of civilisation and de-civilisation inherent in warfare are evident both in the destruction of the environment and transgressive violence towards

extra-human nature during armed conflict on the one hand, and in efforts to regulate and outlaw environmental destruction through IHL on the other. This further highlights shifting boundaries between what is considered exceptional (and therefore illegitimate) and what constitutes the norm. Not only do the rules of IHL but also the discourses surrounding ecocide enable environmental destruction to be addressed as a crime – signifying a shift from the acceptance of such destruction as 'collateral damage' to its recognition as an illegitimate act of warfare.

We are in the midst of drawing a boundary that renders military-induced environmental destruction both definable and recognisable as a transgression. The present moment makes this especially clear: nature has become a topic of concern. Ukraine actively delegitimises Russia's war of aggression through meticulous documentation of environmental destruction, placing it alongside other war crimes. At the same time, the war in Ukraine – and other contemporary conflicts – illustrate how civilising and de-civilising processes remain entangled within warfare. When military conflict is examined through Elias's figurational and process-sociological lens, the emergence of new patterns of interdependence becomes particularly salient. A crucial dimension of this dialectic between processes of civilisation and de-civilisation lies precisely in forming new discursive and figurational spaces where certain practices cease to appear naturalised or beyond scrutiny, instead becoming subjects of negotiation and contestation.

In other words, there is a civilising process of military-environment relations which is not linear and undoubtedly still at its beginning but from a historical perspective currently stronger than de-civilising processes and, in some sense, a reaction to de-civilising processes in warfare. Certainly, severe shortcomings and challenges remain evident in the implementation of IHL and in the (still missing) codification of ecocide as a criminal offence under international law. Unresolved problems of accountability and legal thresholds (Leebaw, 2014, 781), the absence of powerful supranational institutions to enforce IHL and the anthropocentrism inherent within IHL (ibid., 778) continue to obstruct civilising processes of human-environment relations generally and military-environment relations specifically.

Nevertheless, an expanding identification and emerging we-identity among certain groups with the more-than-human world (Quilley, 2009, 133) already influences the military, shaping its efforts to protect ecosystems or mitigate climate impacts (Depledge, 2023). Not least, the very existence of rules and norms regulating military action towards the environment under IHL not only mirrors civilising processes but further supports them through defining appropriate on the one, and unacceptable behaviour on the other hand.

The absence of a powerful supranational institution capable of enforcing IHL – and criticism stemming from this fact – should not lead to conclusions that IHL is wholly impotent. In 1987, Elias criticised those who condemned the United Nations as powerless, arguing that humanity was still at an early stage of the

process towards a higher level of integration which might take centuries to complete (Elias, 1987 [2001], 202–203). The same certainly applies to the civilisation of the military-environment nexus: it remains only at its beginning and is, as demonstrated in current wars, in the danger of being reversed. As Elias reminds us, how long this process will take and whether it will ever be completed only history can tell.

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Matthias Schmelzer*

The dialectic of civilisation: Norbert Elias, the triad of controls, and social-ecological transformation

Abstract

This paper revisits Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process in light of the ecological, economic, and political transformations of the 21st century. It argues that Elias's triad of controls – over the self (psychogenesis), over others (sociogenesis), and over nature (ecogenesis) – provides a powerful but incomplete framework for understanding modern social development. By reinterpreting economic growth as a historically specific articulation of the civilising process, the paper highlights how the very dynamics of civilisational progress now generate destabilising effects – ecological overshoot, social fragmentation, and affective exhaustion. Drawing on political ecology and post-growth scholarship, it proposes a dialectical reading of Elias: one that recognises both the stabilising and the disruptive potential of 'civilising' processes under conditions of capitalist modernity. Rather than framing post-growth as a decivilising regression, the paper explores it as a potential reconfiguration of Elias's triad centered on collective self-limitation, localised interdependence, and convivial autonomy.

Keywords: Social-ecological transformation, history, theory, degrowth, technology, ecology, modernity

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1. Civilisation in crisis? Elias and the politics of growth

Despite a recent resurgence of references to the idea of 'civilisation' in political discourse, ideas of improvement, progress and development have come under increasing scrutiny in the context of accelerating ecological breakdown, deepening inequality, and rising authoritarianism. Amid the converging crises of the 21st century, there is growing interest in re-examining modernity's foundational narratives – including those, like Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process, that seek to explain how societies evolve toward greater control, foresight, and nonviolence. But how well does this framework hold up when placed in conversation with the

* *Matthias Schmelzer, (matthias.schmelzer@uni-flensburg.de),* University of Flensburg, Germany.

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social-ecological contradictions of capitalist modernity – and, in particular, with the sustainability dilemmas around economic growth?

This paper explores the potential of Elias's concept of the *civilising process* to illuminate the dynamics of growth-dependent societies, to contribute to current debates around *post-growth* as a transformative response, and thus to suggest a social-ecological revision of Elias. I argue that situating Elias's theory within a political-ecological perspective – attentive to material throughput, metabolic limits, and global inequalities – allows us to understand economic growth not simply as an engine of civilisation, but also as a historically specific mode of socio-ecological organisation that increasingly undermines the very capacities Elias saw as markers of "civilisation." Re-reading Elias in light of the planetary crisis and post-growth thinking thus requires a dialectical shift: the processes once identified as civilising must now be scrutinised for their contradictory outcomes. This has fundamental repercussions for the theory of the civilising process itself, undermining and complicating its underlying dichotomy of civilising/decivilising in interesting ways, making them productive for current developments.

Elias famously theorised civilisation as a long-term, processual transformation of social relations and subjectivities, characterised by three interdependent forms of control: over nature, over others, and over the self (Elias, 1997a, 1997b, 2001; Van Krieken, 2001; Wouters, 2014). In this *triad of controls*, civilisation is both psychological and social – involving the internalisation of external constraints in the form of self-restraint and the expansion of stable social interdependencies – and material, involving the mastery of external nature. These processes are mutually reinforcing: increased interdependence demands more self-control; higher levels of self-control and control over nature enable more complex societies; and psychic regulation supports social stability (Quilley & Loyal, 2005; Wouters, 2014). From this perspective, civilisation appears as a complex co-evolution of *sociogenesis*, *psychogenesis*, and what might be called following Stephen Quilley *ecogenesis* (Quilley, 2013, 2020; Vries & Goudsblom, 2002).

And yet, while Elias's historical analyses span centuries, his theory remains curiously detached from political economy. Particularly absent is an engagement with the rise of capitalist institutions, centered around accumulation and economic growth, and the related social and ecological implications. As several critics have noted, Elias's focus on long-term figurational change underplays the structural logics of accumulation, extraction, and inequality that underpin modernity (Baumgart & Eichener, 2017; Kilminster, 2007; Treibel, 2008; Van Krieken, 2001). This omission is all the more striking in the Anthropocene, where industrial growth and fossil-fuel dependence – once hailed as hallmarks of modern civilisation – are now widely seen as key drivers of environmental destabilisation (Bonneuil & Fressoz, 2016; Jackson, 2016; Livingston, 2019). So, how does the analysis of the triad of controls and the civilising process change, if we take into account newer analyses of the social-eco-

logical contradictions of economic growth, understood as a societally powerful *idea* and paradigm, a *social process* of intensification and acceleration related to dynamics of accumulation, appropriation and externalisation, as well as a *material* process of expansion of material and energy flows that are crossing dangerous earth system thresholds (Fressoz, 2024; Schmelzer, 2016; Schmelzer et al., 2022)?

Elias always highlighted that sociological concepts need to be evaluated with regard to their "object-adequacy", their "reality-congruence", and their value for human survival and flourishing (Elias, 1971, 356, 258). So that is what this paper is about – to evaluate the object-adequacy of the de-/civilisation theory with regard to discussions of economic growth and post-growth. Bringing Elias into conversation with *post-growth* – a diverse body of scholarship and activism calling for planned reductions in resource and energy use in pursuit of ecological sustainability and social justice – raises important questions. Post-growth is often dismissed as regressive, evoking fears of scarcity, disorder, and collapse (Kallis et al., 2020, 2025; Parrique, 2022; Schmelzer et al., 2022). As will be discussed, while Elias explicitly claimed to not use the term "civilising" or "decivilising" in a normative way, but rather as an analytic tool to describe long-term processes of increasingly complex figurations and related socio-psychological processes, the normative baggage of the concept was difficult to overcome (Baumgart & Eichener, 2017; Duerr, 1988). And from a broadly Eliasian perspective, post-growth might be in danger of decivilising processes, mainly, because the civilising process necessarily requires economic expansion and ever-longer chains of interdependence. From a post-growth perspective, this assumption is not only historically contingent but increasingly untenable.

Rather than a return to "pre-civilised" conditions, post-growth can be understood as an attempt to *transform* the civilising process – to uncouple the core dimensions of human development from the destructive imperative of endless growth. It proposes a different kind of transformation: one based on ecological limits, sufficiency, and democratic self-limitation (Asara, 2015; Brand et al., 2021; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Such a shift calls into question the Eliasian framework's emphasis on the *extent* of control over self, others and nature, and instead redirects attention to the *quality* of these controls and the social relations they presuppose. Rather than advancing the civilising process by expanding the scale or deepening the intensity of controls, such a transformation involves redefining the *type*, *quality* and *orientation* of the triad itself – or, as Bini Adamczak (2017) has termed it, the "modes of relating" that constitute a good society.

While this paper seeks to reinterpret Elias's framework in relation to contemporary ecological crises, it does not address several well-founded critiques of his work – including its Eurocentrism, evolutionary assumptions, empirical selectivity, colonial blind spots, and the externalisation of violence. These limitations – along with Elias's economic and ecological oversights and elitist conception of social change – must be critically engaged with to fully assess the framework's contemporary rele-

vance (Anders, 2000; see, for example, Duerr, 2005; the entire forum introduced by Hobson, 2017; Nia, 2003). In this sense, examining the ecological implications of Elias's framework should be understood as only one dimension of a broader project of revising and further developing his work.

This article revisits Norbert Elias's theory of civilisation and decivilisation in light of the contemporary polycrisis, arguing that the civilising process, as historically understood, is dialectically implicated in both the creation and the potential undoing of the conditions for social flourishing. By integrating insights from political ecology and post-growth research, I propose a rethinking of 'civilisation' for the Anthropocene. The paper proceeds in four steps. Section 2 reconstructs Elias's theory of civilisation and decivilisation. Section 3 reinterprets growth as a civilising force with destabilising effects. Section 4 explores degrowth as a potential reconfiguration of civilising dynamics. The conclusion outlines implications for a renewed sociological understanding of the civilising process in the Anthropocene.

2. Elias revisited: The process of civilisation, decivilisation, and the triad of controls

Norbert Elias developed his theory of the civilising process as a long-term sociological investigation into the transformation of human conduct and emotional regulation in Western Europe. His seminal work, *The Civilizing Process* (originally published in 1939), examines how historically contingent patterns of power concentration, courtly culture, and the rise of the modern state gradually produced subjects with heightened capacities for foresight, self-restraint, and sensitivity to others, and how these subjectivities in turn produced societal change in the direction of state formation and the monopolisation of violence (Elias, 1997a, 1997b). These transformations were not driven by morality or reason, but by the structural pressures of increasingly complex and interdependent societies. Elias analysed this double movement – of social differentiation (*sociogenesis*) and internalised behavioral change (*psychogenesis*) – as mutually reinforcing dynamics shaping modern subjectivity and governance (Baumgart & Eichener, 2017; Elias, 2006; Mennell, 1998).

Importantly, Elias did not regard the civilising process as irreversible or teleological. In his later writings, especially *The Germans*, he examined how processes of *decivilisation* can occur when the underlying social figurations that sustain behavioral restraints begin to break down. He argued that Germany's abrupt transition to national unification, its authoritarian legacy, and its fragmented civil society contributed to conditions in which long-term civilising trends were reversed. The result was not simply the re-emergence of violence, but a broader weakening of social empathy, rising external constraints, and a collapse of the internalised affective control characteristic of "civilised" conduct (Elias, 1989). In this perspective, decivilising tendencies are not anomalies, but integral possibilities within the broader figura-

tional process – reversals that may arise under conditions of rapid transformation, systemic instability, or breakdown of interdependencies.

In his later work, Elias attempted to generalise the insights of his historical sociology by identifying what he saw as structural universals of human social development**.** Central to this is what he called the *triad of basic controls*: the control of humans over non-human nature (which has been termed "*ecogenesis" in later research, see Quilley 2020*), over one another (*sociogenesis*), and over themselves (*psychogenesis*). As André Saramago (2023) has argued, Elias considered this triad to represent one of the *universals* of human development – a set of interlinked domains of control that all human societies, regardless of historical context, are enmeshed in and that are central to social reproduction. These are not abstract functions but empirically grounded processes through which social cohesion, stability, and transformation unfold. All kinds of taken-for-granted parts of reality – from individuality and intelligence to technology or social institutions – are, on closer analysis,

> *"a symptom of and a factor in a specific transformation which, like all such changes, simultaneously affected all the three basic coordinates of human life : the shaping and the position of the individual within the social structure, the social structure itself and the relation of social human beings to events in the nonhuman world" (Elias, 2001, 97).*

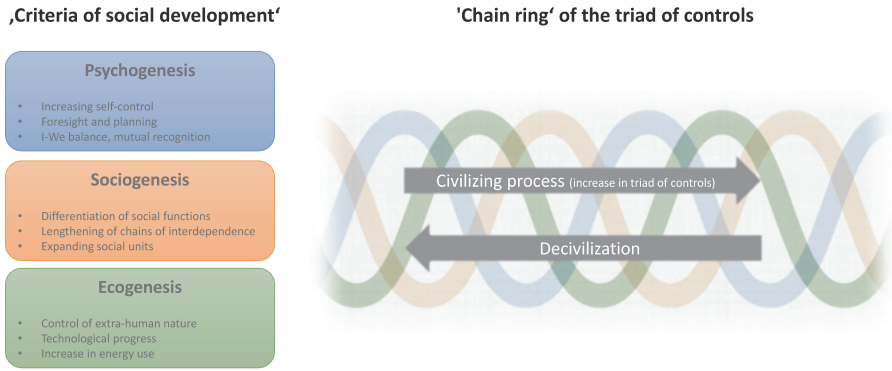
This triad provides a powerful analytical tool for observing long-term shifts in the relationship between society, subjectivity, and nature. Crucially, the three forms of control co-evolve and are interdependent – one side cannot develop without the others. They are not just controls, but also social dependencies, as convincingly argued by Johan Goudsblom, who introduced the term "triad of dependencies" to describe this aspect (Goudsblom, 1995; Vries & Goudsblom, 2002). And Elias presented these three controls as one of the "criteria of social development", meaning that more differentiated, even, and more stable versions of each of these three interconnected and co-evolving forms of controls are signifiers of societal progress, of the civilising process (Elias, 2006; Wouters, 2014). As Elias himself emphasised:

> *"Control of nature, social control and self-control form a kind of chain ring; they form a triangle of interconnected functions that can serve as a basic pattern for the observation of human affairs. One side cannot develop without the others; the extent and form of one depend on those of the others; and if one of them collapses, sooner or later the others follow" (Elias, 2001, 138–139).*

Societal developments are, in Elias view, unplanned, yet structured and directional, they are shaped by "figurations" or "Verflechtungsordnungen" (Baumgart & Eichener, 2017, 79–88; Elias, 1997b, 324–329). In that sense, the civilising process can be interpreted as an increase of basic controls and dependencies in the three complexes, even though these developments do not always advance in tandem. Conversely, a decrease in any one of them may set off a decivilising dynamic, in which the weakening of one form of control gradually erodes the others in a spiralling, mutually reinforcing process that ultimately threatens the integrity of the configuration as a whole. In what follows, I reconstruct the core features of this triad – illustrated in Figure 1 as a triple helix 'chain ring' of the three interrelated

forms of controls. I argue that this ideal-typical framework provides a fruitful – if incomplete – foundation for understanding how economic growth and ecological transformation interact with the dynamics of civilisation and decivilisation.

Figure 1: The triad of controls illustrated as a triple helix 'chain ring'



(based on Elias 2001; Elias 1997a; Elias 1997b; Quilley 2020)

Psychogenesis refers to the long-term changes in human affect, impulse control, foresight, and emotional regulation. For Elias, the civilising process entails an increasing capacity for self-restraint, expressed in delayed gratification, rational planning, and a shift in the "I–We balance" towards individualisation and broader mutual identification. This dimension of Elias's theory draws on the transformation of personality structures over centuries – from spontaneous, impulsive affective expressions toward an increasingly regulated and socially embedded self (Elias, 2001, 2003; Treibel, 2008). In the context of economic modernisation, this aspect of civilising change has been variously linked to the rise of investment-oriented foresight, work discipline, and the cultivation of bourgeois subjectivity. While Elias does not explicitly link these developments to capitalist modernity, subsequent work – including by Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, E.P. Thompson, and contemporary theories of social-ecological transformation – has highlighted how capitalist economies reward specific "mental infrastructures" of self-restraint, long-term planning, and productivity-oriented subjectivities (Freud, 2010; Mennell, 1998; Schmelzer & Büttner, 2024; Thompson, 1963; Weber, 1920; Welzer, 2011).

The second leg of the triad, *sociogenesis*, refers to the increasing differentiation of social functions, the formation of increasingly complex and interdependent social units, and the lengthening of chains of interdependence. Elias famously traced this development from medieval court societies through the formation of modern states, emphasising the pacification of internal violence, the centralisation of political authority, and the gradual taming of inter-human relations. In Elias's terms, civilisation involves the expansion and stabilisation of social networks, which in

turn demand greater mutual regulation and more robust self-control (Elias, 1997b). This process is reflected not only in the formation of nation states but also in the evolution of market societies, bureaucracies, and the infrastructure of modern governance. Importantly, the longer and more complex these chains of interdependence become, the greater the systemic need for trust, planning, and the suppression of impulsive action. Yet these expansions are not neutral: the growth of social interdependencies is deeply intertwined with the emergence of modern fossil fueled technologies, capitalist market economies and global supply chains – developments Elias did not systematically theorise, but which are central to understanding how sociogenesis operates today.

Ecogenesis, the third form of control, refers to humanity's increasing ability to shape, exploit, and dominate extra-human nature. While Elias did not use this term, in particular in his later works he situated this development on a long historical continuum – from the taming of fire and animals to the exploitation of fossil fuels and nuclear energy (Quilley, 2020; Quilley & Loyal, 2005; Schröter & Elias, 2004; Vries & Goudsblom, 2002). This long arc of ecogenesis underlies what we now call technological progress and is intimately tied to the modern industrial growth paradigm. While Elias regarded technological control over nature as a condition for the development of other civilising tendencies (such as the reduction of intra-human violence and expansion of empathy), his work only partially anticipates the ecological consequences of such control when driven to excess.

Crucially, Elias insists that none of these forms of control can be understood in isolation. The triad is a co-evolutionary structure: ecogenesis supports sociogenesis and psychogenesis, but also depends on them in return. The increasing mastery over nature enables longer chains of interdependence, which in turn necessitate stronger self-regulation. In the words of Elias:

> "The increasing control of non-human, natural forces by human beings was only possible, could only be sustained over a long period, within the framework of a stable, highly organized social structure. This stability and organization depended largely, in their tum, on the extensive control of natural forces. And, at the same time, the increasing control of natural forces was only possible in conjunction with increasing self-control by human beings" (Elias, 2001, 138).

Conversely, if any leg of the triad weakens – for instance, if ecological stability erodes, or if social trust breaks down – the entire structure may become unstable. Elias argues that civilising processes are reversible, and that under certain conditions, processes of decivilisation may emerge (Elias, 2001, 138–139; Mennell, 1996; Van Krieken, 2001). His work repeatedly points to destructive potentials that arise within ostensibly civilising trajectories—such as the unprecedented lethality of modern nation-states, the competitive ravages of capitalist development, or the excesses of bourgeois self-constraint. His writings from the late 1930s and Changes in the We–I Balance (1987), written in the aftermath of Chernobyl, likewise gesture toward the environmental and technological dangers generated by modern forms of control (Elias, 1997b, 2001, Chapter 3; Mennell, 1996; Van Krieken, 2001). These

examples suggest that decivilising processes often appear not as simple reversals of civilisation, but as pathologies emerging from within its very dynamics.

In this sense, Elias's framework can be seen as a *non-reductive sociology of interdependence*, offering conceptual leverage for understanding both historical dynamics and contemporary transformations. It is important to note that, although this framework foregrounds the interdependence of the three forms of control, their historical developments have been neither uniform nor synchronous. Elias repeatedly emphasises that the long-term expansion of knowledge and mastery over nature—particularly since the Renaissance—has not been accompanied by a comparable deepening of knowledge about social relations or the capacities required for their regulation. In his view, the growth of scientific-technical control has consistently outpaced advances in understanding the figurational dynamics of human interdependence (Elias, 1997b, 2001, 2003). At the same time, Elias's sociology of knowledge—especially his reflections on involvement and detachment—offers a crucial complement to this account. For Elias, the civilising process does not consist solely in expanding interdependence or refining self-regulation, but also in the growth of detachment: the capacity for reflexive, knowledge-based orientation toward increasingly complex figurations. This cognitive–normative dimension, grounded in the advancement and social diffusion of scientific knowledge, forms an essential criterion of "civilisation" in Elias's later work (Elias, 2003; Mennell, 1998).

What remains underdeveloped in Elias's own writing, however, is how specific material-economic systems – especially those centered on capitalist accumulation and economic growth – shape and disrupt these long-term processes. In the following section, I explore this issue by interpreting economic growth as a historically specific configuration of Elias's triad and by asking whether it functions as a civilising force, a decivilising one, or both.

In this regard it is interesting to note that Elias's three forms of control overlap considerably with the three types of domination that Adorno and Horkheimer identify in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* – domination over oneself, over others, and over nature (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006). Again, the three types of are seen as conditioning one another – a powerful image for this was found in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which hero Odysseus learns to control his own desires and inner nature, binding himself to the mast of his ship to prevent being seduced by the sirens, which gives him greater control over the powers of nature and over the workers he controls. From this perspective of critical theory, however, the three types are not merely analytical tools for understanding social processes through processes of increasing and complexifying *controls*, but rather critical-normative tools for understanding and delegitimising *domination* that are marshalled to problematise enlightenment and "civilisation" (Görg, 1999; Hummel et al., 2024).

3. Growth as a civilising process?

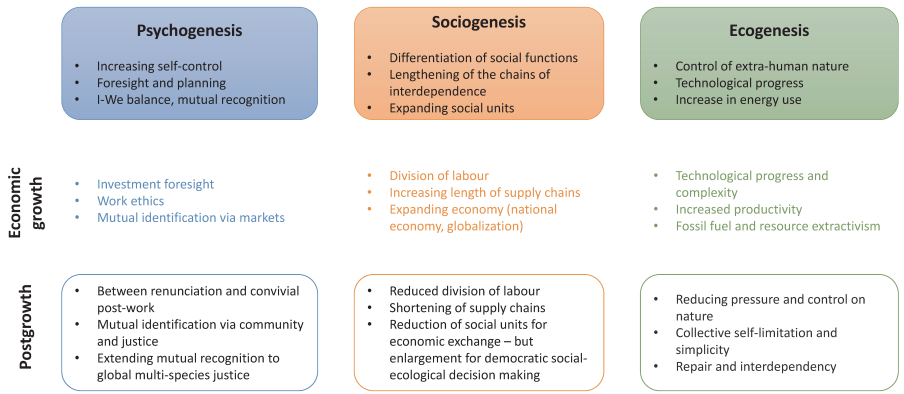
At first glance, the rise of capitalist economic growth can be interpreted as a paradigmatic case of the civilising process. The developments Elias identified as central to civilisation – the lengthening and intensification of social relations, interdependencies and exchange, the expansion of foresight and planning, the increased control over nature and the self – appear to converge in the formation of industrial modernity. Growth, in this light, might be read as a both a result of and a powerful catalyst for advancing each leg of Elias's triad: growth is driven by and at the same time enabling new technological capabilities (ecogenesis), it results from and drives extending global chains of interdependence (sociogenesis), and it depends on and fosters new subjectivities disciplined by norms of productivity, thrift, and delayed gratification (psychogenesis). More of each form of social control leads to and is driven by more economic growth, which leads to and is driven by the advancement of the civilising process.

Yet this alignment is far from unproblematic. The trajectory of modern economic growth, especially in its capitalist and fossil-fueled form, has produced profound social-ecological contradictions. These contradictions call for a more critical and dialectical reading of the relationship between growth and the civilising process. In this section, I reconstruct how economic growth can be analysed by focusing on each of the three dimensions of Elias's triad and their relationships, before arguing that this very intensification generates destabilising effects that undermine the structural foundations of civilisation itself.

In doing so, I relate the three forms of control to our interpretation of economic growth in recent studies, in which we argued that economic growth should be understood as three interlinked processes that have evolved dynamically over time: Growth appears as the ideological, social, and biophysical materialisation of capitalist accumulation (Borowy & Schmelzer, 2017; Schmelzer, 2024; Schmelzer et al., 2022). First, growth functions as a political and epistemological construct, an idea, the hegemony of which is the core ideology of capitalism, justifying the belief that growth is natural, necessary, and good, and that growth is linked to progress and emancipation (Schmelzer, 2015b, 2015a). Second, growth is not only an ideology – growthism – but also a social process – a specific set of social relations resulting from and driving capitalist accumulation that stabilises modern societies dynamically, driven by class interests and subjectivities oriented toward accumulation and competition, laying the groundwork for societies that became structurally dependent on economic expansion – what might be called "growth-dependent figurations" (Keyßer et al., 2025; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Third, growth operates as a material and energetic process – the ever-expanding use of land, resources, and energy and the related build-up of physical stocks – which fundamentally transforms the planet and increasingly threatens to undermine the foundations of growth itself (Schmelzer et al., 2022; Schmelzer & Büttner, 2024). Taken together,

growth can thus be understood not merely as a rise in economic output, but as a historically contingent figuration – an interlocking, self-reinforcing cultural, social, and biophysical dynamic that has profoundly reshaped social relations, subjectivities, and the material foundations of life on Earth.

Figure 2: The triad of controls and its relation to economic growth and post-growth



3.1 Growth as psychogenesis: Subject formation and temporal discipline

The *psychogenetic* aspects of growth are perhaps the most subtle, but immensely important. As scholars such as Max Weber and E.P. Thompson have shown, the emergence of capitalist modernity required not just new institutions but new subjectivities. These were characterised by a heightened sense of time discipline, investment foresight, and emotional regulation or the ability to defer gratification – traits that Elias also emphasised in his theory of civilising self-control. In modern growth societies, competitive pressures and the differentiation of social functions compel individuals to internalise increasingly stable, continuous, and self-regulated conduct. What were once externally imposed constraints become self-discipline – a shift Elias captured in his formulation of the transformation of *Fremdzwang* into *Selbstzwang*. This mechanism underpins the subjectivities of growth: productive, anticipatory, and increasingly self-monitoring (Elias, 1997a).

On a societal level, the idea of the 'development' or 'progress' of human societies in a linear course of time had to be actively produced. Beginning with the Renaissance and building on Christian apocalypticism, which assumed an absolute end point of human societies with the Last Judgment, concepts of abstract time and space emerged in Europe, in particular since the seventeenth century: the spread of the mechanical clock promoted changes in the understanding of time as objective, linear, and countable. Geometry and cartography also enabled a new conceptualisation of land and territory as abstract, borderless, uniform, and measurable space that can be emptied or filled as needed, clearly demarcated, and traded as merchandise

through property rights (Dale, 2012; Malm, 2016; Merchant, 1983; Scheidler, 2020). Early modern natural sciences not only promoted the idea of abstract nature but also argued that humans could dominate nature. In a mechanistic view of the world, nature and human labour were conceived of as mechanisms governed by laws and flows of energy that could correspondingly be manipulated and controlled (Caffentzis, 2013; Merchant, 1983; Radkau, 2002). Beginning with the seventeenth century and in the context of European colonialism, these ideas underwent a secularised reformulation: a linear narrative of progress divided people into 'civilised' and 'primitive' based on racist metrics, thus legitimising colonial expansions (Ghosh, 2021). At the height of imperialism and in early 'development' discourse, poor countries were seen to need outside intervention by European or American experts, to speed up their 'development' on a linear path of social and economic improvement. In the twentieth century, the linear narrative was economised, as general social progress was increasingly conflated with the expansion of production (Escobar, 1995; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018; Schmelzer, 2016). Under capitalism, growth became the secular promise of redemption – and this redemption depended on self-discipline.

In this sense, Elias's concept of psychogenesis – the internalisation of external constraints – helps us understand how individuals adapt to growth-oriented systems and became growth subjects (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017, 2019). However, this dynamic is dialectical. The same subjectivities that enabled the civilising process and capitalist accumulation were not just enmeshed with domination of nature and colonies, as argued above, but also contributed to rising levels of stress, alienation, and exhaustion – conditions widely observed in contemporary post-Fordist societies (Rosa, 2013, 2016). The continuous pressure for productivity and consumption generates widespread exhaustion, while the affective orientations of growth subjectivities (competition, abstraction, future-orientation) undermine empathy, trust, and care (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017, 2019).

3.2 Growth as sociogenesis: Interdependence and market integration

The *sociogenetic* dimension of growth is equally central. As capitalist economies expanded, they gave rise to increasingly complex and globalised forms of interdependence. Elias referred to the lengthening of chains of interdependence as a defining feature of the civilising process, rooted in the specialisation of social functions, the pacification of large-scale social units, and the institutionalisation of states and market exchange. These developments were key to the formation of modern national economies, the intensification of the division of labour and the proliferation of global supply chains – all central to what Elias analysed as the formation of civil order and statehood (Elias, 1997b, 2001).

In this light, economic growth can be seen as a sociogenetic driver of the civilising process— extending the reach of coordination, standardisation, and mutual

dependence across ever-larger spatial and functional domains. While Elias mostly focused on the expansion of the state, from the very onset of modern statehood its expansion was intimately linked to the creation and growth of what today is conceptualised as the "national economy". The economy only became a separate area of social live in the eighteenth and nineteenth century, conceptually in European economics debates and in society through the spread of gainful employment as a male-dominated sector separate from the rest of life, while unpaid reproductive work became 'housewifely' – devalued, but necessary for the reproduction of labour power (Barca, 2014; Komlosy, 2014; Salleh, 2017). Different disciplinary technologies, manifested in institutions such as factories, the military, prisons, and schools, promoted the proletarianisation of labour. This change in work led to the monetarisation of more and more spheres of life and was accompanied by the suppression of relationships of reciprocity. This proletarianisation of previously subsistence-based communities, rooted in the system of wage labour, created a lock-in effect, where workers, too, depended on growth to satisfy their most basic needs as they are no longer able to survive outside of the capitalist system (Graeber, 2019; Komlosy, 2014; Osterhammel, 2009; Pineault, 2023).

But it was not until the 1930s and 1940s that economic experts, politicians, and, increasingly, the public began to understand 'the economy' as a self-contained totality where flows of money regulate the relationships between the production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services within nationally organised borders (Mitchell, 2014). This idea, which today is widely taken for granted, replaced the older view in which economic processes were conceptualised as physical material and energy flows, which naturally gave rise to limits to growth. These developments converged in the 1940s and 1950s in the definition and international standardisation of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), which crystallised the formerly fuzzy sphere of 'the economy' into a technical object with clearly defined contents and boundaries – and which then became the centre of the modern growth paradigm. Only through this universalised concept of 'the economy', commensurable over time and space, did it become conceivable to measure what was to grow: the sum of market transactions within national borders, and through increasingly globalised markets also internationally (Fioramonti, 2013; Lepenies, 2013; Schmelzer, 2016). And of course, this crystallised most clearly the economic core of what Elias referred to as the increasing length, depth and complexity of (supply and demand) chains of interdependence.

Yet this expansion has not only created multiple ecological problems, as discussed in the next section, but also rendered societies increasingly vulnerable. The smooth functioning of complex supply networks is premised on continuous growth, energy availability, and geopolitical stability – processes undermined by the very process of growth in the context of resource scarcities, green extractivism and eco-imperial tensions (Brand & Wissen, 2024). Moreover, these relations are structured by asymmetries of power and ecological unequal exchange (Chang, 2002; Hickel, 2017;

Hornborg, 2016), which raise doubts about their potential to improve people's lives. And mutual interdependence in growth societies is often mediated through impersonal markets rather than solidaristic institutions, fostering alienation rather than cohesion (Dörre et al., 2009; Rosa, 2013).

3.3 Growth as ecogenesis: Technological control and fossil energy

Economic growth is intimately linked to the modern expansion of humanity's material control over nature – what could be called, expanding Elias's terminology, *ecogenesis* (Quilley, 2020). Over the past two centuries, this control has advanced through unprecedented technological development and through the large-scale appropriation of fossil energy. Elias conceptualised this as a *longue durée* continuity when he wrote that "the taming of fire, wild animals and plants for human use, like many other conquests of this kind, were steps in exactly the same direction as the exploitation of mineral oil or atomic energy for human purposes" (Elias, 2001, 137). They were all "part of a slow and very gradual change in the relationship of human beings to non-human nature", in part driven by the "extension of human control and knowledge" (Ibid.). This long arc of transformation reshaped the relationship between humans and non-human nature, displacing biological energy regimes with thermodynamically intensive systems based on coal, oil, and gas (Malm, 2016; Vries & Goudsblom, 2002).

This process, which Elias understood as a long-term change in human–nonhuman relations, has culminated in industrial-scale technological progress, rising energy use, and the massive exploitation of fossil fuels. Elias himself regarded this development as one of the most profound and durable features of the civilising process: a material foundation enabling reductions in insecurity and greater stability in social life. In fact, it seems like that in hindsight Elias saw this form of control as the most profound characteristic of the civilising process, since the social and psychological dimension could easily regress, as he analysed with regard to the Nazi regime. In his 1961–62 essay *The Breakdown of Civilization,* Elias reflects on this dynamic with characteristic clarity: "In spite of the high control of that level of the universe that we call 'nature', the degree of control humans have over themselves as societies is very low, even in the so far most advanced societies" (Elias, 1989, 500 transl. MS).

Elias underscored that civilisational advances in technological terms have far outpaced progress in social or political self-regulation. Yet this imbalance did not lead him to abandon the civilising framework. On the contrary, he believed that growing control over natural forces was a precondition for more stable and peaceful human coexistence – by reducing unpredictability and danger, it created the conditions in which more complex and differentiated social structures could emerge and be maintained. As he put it in a dictionary entry on the term "civilisation":

> *"The gradual shift in the balance of power on this earth in favor of humans in relation to non-human nature […] led to a reduction in the dangers on the part of non-human nature and demanded a more*

even self-control of humans. To simplify, one can say: the higher the permanent level of danger, the lower the permanent level of civilization" (Elias, 1992, 384).

For Elias, modernisation, economic development, and scientific progress were integral to this process – they reduced exposure to famine, disease, and natural disasters, and allowed for more complex division of social functions and the emergence of longer chains of interdependence. The danger level of the natural environment, in his view, shaped the possibility of sustained self-restraint, institutional continuity, and pacification. This explains why Elias maintained, even after the ecological costs of technological progress and economic growth had become apparent from the 1970s onwards: "We still haven't learnt to control nature and ourselves enough" – indicating that the work of civilisation remained unfinished, not invalidated (Elias & Steenhuis, 1984; Hughes, 2013).

Yet in hindsight, this perspective underestimated the destabilising effects of extractive modernity. As recent earth system research has shown, the acceleration of fossil-fueled growth has led to the transgression of planetary boundaries and a fundamental destabilisation of the Earth's biophysical systems (Steffen et al. 2015; Ripple et al. 2023). While Elias maintained a typically 'detached' and balanced view of the social benefits and unplanned ecological side-effects of technological progress until the end of his life (Hughes, 2013), newer analyses suggest a different reality: Ecological overshoot might not be a mere risk of fossil modernity that can be integrated through ecological modernisation. Rather, ecological destruction is intimately bound up with economic growth as such and cannot be dissociated through a deepening of ecological control such as geoengineering ('the good anthropocene', as some have argued, Hamilton, 2016). The very means through which societies extended their control over nature – through increased productivity, energy throughput, and resource extractivism – now threaten to undermine ecological foundations of complex societies itself.

3.4 Civilising growth, decivilising consequences?

This mutual reinforcement of psychogenesis, sociogenesis, and ecogenesis within the context of economic growth has been the focus of recent empirical work, such as our analyses of what we call *fossil mentalities* – historically specific affective structures, perceptions of nature, and energy imaginaries. Drawing on the *history of mentalities* and Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, we examined historical materials from the 18th-century controversy over wood shortages to show how shifts in material energy regimes were accompanied by changing structures of perception, valuation, and desire (Büttner & Schmelzer, 2021; Schmelzer & Büttner, 2024). Relatedly, historical work on the emergence of the *growth paradigm* can be interpreted as a sociogenetic analysis of capitalist civilisation: a process through which specific social figurations formed – characterised by hierarchically structured interdependence and dependencies on perpetual expansion – and were stabilised through discursive and institutional means. The *growth paradigm*, in this sense, constitutes a regime of

justification and measurement that renders growth not only thinkable, but morally imperative and politically unquestionable – a civilisational logic grounded in fossil modernity and institutionalised through indicators like GDP (Schmelzer, 2015b). Both fossil mentalities and the growth paradigm are attempts – in the wake of energy humanities general outlook (Szeman & Boyer, 2017) – to link these socio-psychological developments to the metabolic bases of fossil fuels, whose continued exploitation is increasingly threatening the stable earth systems conditions of the Holocene that were conducive to complex societies and civilisation (IPCC, 2023; Kemp et al., 2022; Ripple et al., 2024).

Taken together, these dynamics reveal the ambivalence at the heart of the relationship between growth and civilisation. Growth intensifies the very processes Elias identified as civilising – but in doing so, it generates externalities, contradictions, and feedbacks that threaten to undo the structures of control upon which the civilising process depends. This suggests the need for a dialectical reading of Elias: one that recognises not only the progressivity of civilising processes but also their capacity to turn into their opposite under certain historical conditions. The spatially and temporally dispersed causes (imperial mode of living based on fossil fuels) and effects (floods, droughts, hunger etc.) and the lack of empathy with regard to climate change has been conceptualised as an extreme form of "slow violence" (Nixon, 2013) – and it resonates strongly with Elias own conception of decivilisation:

> *„In connection with the increasing independence of the individual self-regulating instances, which include reason and conscience, ego and superego, the range of a person's ability to identify with other people in relative independence of their group membership, i.e. to feel compassion for them, is obviously also expanding. De-civilization then means a change in the opposite direction, a reduction in the range of compassion" (Elias, 1992, 368).*

This echoes Robert van Krieken's question on "the extent to which the civilising process actually generates barbaric conduct, rather than simply being its opposite" (van Krieken, 1999, 2024). Indeed, the expansion of fossil capitalism, with its ecological devastation, labor exploitation, and postcolonial externalisations, can be read as a form of civilised barbarism – a modern formation in which civilising norms coexist with structurally violent systems. This interpretation resonates with critiques of modernity advanced by the Frankfurt School – notably in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* – but also calls for a materialist and ecological extension of Eliasian sociology (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006). Of course, Elias wrote *The Civilising Process* in an era before the emergence of the growth paradigm, in the context of what Herman Daly termed an "empty" world in contrast to todays "full world", before the Great Acceleration of exponential growth dynamics, and thus could not have foreseen the devastating consequences of the material and economic dimension of the civilising process. These ecological consequences are related to one of Elias core dictums about the independence of social orders, as emergent phenomena, from

intentional human actions. As he argued in a quote that one can relate to the growth-ecology-conundrum:

> *"Again and again […] people stand before the outcome of their own actions like the apprentice magician before the spirits he has conjured up and which, once at large, are no longer in his power. They look with astonishment at the convolutions and formations of the historical flow which they themselves constitute but do not control." (Elias 2001, 29)*

However, if we take the analysis seriously, that there are psychological, social and ecological limits to continued growth and „civilisation" – in the sense of the deepening of the three forms of controls – one question arises: Would a transformation beyond growth in the three dimension at the core of Elias framework lead to regressive tendencies ("decivilisation" in Elias terms)?

4. Post-growth and the transformation of the civilising process

The "2024 state of the climate report" starts with a stark statement: "We are on the brink of an irreversible climate disaster." Written by some of the most well-known earth system scientists globally, it continues by stating with confidence: "This is a global emergency beyond any doubt. Much of the very fabric of life on Earth is imperiled. We are stepping into a critical and unpredictable new phase of the climate crisis." One of the key reasons identified for what the report characterises as an imminent risk of "societal collapse", undermining all possibilities for civilised societies, is economic growth. The report concludes:

> *„In a world with finite resources, unlimited growth is a perilous illusion. We need bold, transformative change: drastically reducing overconsumption and waste, especially by the affluent […] and adopting an ecological and post-growth economics framework that ensures social justice" (Ripple et al., 2024).*

If economic growth can be interpreted as a historically specific articulation of the civilising process, as argued in the previous section, how should we reconcile this new reality, in which continued growth is threatening the very foundations of complex, modern societies or what Elias analysed as the "process of civilisation"? And what are the implications for moving beyond growth, can a post-growth transformation reconfigure the civilising process in a way that maintains its emancipatory potentials while shedding its destructive excesses?

To address these questions, this section puts the political project of post-growth in conversation with Elias's triad. Post-growth (or degrowth, with a similar overall outlook) seeks to reduce ecological overshoot, transform economic institutions, and promote a good life within planetary boundaries (Kallis et al., 2018, 2025; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Post-growth can thus be understood as a specific figuration that aims at overcoming all types of growth dependencies, some of which were central to Elias's conception of the civilising process (for example Elias's "monopoly mechanism" around competition, see also Keyßer et al., 2025). As illustrated in Figure 2, post-growth can be understood not as a simple reversal of the civilising process, but as a deliberate rebalancing and revaluation of its constitutive processes.

I argue that rather than further increasing the *scale* of social control and deepening the three forms, such a transformation may involve redefining the *quality* and *orientation* of the triad of controls and dependencies – toward a more sustainable, just, caring, and democratic societal organisation.

4.1 Ecogenesis: From control to collective self-limitation

In contrast to the expansionist logic of growth, which aims to extend human control over nature through extractivism, industrialisation, and technological mastery, post-growth call for a deliberate reduction in material throughput and energy use – especially in the Global North. This shift is not incidental, but foundational. According to recent IPCC reports, reducing energy demand is the most effective short-term measure for mitigating ecological collapse (IPCC, 2023). Numerous studies underscore the necessity of drastically shrinking resource use, land occupation, and emissions footprints in high-income countries (Kallis et al., 2025; Vogel & Hickel, 2023; Wiedmann et al., 2020).

In this light, post-growth entails not further control over extra-human nature, but its inverse: a recognition of the ontological and existential interdependency of humans with more-than-human nature, related forms of egalitarian metabolic exchanges, and collective forms of self-limitation (Kallis, 2019; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Be it permaculture, agroecology, symbiotic ways of whole-systems thinking that adopt settlements and agriculture to flourishing in diverse natural ecosystems, or Rights of Nature – post-growth futures require not more, but a conscious reduction in control over nature, and the development of nature-society relations based on mutual recognition, inter-species solidarity and care (Eastwood & Heron, 2024; Jackson, 2025; Kimmerer, 2020).

Such restraint is not regressive; it is a mature and rational response to the ecological consequences of unbounded expansion. Rather than signifying the collapse of "civilisational" capabilities, this new ecogenesis reflects a different form of foresight – one premised on precaution, repair, and relationality. This includes both structural changes in and reductions in over-production and consumption, regenerative forms of working with nature, such as Indigenous land rights, ecological repair or permaculture, as well as ecological reparations to address the North-South inequalities created by centuries of extractive development (Nelson, 2025; Schmelzer & Nowshin, 2023).

4.2 Sociogenesis: From lengthened chains and complex figurations to relocalised provisioning and simplicity

The sociogenetic implications of post-growth are similarly contradictory. While Elias associated the civilising process with the lengthening of chains of interdependence – from villages to nation-states and global markets –, and with increasingly complex figurations, post-growth strategies often call for shorter, more resilient

chains of provisioning and for a reduction of irrational forms of complexity and divisions of labour (such as bullshit jobs, with regard to reproductive work). These include regionalised economies, localised food systems, and the deglobalisation of supply chains – all aimed at reducing appropriation from the global South, vulnerability, ecological harm, and dependency on extractive global trade regimes. For instance, community-supported agriculture and regional energy cooperatives demonstrate degrowth-aligned provisioning in practice (Bello, 2005; Kallis et al., 2018; Schmelzer et al., 2022). Similarly, relocalised provisioning is often related to reductions in the use of complex, alienating technologies that depend on globalised markets, and a move to simplicity, people-centered forms of convivial technology (Kerschner et al., 2018; Vetter, 2023).

This reconfiguration does not imply isolationism or the end of interdependence or of the freedom of movement. Rather, it signals a qualitative shift from competitive and hierarchical forms of globalisation to democratic, needs-oriented provisioning and open relocalisation (Liegey et al., 2013; Schmelzer & Nowshin, 2023). A sufficiency-oriented post-growth economy is not simply smaller – it is deliberatively organised, grounded in mutual recognition and capable of negotiating shared boundaries and entitlements. Such a transformation requires a renewed emphasis on democratic planning – not in the centralised sense of 20th-century state socialism, but as a pluralistic and participatory process of coordinating provisioning systems within ecological limits (Durand et al., 2024). As planetary boundaries are breached and just access to resources becomes increasingly contested, the political task becomes one of organising post-growth provisioning systems that are both ecologically viable and socially fair – it amounts to a reduction of social units for economic exchange – but an enlargement for democratic social-ecological decision making and the units of concern, even to more-than-human nature. In this sense, post-growth demands increasingly complex figurations of human and extra-human nature that can organise the provisioning systems central for well-being within limits (Asara et al., 2013; O'Neill et al., 2018; Schmelzer & Hofferberth, 2023).

4.3 Psychogenesis: From self-discipline to convivial autonomy

Among the three dimensions, post-growth appears least contradictory with the psychogenetic dimension of Elias theory of the civilising process. The reduction of consumption and energy use in high-income societies clearly demands a high degree of individual self-control, the internalisation of limits, and long-term orientation – all key building blocks of what Elias analysed as the civilising process. Also, Elias emphasis on the role of shame in moving from external to internal restraint can be made productive here, most obviously with regard to flight shame (Sommer & Welzer, 2014; Stay Grounded, 2019).

However, this is only part of the story. From a post-growth perspective that takes into account the critique of domination over oneself central to critical theory

(Horkheimer & Adorno, 2006), this psychogenesis can be reinterpreted through a broader lens – emphasising not just individual restraint, but collective autonomy, conviviality, and transformation of desire (Illich, 1973; Kallis, 2019). Rather than being driven by productivity, status, or accumulation, post-growth subjects are conceptualised as motivated by care, solidarity, and ecological awareness. The cultivation of such post-growth subjectivities entails an enlargement of empathy across borders, species, and generations, and a redefinition of freedom as self-limitation in solidarity (Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017, 2023). Post-growth is not only about scaling down resource use, but also about expanding *democratic capacities* for planning, deliberation, and care (Durand et al., 2024; Groos & Sorg, 2025). Without a broadening of mutual recognition, especially toward global ecological and multispecies justice, post-growth cannot be conceived as a democratic transformation. The challenge is to foster new forms of collective self-regulation that do not reproduce the alienating and disciplinary dynamics of capitalist growth societies, but instead cultivate shared autonomy and interdependence. While this also necessitates complex forms of individual self-regulation, control of impulses and an internalisation of external constraints, these might not necessarily take the form of discipline over oneself, as a hierarchical self-relationship of domination that suppresses ones inner nature, but rather one of recognising collective inter-dependencies and building mutualistic autonomy based on care and conviviality (Arora et al., 2020; Eversberg & Schmelzer, 2017).

5. Conclusion

Nobert Elias writings were immensely bold, and his sociology of the 'human condition' deliberately moved beyond the contemporary preoccupation with 'modernity', rejecting many dominant sociological paradigms as one-sided—whether economistic, teleological, individualistic, or overly rationalistic (Kilminster, 2007). Yet given the ecological predicament and its intimate relation to growth – a core feature of the civilising process so central to Elias's framework – a dialectical reformulation of Elias's key framework seems in order. This article has proposed a reinterpretation of Norbert Elias's theory of the civilising process in light of the ecological, economic, and political transformations of the 21st century. By foregrounding the material foundations and systemic contradictions of capitalist growth regimes, I have argued that Elias's triad of controls – over nature, others, and the self – offers not just a lens for understanding long-term social development, but also a critical tool for diagnosing its breakdown. This reinterpretation contributes to both sociological theory and the emerging field of post-growth studies by offering a dialectical framework of analysis for social-ecological transformation. And it also reflects a broader trend in Eliasian scholarship to conceptualise decivilising processes not as reversals of civilisation but as pathologies emerging within its very dynamics.

Recasting economic growth as a historically specific configuration of Eliasian civilisation reveals the ambivalence of both, the civilising process and growth: the same processes that once enabled greater stability, foresight, and social cohesion have become sources of ecological overshoot, alienation, and systemic risk. The intensification of control – technological, social, psychological – has not eliminated danger but transformed it, generating new forms of vulnerability that challenge the civilisational assumptions of progress, expansion, and mastery.

More specifically, the paper advocates a shift within Eliasian debates from an emphasis on the extent of control toward the quality and relational orientation of controls. This revised understanding of the triad, I argue, provides a conceptual basis for critically assessing the political opportunities and limits associated with different strands of post-growth thinking. In this context, post-growth can be conceptualised not as a regression from "civilisation" but as a potential reconfiguration of its basic dynamics. The central shift here is not a matter of increasing or decreasing the extent of control in any of the three domains, but of transforming the qualities, orientations, and relational logics through which they operate. Post-growth reorients the focus from control to collective self-limitation, from interdependence-as-domination to interdependence-as-solidarity, and from self-discipline to convivial autonomy. It thus outlines a vision of social transformation that resonates with Elias's processual and relational sociology – but reorients it toward planetary justice and sustainability. Rather than advancing the civilising process by expanding the scale or deepening the intensity of controls, a post-growth involves redefining the quality and orientation of the triad. This shift aligns with Bini Adamczak's notion of transforming *Beziehungsweisen* – modes of relating (Adamczak, 2017).

Elias's framework also raises a deeper tension for post-growth thinking: it reveals the intimate connection between liberal modern societies, largely non-violent subjectivities, and the stabilising role of fossil fuels and growth. His work offers a warning – not against ecological overshoot per se, but against the social disintegration that may follow a rapid loss of technological control, energy security, and social coordination. This danger concerns the fragility of the civilising processes with the interdependencies of the "chain ring" of psycho-, socio-, and ecogenesis – as he argued, "if one of them collapses, sooner or later the others follow" (Elias, 2001, 139). This highlights one of the most fundamental challenges of post-growth sustainability: to transition toward societies that remain modern, democratic, and cosmopolitan – based on recognition of historical harm and the need for repair and reparations – while radically lowering energy throughput and reducing extractivist dependencies (Quilley, 2013). The task is to build figurations that are no longer grounded in growth, yet still complex, pacified, and globally interdependent: modern societies, not *Gemeinschaften*, but with shortened socio-metabolic chains and post-extractivist nature–society relations (Schmelzer et al., 2022). Understood through Elias's framework, this would require rebalancing the relations among the three complexes rather than simply expanding or reducing control in any one of

them. Qualitative transformations could move the triad in different directions: ecogenesis toward forms of reduced domination and post-growth compatible society–nature relations, while psychogenesis and sociogenesis would need to develop qualitatively new forms of coordination, solidaristic identification, and democratically planned interdependence. Such transformations would alter not the *amount* of control but the *relations, orientations, and modalities* through which the three complexes co-evolve. Historically, no such formation has existed – and the remaining timeframe is narrowing rapidly.

The challenge ahead is not merely to critique what Elias analysed as the "civilising" process or to invert its values, but to transform its trajectory: to ask what kinds of figurations, institutions, and subjectivities can sustain human and more-than-human flourishing in a world of ecological limits. This requires a renewed sociological imagination – one that takes seriously both the historical depth of Elias's insights and the material urgency of the planetary crisis. Integrating Elias's sociology of knowledge also highlights that post-growth transformations must cultivate not only new socio-ecological relations but also new forms of reflexive detachment – collective capacities for understanding, navigating and democratically planning dense interdependencies under conditions of ecological and societal limits (Brand et al., 2021; Elias, 2003; Hofferberth et al., 2025). If, as Elias insisted, civilising and decivilising processes are always intertwined, then our task is not to abandon the project (even though there are good reasons for abandoning the term, see Duerr, 2005), but to reclaim and reshape it for a world beyond growth. While Elias's theory is rooted in European modernity, future work must address its Eurocentric and androcentric limitations by integrating feminist, postcolonial, and pluriversal perspectives (Kothari et al., 2019; Oliveira, 2021).

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