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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

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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).*

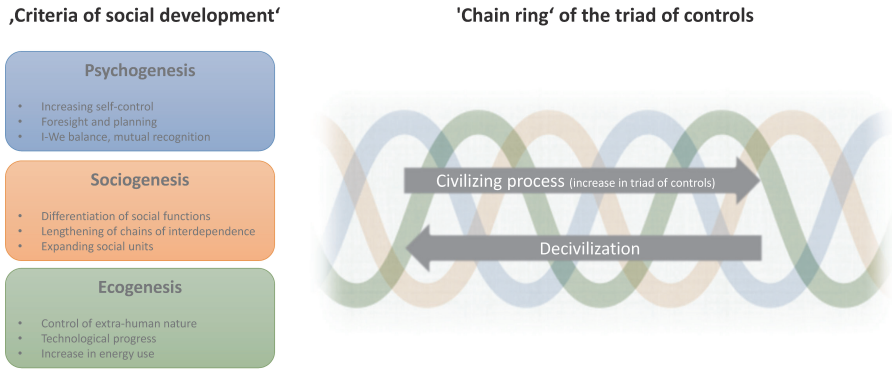
This triad provides a powerful analytical tool for observing long-term shifts in the relationship between society, subjectivity, and nature. Crucially, the three forms of control co-evolve and are interdependent – one side cannot develop without the others. They are not just controls, but also social 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?

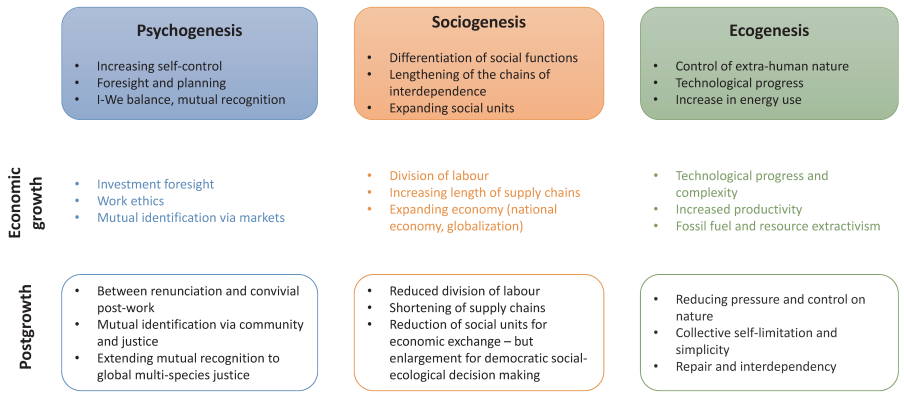
At first glance, the rise of capitalist economic growth can be interpreted as a paradigmatic case of the civilising process. The developments Elias identified as central to civilisation – the lengthening and intensification of social relations, interdependencies and exchange, the expansion of foresight 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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