

# Social Standards of Self-Restraint in World Politics<sup>1</sup>

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The process sociologist, Norbert Elias (2012:89) maintained that Caxton's comment in his fifteenth century treatise on courtesy that 'things that were once permitted are now forbidden' could stand as the 'motto' for the European civilizing process that was to come. The main course of development which would revolve around the formation of modern states and the significant pacification of the relevant societies shaped different related spheres of social interaction. According to Elias, they included the standards that governed bodily functions, changes in table manners and (of particular importance for the present discussion) shifts in emotional responses to cruelty and violence. His writings were less consistent on the subject of whether actions that were once permitted in relations between states have become forbidden in the most recent phase of the modern states-system. The main objective of the following discussion is to synthesise elements of process sociology and the English School in order to determine whether the current era is distinctive if not unique. The paper begins with a brief discussion of Elias's reflections on international relations.

## **The 'Civilizing Process' and International Politics**

Throughout his writings, Elias portrayed international politics as 'the realm of recurrence and repetition', to use an expression made famous by Martin Wight (1966). The argument was that no higher monopoly of power can restrain separate states whose self-reliance for security and survival invariably breeds distrust and mutual suspicion, and whose behaviour in the heat of particular conflicts has often been characterised by 'high fantasy content' world-views that have resulted in unrestrained violence against demonised adversaries (see the discussion of double-bind processes in Elias 2007:162ff, 171ff). Relations between states in recent times were described as having many of the same qualities as interactions between social groups in the age of humanity's alleged 'barbarism' (Elias 2013a:215). There were no fundamental differences between the use of poisoned arrows in early warfare to kill or maim enemies and the willingness to employ the technology of 'mass incineration' in the nuclear era. The main contrast is that the members of (internally) highly-pacified societies today regard themselves as considerably more civilized and restrained than their 'savage' and supposedly more war-prone 'tribal' ancestors. In his reflections on the nuclear era, Elias (2010a) contended that the sense of belonging to more civilized societies might not save the superpowers from all-out war (see van den Bergh (1992) for a different interpretation from within the standpoint of process sociology of the role of nuclear weapons in encouraging 'reciprocal restraint').

Elias maintained that the modern states-system might suffer the fate of its predecessors where the great powers that survived earlier 'elimination struggles' descended into 'hegemonic wars' that were fuelled by 'hegemonic intoxication' (Elias 2010a:101). In at least one respect, however, the contemporary phase of world politics appeared to be unique. Modern 'civilized' attitudes to violence – in particular repugnance towards cruelty – had led to widespread revulsion against genocide. The interweaving of societies meant that more and more people were aware of distant suffering and felt 'a duty to do something about the misery of other human groups' even though global commitments to eradicate poverty remained limited (Elias 2013a:29). Rising levels of global interconnectedness had created some incentives and pressures to tame selfish ambitions and to cooperate to deal with common difficulties. 'Unions of states' had the potential to replace 'individual states' as 'the dominant

social unit' although national attachments continued to exercise a 'drag effect' on efforts to build powerful international organisations (Elias 2010b:147, 181, 195–7; Elias 2011:165ff).

Those different comments about world politics suggest that the modern states-system is very finely-balanced between opposing social and political tendencies. Elias (2011:17, 174) did not exclude the possibility that societies will work out how to live together non-violently as a result of inter-generational learning processes over the remaining period in which human life can be sustained on the planet, assuming that humanity does not destroy itself first. But what is true of 'civilized' groups was also valid for what there is in the way of a global civilizing process<sup>2</sup>. In stable, civilized societies where the state's monopoly of physical power is the ultimate constraint on the use of force, the restraints on violence can break down quickly if people become anxious about their security or survival. The risks are especially great in international politics where one of the central preconditions of the modern European civilizing process - the existence of a monopoly of power that can punish transgressions of the dominant social standards of restraint - is absent. Civilizing restraints on violent harm could be expected to remain brittle in the relations between political communities that are subject to the tensions that were described earlier (Elias 2010b:199ff). There had been an unmistakable general long-term trend towards the social and political integration of the species and reason to believe that what has come to be known as globalisation is still at an early stage of development. But the 'immense process of integration' that the species has undergone was not guaranteed to survive. A 'dominant disintegration process' could emerge that would throw some achievements in taming international politics into reverse (Elias 2010b:148, 202).

Elias's reflections on world politics frame the following preliminary discussion of how far the contemporary international system is different from its predecessors, in part because of the 'civilized' nature of many of its constituent political parts. The first task is to consider how closer connections between process sociology and the English School analysis of international society can contribute to solving the puzzle that has been posed. The society of states which Elias's writings did not consider is critical for understanding agreements as well as disputes about what is permissible and forbidden in world politics. The second part of the following discussion considers three distinctive features of the contemporary society of states. They are the taming of the great powers, the expansion of international society, and the emergence of cosmopolitan standards of self-restraint. A third and final task arises in response to Elias's tendency to focus on the absence of an equivalent to the 'civilizing process' in international relations. It is to lay the foundations for an explanation of a modern global civilizing process (in the technical sense of the term) that is unprecedented in the history of the Western states-systems.

### **The Civilizing Process and International Society**

Elias maintained that the state's monopolisation of violence and taxation imposed external constraints on conduct that led to domestic pacification, to higher levels of interconnectedness, and to new forms of attunement between members of the same society. He repeatedly emphasised that there has been little evidence of equivalent developmental patterns in the relations between societies. His writings do not contain a conception of 'the anarchical society' – of shared interests in preserving international order that result in standards of restraint in the absence of a higher monopoly of power (Bull 2001). There was no systematic discussion of how the society of states was linked with long-term civilizing processes within and across its constituent parts, or of how the European civilizing process had been expressed in, and also shaped by, the core institutions of international society.

Many of the rituals and protocols of modern diplomacy are a product of the court society that Elias (2006a) regarded as the key to core features of the civilizing process – the absolutist court of Louis XIV. But other institutions of international society such as the contrived balance of power, as well as the belief that the great powers have special responsibilities for maintaining international order, are examples of agreed standards of self-restraint that are evidence of some parallels to intra-societal civilizing processes. Many of the 'civilizing' dynamics that may emerge whenever people are

forced together in longer webs of social interconnectedness are evident in the rise and development of societies of states. They include, first, a shift in the relative power of the fear of coercion and the restraints that people impose on each other and on themselves because of the inner compulsion of 'conscience' and notions of right conduct; second, the emergence of social standards that demand more intensive forms of self-regulation and make the control of violent and aggressive impulses critical for social esteem; and third, rising levels of mutual dependence that create incentives to develop more detached and realist understandings of other people and also to become more agreeable in dealings with others that can pave the way for a major widening of 'the scope of emotional identification' (Fletcher 1997:82). The analysis of the European civilizing process therefore opens the way to a comprehensive interpretation of several interconnected long-term trends that stretch from the early stages of state-formation in the West and the emergence of distinctive diplomatic institutions through to the globalisation of the Western model of political community and the emergence of the contemporary universal society of states. They should be regarded as the inter-related parts of one overall pattern of development that has affected humanity as a whole. Within that framework it then becomes possible to explore the extent to which 'things that were once permitted are now forbidden' in the relations between states.

### *The Taming of the Great Powers*

One of the central themes in the study of the civilizing process – namely that the dominant tendencies evolved 'behind the backs' of people who were pulled in one direction or another by social forces that no-one controlled – has particular relevance for understanding the central power relations in any international system (Elias 2007:77). In the modern period, the great powers came under greater pressure to recognise that they were locked together 'in the production line of the same machinery' with the result that 'sudden and radical change in one sector' could cause generalised disruption that no national government could ignore (Elias 2012:353). Self-interested reactions to lengthening entanglements - driven by fear and suspicion – as well as geopolitical rivalry and military conflict often predominated. But increasingly destructive warfare also led to recognition amongst the great powers that international order could not be left to chance but had to be preserved through mutual restraint, diplomatic consultation and collective action.

Detailed historical works have explained how peace settlements at the end of major wars shaped the long-term trend towards the greater collective management of the international system (Clark 2005:65 and 84; Osiander 1994). The European states realised that they were no longer what Vattel ([1758] 1863: III, iii) described as 'a confused heap' with little reason to concern themselves with 'the fate of others', but had an overriding interest in being attuned to one another in a great 'republic' that was responsible for preserving the balance of power and for avoiding hegemonic conflicts. Following the Napoleonic wars, the major powers supported the principle that they should use their combined authority as the 'great responsables' to guide the international system through its inevitable political crises. In a sequence of post-war settlements, their successors constructed constitutional frameworks that embedded expectations of 'strategic restraint'; they attempted to reach shared understandings of the forms of national self-control that were essential if international order was to survive and if international society was to function smoothly (Ikenberry (2001); van Benthem van den Bergh (1992:30ff).

What has been called the obsolescence of force in the relations between the great powers is one phase of a longer civilizing process in which larger territorial monopolies of power became more dangerous to each other; they were pushed towards recognising the need to act in concert to bring the struggles for power and security that tied them together under at least partial collective control. Various peace conferences and the proliferation of permanent international institutions are examples of how parallels to intra-societal developments with respect to 'social constraints towards self-constraint' appeared in the relations between states; they are evidence of the 'spread of foresight and

restraint' (which Elias 2012:418ff regarded as a central element of the whole European civilizing process) across greater distances. The former have been important for the acquisition of higher levels of mutual attunement and for developing standards of self-restraint that partly reconciled different national conceptions of what is permissible and forbidden in the relations between sovereign peoples. Such conferences and institutions have been the global manifestation of what Elias (2013b:268) regarded as the principal 'direction' of any civilizing process, namely the willingness to resolve 'conflicts and disagreements on the basis of jointly acknowledged rules, instead of by violence'.

The twentieth century is often described as one of the most violent in human history, but the Second World War was a turning-point in the evolution of international society. The subsequent 'long peace' between the great powers represents the renewal of an earlier long-term trend towards a 'civilianisation' or 'civilizing' of the military domain that had been interrupted by short-lived, failed experiments in totalitarian rule that were initiated by regimes that displayed an ambivalent relationship with, if not outright contempt for, European standards of civilization (Kershaw 2005). In the industrial regions of the world, the past few decades have witnessed the re-emergence of the social trend that was celebrated by many Enlightenment thinkers for whom glorifying war and cherishing military values were the hallmarks of the 'obsolete' and 'barbaric' age that commercial society seemed to be destined to eradicate (van Doorn 1984:44-5). Echoing earlier themes in the British liberal tradition including themes that were central to the writings of Sir Norman Angell, some argued in the late 1980s that warfare was about to suffer the same fate as slavery and duelling, and to fall out of favour because of shared convictions about what it means to be a 'civilized' people (Ray 1989; also Mueller (1989:217) for the thesis that war is 'immoral, repulsive and uncivilized' as well as 'ineffective' and 'futile'). Such standpoints rehabilitated perspectives on world politics that seemed to have been swept aside by the triumph of realist or neo-realist pessimism. Early in the twentieth century, Sir Norman Angell (1912:20ff, 272-3) argued that 'the possibility of one part injuring another without injury to itself [had] been diminished'. A general dampening of the 'impulses to injury' was taking place as part of the same 'civilizing' of drives that had already led to the abolition of forms of violence that included the aristocratic duel as well as state torture that had provided 'public amusement' (Angell *ibid*:209-10). Such ideas were discredited in the inter-war period but, because of the post-Second World War 'long peace' and rapidly rising levels of human interconnectedness, they have proved to be insightful reflections on long-term potentials that distinguish the modern states-system from its immediate predecessors.

Wight speculated – and Elias broadly agreed with his judgment – that, if the past is any guide, then states-systems appear to be destined to end in violence either as a result of internal elimination contests that lead to empire or because of conquest by an eternal power. The modern society of states may prove to be the great exception. Recent trends suggest that there is a high probability that 'the frequency of war will sharply decline' in future as far as the relations between the major powers are concerned ((see Lebow (2010a:268), also Lebow (2010b), although there is no guarantee that it will disappear entirely (Jervis 2011). The nuclear revolution had a 'civilizing effect' by pushing the superpowers to settle major differences non-violently. The idea that industrial states can resolve major differences by force is now absurd although violence in relations with other societies seems likely to survive (Buzan 2009). With the unique change in the relative power of economic as opposed to geopolitical interconnectedness (Buzan and Little 2000), the traditional warrior codes that valued displays of male courage or exhibitions of military prowess have lost their earlier significance as a source of personal meaning and as a means of securing social esteem. The great majority of people in highly-pacified societies attempt to realise such aspirations through unwarlike commercial, administrative and related pursuits (Lebow 2010a:268). Unprecedented social standards of self-restraint with respect to the use of force are now in place. The relationship between violence and civilization has been transformed at the level of relations between the great powers.

*The Expansion of International Society*

The expansion of the international society of states from Europe to the rest of the world is a second fundamental transformation of the most recent phase of world politics. With the successive waves of colonial expansion, non-European peoples were incorporated within political and economic structures that were suffused with pernicious assumptions about the racial and cultural superiority of 'civilized' peoples. The belief that international society was an exclusive 'European club' was defended on the grounds that non-European societies were less 'civilized'. Their gradual acceptance as social equals – a process that is still far from complete – was part of a profound alteration of the course of the European civilizing process.

In terms of its membership, contemporary international society is the first universal society of states in human history, although its core political and economic institutions are far from 'post-European' or 'post-Western'. They remain biased towards Western values and interests that reflect the continuing influence of related standards of civilization. It is important, however, to stress the long history of disputes about European conceptions of civilization. European societies had little compunction in violating 'civilized' standards of self-restraint in relations with 'savages'. The double standard of morality in which one ethical code applied within the state and another in relations with other states existed in a more extreme form in the relations with Europe's outsiders where genocide, economic exploitation and cultural humiliation were widespread (Elias 2008a:113ff). So great were the power disparities between imperial overlords and colonial peoples that the former could often behave as they pleased, ignoring the imperatives of conscience in other spheres. There was little or no incentive to think from the standpoint of others or to make political concessions to people who could offer little in return. The process of civilization licensed the removal of many of the taboos against violence that were observed in relations between Europeans but, especially during the European Enlightenment, it also provided the moral and cultural resources for condemning those who disregarded 'civilized' constraints within their own societies as they proceeded to dominate, exterminate, displace, enslave and in other ways harm subjugated peoples. The crucial contrasting standpoint was that imperial cruelties clashed with the normative ideals that were integral to the collective identities of 'civilized' peoples. Demands for the observance of new standards of restraint in relations with the colonies developed in tandem with struggles to organise societies around the universalistic and egalitarian dimensions of the civilizing process.

The nineteenth-century 'standard of civilization' embodied the peculiar ambiguities of the civilizing process; it is one of the best illustrations of its connection with the structure and expansion of international society. The doctrine reasserted a right to colonise, judge and transform colonised societies while holding out the promise, on the assumption that imperial rule would ensure progress and civilization for 'backward' regions, of eventual membership of the European society of states (Gong 1984; Suzuki 2009). From the early to mid-nineteenth century, the dominant principles of domestic and international legitimacy were shaped by the conviction that the overseas empires should be governed, to a greater extent than ever before, by constraints on violent and non-violent harm that were the hallmarks of a 'civilized' existence (Crawford 2002). Images of permissible and forbidden forms of colonial administration shifted radically with the result that the constituent parts of international society came to believe that it was no longer acceptable to take colonial territories by force or to seize, transport and sell other peoples. A major transformation of attitudes to the relationship between violence and civilization took place in the relations between dominant and subordinate societies.

One of the distinguishing features of the modern states-system is the notable, but incomplete, achievements that have occurred in weakening the contrasts between the 'civilized' and the 'barbaric'. A major difference is evident in changed attitudes towards displays of supposed racial or cultural superiority over others, towards acts of humiliation and stigmatisation, and towards other manifestations of the conviction that others do not deserve the equal respect that has come to be

regarded as the birthright of all human beings. For 'civilized' peoples, it is clearly no longer morally acceptable to invoke differences of race and civilization to license various traditional forms of violent and non-violent harm against 'natural inferiors'. To that extent at least, there has been an enlargement of the boundaries of moral concern and a partial widening of the scope of emotional identification between peoples. But such advances are uneven and limited. The speed with which dichotomies between the 'civilised' and the 'savage' emerged in the aftermath of 9/11 is a reminder of how quickly colonial imaginaries can be rekindled under conditions of fear and insecurity. The tenacity of such pernicious contrasts must be understood in long-term perspective. They are the cultural relics of earlier phases of the process of civilization that included the divisions between the 'civil' and 'uncivil' in the early stages of European state-formation, in the successive waves of 'medieval' or 'early modern' outward expansion, and in the nineteenth century colonial era where the modern society of states was shaped by powerful derogatory assumptions about 'less advanced' peoples who blocked the path of their 'civilized' superiors (Keal 2003).

Those developments explain how a catastrophic 'loss of meaning' led to 'deep mourning' and collective distress and 'depression' from which colonised peoples have not recovered, and which may still be poorly understood (Elias 2013a:83-4). Contemporary 'anti-Western' political movements that proclaim the superiority of 'traditional' belief-systems are an unsurprising reaction to a European civilizing process that legitimised – and was shaped by – colonial violence and calculated strategies of humiliation (Kull 2011). Their attitudes and behaviour must be considered in conjunction with the changing power balances between European and non-European peoples that found expression in the pressures on colonial subjects to acknowledge their racial and cultural 'inferiority', and to accept their absolute dependence on European societies for access to 'civilization' and progress. Those most recent manifestations of the 'cultural revolt against the West' that has transformed the society of states cannot be dismissed then as 'pathological' world-views that supposedly demonstrate, as stated in the 'new barbarian thesis', an inherent cultural inability to adapt to modern social structures and belief-systems; they are descended from earlier struggles to win respect for 'traditional' values and customs (see Jacoby 2011; Mishra 2012; Pasha 2012). Crucial political challenges result from the invalidation of earlier predictions about the voluntary acceptance of European 'civilized' standards across all non-European regions. The quest for a global agreement on standards of self-restraint must now start from very different premises and with a deeper awareness of the need for cultural justice in the context of widening differences that include revived politico-religious attachments (Shapcott 2001, Shani 2014).

Various 'emancipation struggles' in the West reduced the social gradient between the former colonial and colonised peoples as well as between rulers and ruled, men and women, and adults and children to some extent (Elias 2013a:28). The former included campaigns to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and chattel slavery, to end apartheid and conceptions of racial and cultural supremacy more generally, and to protect individuals and minorities from violent and non-violent harm whether at the hands of their own government or perpetrated by external enemies in times of war. As integral parts of that process, anti-colonial struggles to gain inclusion in the society of states were shaped by multiple forces including the reality that many 'first generation' national leaders were educated in European metropolitan universities and attracted or exposed to claims that the progressive ideals of freedom and equality were hallmarks of 'civilization'. Crucial was the awareness of an old tension within the European civilizing process between those who believed that 'no holds were barred' in relations with 'savages' and their political opponents who maintained that peoples who committed colonial cruelties forfeited the right to call themselves civilised.

Counter-hegemonic movements that resisted European imperialism revealed how the participants in emancipation struggles can acquire power and secure legitimacy by exposing tensions within the dominant ideologies and by weakening the power base of traditional elites that claim to live by high ethical ideals. Political and ideological struggles between superpowers that were anxious to flourish their anti-colonial credentials in the struggle to win Third World support were also important factors in the expansion of international society. Changing conceptions of what was permissible and

forbidden increased the reputational costs of trying to hold onto the overseas empires in an era when the political resolve and material capabilities of European governments had declined (Crawford 2002). Anti-imperial emancipation struggles prevailed because major changes in the power balance between Europe and its colonies - and between the traditional European great powers and the superpowers - coincided with the collapse of the moral defence of the empires that had been central to the European civilizing process.

International society is no longer supported by a widespread belief that the constituent members belong to a single civilization (as opposed to being caught up in a Western-initiated civilizing process). Process sociology contains valuable resources for diagnosing the current condition that can be described as the unfinished transition from the conviction that a single civilization - whether European, Chinese, Japanese and so on - is surrounded by 'inferior' groups to the recognition that multiple cultures and civilizations (or civilizing processes) now face each other as moral equals. Different peoples may be at a very early stage in understanding how they developed through diverse, but always inter-related, civilizing processes that have become ever more intricately interwoven. The dawning awareness of those realities which is the manifestation of shifting power relations is a central feature of the 'most recent phase' of civilizing processes in the West and in other regions that have undergone related developments. The global expansion of international society is similar to other phases of human history in which peoples who had been forced together confronted challenging questions about whether they could agree on standards of restraint that enabled them to co-exist amicably. As in the past, the upshot of social and political inequalities is that incentives to agree to, and comply with, specific standards of restraint are distributed unevenly.

#### *Cosmopolitan Standards of Restraint*

Because of its association with notions of cultural superiority the idea of civilization has lost its prominent position in the ethical defence of cosmopolitan political projects (Jackson 2000:408). But various legal developments including the rise of the humanitarian laws of war from the middle of the nineteenth century and the war crimes tribunals at the end of the Second World War were explicitly connected with the conscience of 'civilized' peoples. Western societies have been the driving-force behind the globalisation of 'civilized' liberal harm conventions that command widespread but far from universal support. Many contemporary Western political initiatives are testimony to the continuing influence of nineteenth-century liberal-internationalist convictions such as the thesis that the spread of liberalism will promote world peace. Empirical support for the contention that liberal states have a special relationship with each other - because they have broken with the age-old practice of using force to resolve major disputes - has been linked with the conviction that it is possible to transform international society as a whole by globalising human rights, supporting democracy promotion, and universalising the commitment to free trade (see Gat 2006:ch. 16).

Whether or not that conjecture proves to be optimistic, it is clear that Enlightenment suppositions about the moderating effect of commerce, and related anticipations of the positive evaluation of 'ordinary life', are closer to being realised in the liberal sphere of peace than in other parts of international society. Liberal optimism about the possibility of transforming world politics so that all peoples can live non-violently rests on the assumption that, despite their cultural and other differences, most people hope to prolong life for as long as possible without the burden of unnecessary or relievable pain and suffering. The universal human rights culture and international criminal law represent a victory for the liberal belief that, despite cultural and other differences, most people wish to be free from unjustifiable harm and eradicable suffering. There are always two sides to such social processes. Societies that find gratuitous violence disturbing and distasteful, and that no longer regard warfare as central to their collective identity or to masculine self-esteem, may find it difficult to understand peoples that 'lag behind' because of 'irrational' attachments to violent struggle. An apparent inability to resolve differences peacefully may be regarded as evidence of atavism and irrationalism. It is a short step to exasperation with groups that seemingly cannot be assisted and who

are – for many ‘civilized’ peoples - not worth trying to help (Linklater 2014). The ‘new barbarism thesis’ refers precisely to supposedly atavistic cultural traits that are presumed to explain why ‘pre-modern’ peoples are prone to commit acts of violence that have been eliminated from – and are often represented as an inexplicable assault on, and danger to - ‘civilized’ societies (Jacoby 2011).

Analyses of liberal pacification have not been connected with the examination of the civilizing process but that phenomenon is a perfect illustration of how ‘civilized’ attitudes to violent harm (that influenced campaigns to abolish public execution and the death penalty as well as judicial torture and associated cruel punishments) have reshaped international society. It is important to add that the analysis of the European civilizing process reveals that liberal attitudes to violent harm must be seen in conjunction with the compulsions of interdependence and with changes in the ways in which people came to be bound together. State formation, the shifting balance of power between external and inner constraints, and changing levels of repugnance towards cruelty and violence, evolved as part of the same process of civilization. Normative shifts did not precede those other transformations, and they were not the principal driving force behind them, but nor were they mere garlands thrown over, and designed to conceal, the self-interested behaviour of the dominant social strata. Moral concerns about how ‘civilized’ societies should conduct their foreign policy are an offshoot of the processes that forced peoples together and confronted them with the challenge of learning how to co-exist peacefully. As argued earlier, the normative shifts that are part of a modern international ethic have taken place in large measure of the urgent need to control revolutions in destructive capabilities; they have had more to do with controlling such dangers than with promoting emotional identification between peoples as an absolute end in itself, although that is an intrinsically-valuable ideal for many people and a major influence on their behaviour. The major power’s involvement in embedding a principle of humaneness in international society has occurred however not because modern peoples are ‘better’ than their ancestors but because they have different sensibilities that reflect amongst other things the dangers they imposed on one another in the age of total warfare.

The liberal peace and efforts to promote liberal-democratic values are evidence of how the ethical sensibilities that distinguish highly-pacified societies from male warrior cultures have globalised a unique civilizing process and led to an international society that is radically different from earlier states-systems in the West. Collective efforts to spread liberal principles demonstrate the part that the ‘harm principle’ has played in promoting the complex interweaving of domestic and international principles of legitimacy (Linklater 2011:ch. 2). As noted earlier, various international legal conventions are testimony to its influence. They include the humanitarian laws of warfare that were established to reduce ‘superfluous injury’ and ‘unnecessary suffering’, the universal human rights culture, the recent notion of the ‘responsibility to protect’ and, finally international criminal law that is anchored in the liberal tenet that individuals – whether military leaders and personnel under their command – will be held personally responsible for violating the laws of war.<sup>3</sup>

The innovations that have just been described express collective sensibilities that are closely associated with the liberal ‘harm principle’ and specifically with the moral conviction that ‘cruelty is the worst thing we do’. There is no better example of the limitations of the thesis that little of substance has changed in the relations between states over the centuries, and no better illustration of how the idea of civilization has been consciously deployed to transform the dominant understandings about forms of violence that are permissible or forbidden. The point has been made that agreements on the relevant standards is often precarious. Realism provides the important reminder that ‘military necessity’ can lead to the collapse of global harm conventions that are designed to minimise suffering in war. The aerial bombardment of German and Japanese cities during the Second World War demonstrated how quickly ‘civilized’ societies could relax the social taboos against mass slaughter when they calculated that such behaviour was necessary for victory, or for survival in the case of British policy. ‘Civilized’ societies have weakened similar restraints on force in several conflicts in non-Western regions in the more recent period. Even so, it is important to move beyond ‘process-reducing’ perspectives such as neo-realism to identify and explain the changing standards of self-restraint that are embedded in the evolving practices of international society. One consequence is that the state’s

freedom of manoeuvre and ability to escape international accountability have declined notably. That change cannot be reversed without first overcoming significant public resistance to superfluous injury that is now a significant part of the social habitus. Although the phenomenon has not been discussed in the following terms, greater public concern about the indiscriminate and disproportionate killing of civilians has been a major feature of Western (and also non-Western) civilizing processes in recent years (Bellamy 2012; Thomas 2001). But as discussed earlier, public tolerance of civilian casualties remains high when it is believed that national military personnel will be killed or injured in unacceptable numbers, and particularly when 'advanced' peoples think they may be engaged in a struggle with untameable 'atavistic' social forces that do not observe 'civilized' constraints.

Contemporary international society has turned an important corner by granting cosmopolitan standards of self-restraint a central place in its principal global harm conventions. That transformation reflects the moral belief that the institutions of international society are to be judged not only by how far they help to maintain order between the great powers but also by the extent to which they address the needs of vulnerable peoples (Clark 2013). The whole movement illustrates the unprecedented influence of the idea of human equality on international relations (Buzan and Little 2000:340). It supports the claim that 'revulsion against the use of violence is growing' (Elias 2013c: 226), and the contention that at no other time 'have so many people had so high a threshold of sensitivity in relation to...acts of physical violence' (Elias 2013d: 253). Cosmopolitan harm conventions that affirm the equal right of every person to be free from cruelty, unnecessary violence, and degrading and humiliating treatment irrespective of citizenship, nationality or ethnicity, or race and gender are core elements of a global ethic with universalistic and egalitarian underpinnings that had little influence in earlier periods. The usual caveats apply and no assumption is made that those achievements are permanent or that further advances are inevitable. What is distinctive is the existence of various regimes that encourage compliance with standards of restraint in the context of international anarchy (Keohane 1984). Various global non-governmental organisations that defend humanitarian responsibilities before the court of 'world opinion' have also been influential in applying pressure on states to comply with global legal and ethical standards (Stearns 2005). By drawing public attention to excessive violence and by seeking to shame or punish those who breach harm conventions that embody current cosmopolitan principles of legitimacy, those associations have ensured that the retreat from the relevant standards of self-restraints does not go unchallenged.

The liberal civilizing offensive emerged in particular historical circumstances and in the context of specific social and power conflicts. For example, in the bipolar era the promotion of the universal human rights culture was closely linked with the United States' defence of civilized 'Western values' in its rivalry with the 'totalitarian' Soviet Union (Clark 2007:ch. 6). Such political dynamics will continue to influence global civilizing offensives and lead to questions about the authenticity of supposedly universal, emancipatory projects (Peterson 2013). As already noted, some authors stress major parallels between colonial, 'civilizing' missions and recent 'transformative invasions' that have combined 'humanitarian', liberal-democratic projects with the objective of securing social and political outcomes that suit great power interests (Feichtinger, Malinowski and Richards 2012). The significant achievements of the expansion of international society have been discussed. The contemporary prominence of humanitarian endeavours reflects failures of that process, specifically the violent consequences of state-formation and 'failed states' in several regions. Many Western societies have promoted state-building or re-building initiatives that reflect earlier phases of their civilizing process and a continuing desire to promote its globalisation. Western responses to crises of the state in former colonised regions provide a window onto the current phase of a civilizing process that first developed in Western Europe. Debates about humanitarian intervention, efforts to reconstruct war-torn societies, and measures to ensure democracy promotion and support for human rights are all connected with that earlier process of civilization. They are manifestations of changing standards of civilization.

A recurrent criticism of cosmopolitan standards of self-restraint is that the liberal-concentration on controlling the state's monopoly powers has authorised a broad relaxation of constraints on global business corporations and a corresponding emancipation of market forces.

Conduct that was once permitted in relations between states is now checked or forbidden; actions that were once restrained in the economic domain are not only permissible but have been widely encouraged. The constraints of conscience are less evident there. A parallel argument is that achievements in restraining the state's capacity to inflict violent harm on its own citizens and in its external relations have not been accompanied by collective efforts to protect people from the levels of transnational economic and environmental harm that advances in global pacification have made possible. The contention is that the liberal project has not recognised the need for, and has often resisted, efforts to create cosmopolitan restraints that keep pace with the globalisation of economic and social relations. That political shortcoming is not unconnected with domestic unrest and instability in several societies, but the dangers are not limited to them. Long-term dangers of global social and political instability – and concomitant pressures on restraint on violence – cannot be ignored. For the critics, Western liberal complacency compromises a 'civilizing' project which is deemed to be little more than an instrument for perpetuating forms of Western political and economic hegemony that fail large sections of the world's population. Their standpoint highlights the problem of 'organised irresponsibility', an expression that refers to permissive legal frameworks that ensure the 'non-liability' of actors with respect to, *inter alia*, unintended harm to others or negligent damage to the physical environment (Veitch 2007:114ff). Such standpoints are central to a more comprehensive analysis of violence and civilization than the current discussion can provide.

### **Towards an Explanation of Global Civilizing Processes**

The main objective of this section is to take some preliminary steps towards an explanation of civilizing processes in modern world politics. A useful starting-point is the link between state formation and the process of civilization. Stable, state monopolies of power have been critical for the existence of relatively-high levels of personal security in complex societies; they have also been the *sine qua non* of international civilizing processes. The modern state contributed to a global civilizing process by replacing mercenary forces that caused human misery by living off the land with more disciplined, professional militaries that were more answerable to the standards of self-restraint in 'civilized' societies. Similar points are evident in English School arguments about 'the state's positive role in world affairs' which stressed that successful state formation simultaneously solves some of the problems that people have had in living together non-violently but also creates new ones (Bull 1979).

The effective monopolisation of coercive power removed some of the dangers that people face when they relied on themselves for their security. It disarmed and disabled violent factions; it imposed external constraints on rival groups and fostered the recognition that political compromise was necessary to maintain a public order that was in their long-term interests. Where a strong *we-identity* did develop within the state, it was often connected with violence towards domestic enemies that included physical expulsion, a strategy that risked external intervention by supporters (Elias 2006b; Rae 2002). Early modern European states addressed the problem by embedding a principle of religious toleration in the Westphalian settlement. They understood that international order depends on a delicate balance between asserting sovereign rights to political independence and supporting international standards of self-restraint that contributed to peaceful co-existence.

The existence of multiple power monopolies creates a high probability of struggles for power and security as well as attendant dangers that major disagreements will be resolved by violence. The breakdown of military discipline in warfare has been one reason for the perpetration of what have come to be known as 'war crimes'. Even in the case of disciplined armies, major atrocities can take place. What are the pressures and incentives that encourage self-restraint? The most obvious factor is reciprocity. As various informal and formal agreements to exchange prisoners of war have revealed, the fragile reed of reciprocity is often the key to observing specific standards of self-restraint. What has been described as the 'durability' of social encounters – the likelihood that the different parties will 'meet again' – underpinned the 'civilizing' practice of prisoner exchange in Europe (Parker 2002:161, 167). Each side understood that the return of its military personnel depended on mutual restraint;

each understood that slaughtering prisoners would provoke retaliation and retribution. Reciprocity depended on a relatively even distribution of power between interdependent groups. The corollary is exemplified by the relations between European colonisers and indigenous peoples. Where there are serious power inequalities – where the weaker parties cannot retaliate or withhold significant benefits when they are harmed – then the stronger groups have a greatly-reduced incentive to exercise self-restraint ((Cell (1979); also Keohane (1989)). That is a crucial theme in process sociology and in the English School analysis of the importance of the balance of power for the survival of the restraints that define international society.

Prisoner exchange depends on restraints on violent behaviour that may spring from anger and the thirst for revenge. It is connected with the ability to replace highly-emotive behaviour that offers immediate gratification with a more rational, long-term, approach to a shared predicament. As noted above, the realisation that states are part of the same 'production line', and cannot behave exactly as they please without a high probability of costs that are equivalent to the harms they cause, injected 'civilizing' dynamics into relations between the great powers. The sheer scale of the destruction that could be inflicted in periods of warfare had a taming effect. Nowhere was the survival value of the human capacity for restraining violence more evident than in the bipolar era. It also revealed that international harm conventions that embody shared understandings about the imperative of controlling the use of force invariably depend on a balance of military power where no state can behave as it pleases without the fear of violent reprisal (Dunne 2003).

The English School has made an important distinction between a 'fortuitous' balance of power that is the unplanned outcome of geopolitical competition and struggles for hegemony, and a 'contrived' balance of power that represents a major advance in great power cooperation (Bull 2001: 101). The contrived balance of power is an example of how a high level of self-regulation and self-restraint can emerge for reasons of enlightened self-interest. During the Cold War years, unprecedented destructive force increased 'the social constraints towards self-constraint' that was fundamental to the contrived equilibrium of the balance of terror. Neo-liberal scholars have provided an interesting variant on such analyses of the incentives for exercising self-control by arguing that international agreements are durable when states must face each other again and again in international organisations that were established to manage 'complex interdependence'. Analysts have described how states can restrain each other by shaming actual or potential defectors from cooperative mechanisms and by imposing tangible reputational costs (Keohane 1984). The discussion points to significant shifts in the relative power of external and internal restraints – in the reduced importance of the fear of physical coercion in creating incentives to exercise self-restraint and the increased influence of pressures to conform to global standards that societies impose on themselves and on each other within international organisations. There is a useful link to be made with the analysis of the civilizing effects of national and global 'meeting regimes' in process sociology (Van Vree 1999).

Wight (1977: ch. 1) argued that societies that regard themselves as belonging to the same civilization – one centred on the rights of sovereign rulers in the case of modern Europe – have certain common orientations towards the social world that facilitate the quest for agreements on basic principles of international co-existence. A shared civilizational identity may enhance their prospects of creating 'meeting regimes' and accepting certain standards of restraint. Wight added that simply being part of the same civilization provides no guarantee that state will abide by 'civilized' standards, especially when dealing with enemies. Even so, it was often the case that what states have accomplished in the way of creating international or cosmopolitan harm conventions has been influenced by the extent to which they identified with the same civilization, as was the case with the Greek city-states and with European societies prior to the expansion of international society. A shared 'civilized' identity can have a restraining role on acts of violence that are regarded as 'barbaric' and as the hallmark of 'savages'. A double standard of morality may exist however. During the Second World War, for example, German armed forces respected certain standards of restraint with respect to the

treatment of prisoners of war that were captured on the Western front. In relations with the Russian 'barbarian' on the East, the 'civilized' rules did not apply.

The contrast with 'savages' is critical. Social identities that are anchored in identification with the same civilization rest on cultural dichotomies that expose outsiders to the danger of extreme violence. 'Civilized' identities may have encouraged evenly-balanced societies to place controls on violence in their relations with one another. Their other side is not just the absence of 'we-feeling' with outsiders but derogatory representations that licence or authorise levels of force against them that are generally condemned as cruel or needlessly violent within the 'civilized' world. Widespread compliance with the rules of war in the eighteenth century owed a great deal to the reality that military elites believed that they were part of the same civilization, or thought they belonged to a transnational elite that was the chief custodian of 'civilized' values (van Crefeld 1989:ch. 19). Such conceptions of the restraining role of the laws of war did not apply in relations with 'savages' in the colonised world.

Those are instances of a more general phenomenon which is that a civilizing process that is common to the separate but interdependent members of an international society can find expression in the harm conventions that tie them together. The honour code that united hoplite warriors in the classical Greek city-states underpinned specific restraints on inter-city violence. Medieval knights departed for battle in the belief that the defeated would be ransomed rather than summarily executed. In both cases, the harm conventions that were central to a specific civilizing process restricted certain rights to members of the warrior elite. Collective privileges were not shared with 'social inferiors' who were denied similar rights to be protected from violence. Those examples further indicate that ideas of civilization prohibit some forms of violence and permit or even demand others that can include the extermination of enemies.

In the examples given, civilized self-restraints on force did not depend on egalitarian commitments. The idea of human equality had little political significance in the earlier states-systems in the West or, indeed, in the modern society of states until recently. The main restraints on harm could function without that ideal but, clearly, that is no longer the case. At least for now, a unique global civilizing process that is suffused with universal and egalitarian values is in place. Pressures to demonstrate that foreign policy complies with, or does not openly contradict, the principle of human equality illustrate the point. In the recent phase of the European/Western civilizing process, commitments to egalitarian principles underpin ideas of human rights and support for legal sanctions against those who are found guilty of abusing the rights of prisoners of war. The existence of those practices marks a major change in the relationship between the external restraints that increased as a result of higher levels of destructive power and the internal restraints that are associated with the more positive characteristics of a civilizing process that were noted earlier (see footnote one). That shift explains why states are now expected to balance their national and international responsibilities with humanitarian obligations that include support for the laws of war and the human rights culture.

As part of the civilizing process, the idea that the civilian as an equal human being should be spared unnecessary suffering has acquired a moral significance that it did not possess in the earlier Western states-systems; indeed, no special category of civilians with special rights to be spared violent or non-violent harm existed in those times (Slim (2008); also Bellamy (2012: introduction and ch. 1). Profound shifts in social attitudes to the rights of civilians occurred in the period between the French Revolution and the post-Second World War era. Support for civilian immunity was initially anchored in the principle of reciprocity, as were the rules pertaining to the return of unharmed prisoners of war, but it has become 'internalised' in the world-views of many societies, or at least 'embedded' in international law with the result that blatant violations now provoke widespread condemnation (Thomas 2001:ch. 2). That development was a response to the peculiar paradox that was highlighted earlier, namely that modern peoples who are accustomed to low levels of violence in relations within their society, acquired destructive capabilities that jeopardised domestic achievements. Societies were compelled to deal with the reality that they had become more dangerous to each other; their response reflected the influence of ideas of human equality that moved

to the centre of civilized societies as a result of various 'emancipation struggles' that were part of a major shift in the power gradient between dominant and subordinate groups. Humanitarian projects that reflect sympathy for the victims of military conflicts - including now the plight of women in war - are part of that legacy, as are the various international governmental and non-governmental organisations that have pioneered the global protection of human rights. They are evidence of changing power balances between the state, international non-governmental organisations and the rights of individual persons - or between international and world society.

Egalitarian values have been pivotal to the development of humanitarian responsibilities that aim, *inter alia*, to reduce poverty and to promote global health. Those obligations remain weak relative to national and international responsibilities, but the very fact that the members of the society of states address such problems at all deserves comment. Such human concerns were not priorities in the earlier Western states-systems or in their constitutive parts. Only in the very recent period have they become principal features of world politics. Various normative images exist of how the idea of equality can give direction to a global civilizing process with the more positive characteristics mentioned earlier. They confront the insecurities of those who are most exposed to the negative effects of rising levels of global interconnectedness including vulnerability to exploitation, unjust enrichment and other forms of non-violent harm. They are evidence of a partial widening of the scope of emotional identification so that duties to co-nationals do not exhaust the sense of moral responsibility to other people. Those social resources demonstrate the immanent potential for a more radical transformation of the relative power of national, international and humanitarian responsibilities; they are invaluable cultural reserves that can be harnessed to resist future efforts to contract the scope of moral consideration. That is one reason why current endeavours to give concrete meaning to ideas of world or cosmopolitan citizenship are imperative. All such concepts are critical to political efforts to promote new forms of 'conscience formation'.

A related question is how far those who identify with a specific civilization recognise the problems that their ways of life create by virtue of pernicious distinctions between the 'advanced' and the 'backward'. The issue is whether they think of civilization in the singular - as a set of traits that they alone possess - or believe that different peoples have undergone distinctive civilizing processes with value in their own right. As noted earlier, the 'radical Enlightenment' highlighted the ambiguities of 'civilization' and promoted greater detachment from modern ways of life. Its members revealed that 'civilization' was a barrier to transformed relations between European and non-European peoples that brought an end to imperial cruelties, if not to colonialism itself. The expansion of international society is testimony to success in weakening the sense of civilized superiority.

One approach to the consequences of that change for world politics maintains that states may be 'consciously working out, for the first time, a set of trans-cultural values and ethical standards' (Watson 1987:152). That observation was connected with a central dimension of English School inquiry which is the combination of satisfaction that non-Western societies have largely accepted European principles of international relations with concerns about the continuing challenge of ensuring that the society of states acquires greater legitimacy in the eyes of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged peoples (Vincent 1986). Disputes about classical liberal perspectives that privilege civil and political rights over social and economic rights are symptomatic of the more general problem. They have raised questions about how far the most affluent groups are so trapped in parochial world-views that they cannot understand radical discontent amongst subordinate groups or respond sympathetically to their pleas to have their interests taken more seriously.

Moreover, because members of the contemporary international society do not regard see themselves as part of the same civilization, they face a greater challenge than their predecessors did in agreeing on global principles that should be observed not only in their relations with each other but also within their respective national boundaries. The expansion of international society is evidence of success in identifying principles of co-existence that bridge substantial cultural differences, although there is obviously much to do to achieve 'effective political dialogue and cooperation' between the societies involved - and a great deal to accomplish by way of acquiring the level of detachment from

specific cultural horizons that is necessary if efforts to promote global agreements about standards of restraint are not to be dismissed as attempts to impose an alien 'standard of civilization' on others (Elias 2012:453). Advances in that domain are critical if radically different peoples who have been forced together over the last few centuries are to succeed in planning a global civilizing process that is organised around voluntary agreements on how to achieve 'the non-violent co-existence of human beings' (Elias 2013a:186).

Several parallels exist between the conditions that led to the European civilizing process and global circumstances that create pressures to acquire higher levels of detachment from specific cultural standpoints and social locations. In both cases, lengthening and deepening webs of interconnectedness provided the impetus for more 'civilized', restrained orientations to other peoples. Those dynamics are the reason for major differences between the contemporary phase of international society and the preceding eras in the history of the Western states-systems. They explain why it is possible to think of a global civilizing process that has its origins in Europe but is outgrowing the West in uneven and controversial ways.

### **Conclusion**

Elias (2012:00) analysed the European civilizing process but stressed that it was one of many that included China with its longer history of internal pacification. Other process sociologists have argued for a comparative study of civilizing processes, Western and non-Western (see Mennell 1996). Such an investigation would contribute to Elias's defence of more detached and less ethnocentric analyses of very long-term processes in the development of human societies. Analysing such patterns would take up the challenge of the nineteenth century universal histories which had failed because of erroneous assumptions about progress, teleology and the superiority of European civilization (Elias 2012:). The critique of such grand narratives had led most social scientists to 'retreat into the present', believing that the study of long-term processes was permanently discredited (Elias 2009). However, the '[baby had been thrown out with the bathwater', *ibid*). The challenge was to take a long-term perspective on societies that focused on changes that had affected humanity as a whole.

The study of international relations has a vital role to play in rehabilitating such grand narratives. A central task is to understand how the webs of human interconnectedness have lengthened over the centuries and millennia. As part of that endeavor, it is important to analyse how different civilizing processes have shaped and been shaped by each other (see Hobson 2004), and how the lives of distant peoples became more closely interwoven as a result. Non-Western perspectives can contribute to such an analysis of long-term patterns of change by correcting the biases of the dominant Western approaches that have mainly concentrated on social and political dynamics in the West (Hobson 2012). Those biases were a function of the prevalent global power balances during the emergence, consolidation and growth of the academic study of international relations. They reflected the political and economic dominance of Europe or the West. Arguments for constructing non-Western approaches are connected with current and predicted changes in global power relations, and most obviously with the rise of China. From the standpoint of process sociology, such perspectives can provide valuable insights into how different peoples and their civilizing processes became interconnected before, during and after the expansion of the West. They can shed new light on the power relations that were intrinsic to those patterns of change and on their lasting effects on contemporary peoples.

Elias maintained that one of the purposes of the social sciences is to provide 'realistic' knowledge about human society that can help people to orientate themselves to very long-term patterns of change including rapid and largely unforeseen developments. A central aim, it was argued, was to contribute to collective learning about how peoples can learn to live together non-violently and amicably – in short, how they can reach agreements about what is permissible and forbidden in their relations with each other. Elias's analysis of long-term changes in the West as provides a model to follow in the examination of various non-Western civilizing processes and in a related investigation of

how they became linked together and interwoven in global webs of interconnectedness. The analysis of standards of self-restraint that has been undertaken in this paper may provide some clues on how to promote a more comprehensive inquiry that examines diverse civilizing processes as well as the moral and political questions about the permissible and the forbidden that have arisen with their incorporation in the first universal society of states.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented as the keynote lecture at the 13th METU Conference, *Multiple Paradigms/Multiple Worlds*, which was held at the Middle East Technical University, Ankara between 25-27 July, 2014. I am grateful to the participants for invaluable comments. A version of this paper will be published in the *Journal of Social Science*, Tokyo later this year

<sup>2</sup> It is important to stress that Elias used the idea of a civilizing process in two ways – first, to describe European patterns of development between approximately the fifteenth and twentieth centuries and, second, to refer to broadly similar tendencies in many other societies and in their relations to some extent. To understand a ‘civilising process’ in this second and more technical sense, he argued, it is important to focus on ‘the problem of how people can manage to satisfy their elementary animalic needs’ without ‘reciprocally destroying, frustrating, demeaning or in other ways harming each other time and time again in their search for this satisfaction’ (Elias 2013a:35). The emphasis was on controls of violence and standards of self-restraint. The technical meaning of civilizing process also included more positive characteristics such as ‘the extent and depth of people’s mutual identification with each other and, accordingly, the depth and extent of their ability to empathise and capacity to feel for and sympathise with other peoples in their relationships with them’ (Elias 2013a:122).

<sup>3</sup> Those developments are highly ambiguous. The notion of the responsibility to protect became linked ‘post 9/11’ with the doctrine of the state’s international obligations not to harbour terrorist organisations that were deemed to be ‘the enemies of civilization’ (Reinold 2013: ch. 4). The failure to honour that obligation exposed the ‘outlaw’ state in question to external intervention on the part of ‘injured states’ that professed to be the custodians of new global standards expressed in ‘hegemonic international law’ (Reinold 2013: 117).

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