

Rethinking the State: How Necessary is a Farewell to Max Weber?

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Abstract

Our understanding of the modern State is being called into question by the global rise in nationalism, exclusion, authoritarianism, and protectionism, which are already shaping the agendas of influential states. Social scientists and political elites have struggled to respond adequately to these challenges, rejecting these rising political patterns more by negation (as anti-liberal or pre-modern) rather than using them as a cause for reflection on the predominant political understanding. This article proposes a more productive engagement with these trends through examining the usefulness of the ideas of one of the most important state theoreticians, Max Weber.

Keywords: State Theory, Max Weber, Norbert Elias, Postcolonialism, North-South Relations, Post-Development

Rethinking the State: How Necessary is a Farewell to Max Weber?

The year 2020 saw the 100th anniversary of the death of Max Weber. The following contribution aims to stimulate an analytic proposal to think with Weber beyond Weber and to open up new options for state analysis.

Our liberal understanding of the state is currently being called into question in a number of ways: nationalism, exclusion, authoritarianism and protectionism are rising globally and are already shaping the agendas of influential states. Modern Western conceptions of the state, which for a long time have been the most important points of reference for contemporary analyses, are coming under pressure –more than ever with the COVID-19 pandemic. To date, however, social scientists and the political elites have struggled to respond adequately to these challenges. Instead, these rising political patterns are vilified and rejected by negation (as, for instance, anti-liberal or pre-modern) rather than using them as a cause for (self-) reflection on the predominant political understanding.

This article develops a more productive engagement with these recent developments. First, it outlines the two central dimensions that underlie Western understandings of the state while identifying the need for a new, context-

sensitive method of analysis. Subsequently, the usefulness of the ideas of Max Weber, one of most important state theoreticians to date, will be examined. Through this analysis, the article builds a case for resuscitating the Norbert Elias figuration model for understanding recent societal trends. Some brief examples will illustrate the deployment of this methodical framework.

1. Limits of Western Political Understanding

Up to the present day, engagement with the state has been characterised by one constant: in virtually all methodical and theoretical approaches, the Western state is taken as the central point of reference. This Eurocentrism is comprised of two dimensions: the first level is an understanding of development as an *evolutionary process* aligned to the achievement of an abstract telos projected onto the future and judged by European experiences and standards. Here, development is always imagined in strictly sequential terms rather than as simultaneous coexistence. This interpretation conceives of the emergence of the European state as a continuous process of modernisation, which through secularisation and rationalisation obey a kind of natural impetus. European state formation is thus stylised as universal, a totality

that excludes alternatives. Critics, however, have long pointed out that the consolidation of European states did not follow identical patterns but differing and contradictory dynamics in which neither the rational legal authority and bureaucratic administration nor the capitalist logic of exploitation spread continuously as a linear outcome of development. [1] Moreover, state monopoly on the use of force and taxation, the most important pillars of modern statehood, were established in European state formation processes intrinsically through arms races and armed conflicts between competing rulers, which led to a convergence between resource extraction and a coercive apparatus. [2] Recognising that it was only through war that modern statehood became established underscores the uniqueness of European development and the impossibility of transferring it to other countries or regions. [3] Nonetheless, most state research continues to use Western experiences as the ground for typification while interpreting other forms of statehood as an expression of imperfect Western states. [4]

The second dimension of this Western understanding of the state is an androcentric, *individualistically theorised subject concept* informed by liberal theory and conceiving of the individual as a rationally acting maximiser of self-interest or freedom who shapes both the state and societal development accordingly. This is a cultural concept of the secularised West, which, as first outlined by René Descartes, stylises rational control as a virtue to be internalised and that was subsequently, via Adam Smith, made describable and measurable through the category of (economic) interest (Hirschman). [5] This understanding of the rational utilitarian individual promised reliable calculability of the irrational: human beings, with unrestrained passions transmuted into cherished interests that increasingly made acting strategic and thus calculable. Since measurability and calculability are central to today's science, liberal conceptions of the subject as an individual, rational maximiser of self-interest remain powerful today, shaping our understanding of institutions as incentive structures and aggregations of rational actions.

Through this idea of freedom and self-responsibility, the human being became

historically, socially, gender-specifically, culturally and locally de-contextualised. [6] What is omitted from this method, however, is that individuals also always constitute themselves through collective forms of identity. This should not be considered a fundamental criticism of individualism but should primarily be understood as an effort to integrate subjective collective relations and affections more strongly into analysis. This is not to say that the subjects of distinct social or ethnic groups or nations are in principle more strongly shaped by the group or by affect, but rather that different roads of state formation have led to different balances between ratio and affect as well as between the individual and the collective. Omitting precisely this insight is the reason why many social scientists, alongside political elites, have failed to recognise in a timely manner recent articulations against the establishment's liberal politics and how to cope with them. This lack of understanding often results in helpless moral repudiations and frequently becomes counterproductive. An up-to-date understanding of society and state, however, has to overcome the Eurocentric tunnel vision and adopt a context-sensitive and decentred perspective towards the state both methodically and theoretically.

2. Max Weber and the State Today

One who analyses the state talks about Max Weber. With his understanding of the state as a compulsory political organisation with continuous operations (*politischer Anstaltsbetrieb*), which successfully enforces the monopoly of legitimate physical force within territorially bounded orders (Weber, *Economy and Society*), Weber created a definition that influences and orientates state theory down to the present day. This broad recognition of the Weberian concept of the state is rooted in its multidimensionality: it addresses the relationship between force and legitimacy, which the political institutions of the state have to arrange and organise, thus emphasising the double function of the state as an instance of authority and as a form of community. The popularity of Weber's ideas was enhanced by the fact that, as a legal scholar with formal juridical

formula and a focus on administration and law, Weber could rely on the support of the influential legalist and institutionalist state research, while his analytical idea of the state as an organisation or relation of authority (*Herrschaftsverhältnis*) also guaranteed him the interest of political state philosophy.

The de facto failure of state formation processes in, for instance, Afghanistan and Somalia, however, reminds us that the Weberian understanding of the state has always only corresponded to a fraction of the state forms worldwide. While in Weber's sense the modern state is predominantly understood as an autonomous apparatus separated from society and economy, i.e. where the separation of state authority from the economic and social spheres is warranted in the form of an 'impersonal power,' [7] many states in the Global South –and not only there– are characterised by an overlapping coexistence and reciprocal interpenetration of heterogeneous, formal, and informal systems of power and regulation which undermine the homogeneity and integrity of the state and may even constitute regulatory systems inconsistent with and/or antagonistic to it. The limited effectiveness of the state monopoly, the weak institutionalised control mechanisms of state power, the superimposition, penetration or substitution of formal institutions and procedures by other arrangements, and the absence of civil instances that socially mediate and control state policies generate political patterns and structures in which personal power rather than impersonal power prevails. [8]

The explanatory power of Weber's theory of the state monopoly of legitimate force has been further eroded by recent developments that have caused the concept of the enlightened citizen as the primary subject of political action to lose influence in the West, while under globalisation and regionalisation of economic activities, juridical space and state territory have increasingly diverged. Yet criticisms of the Weber-influenced Western understanding of the state have failed to confront Weber's ideas themselves with the two stated dimensions of the critiques of Eurocentrism. Remarkably, to this day neither the exponents of Weber's theoretical tradition nor its critics have made

the larger effort of exploring whether his work could provide stimuli for new and more context-sensitive research.

Examining this neglected question shall be the first task. In order to approach this systematically, Weber's work will be evaluated on the basis of the following questions extrapolated from criticisms of Eurocentrism: (1) whether and how individual and collective action, i.e. the relation between structure and agency in the field of the state, are addressed and made empirically measurable; (2) how context-sensitive Weber's understanding of the subject is and, in particular, the relevance attributed to affect; (3) the extent to which Weber's methodical approach directly integrates context factors; (4) whether the androcentrism that frequently underlies the Western understanding of the state is addressed; and (5) the extent to which a local contextualisation of the object of study takes place and/or an evolutionary universalism is advocated for.

Structure and Agency

For Weber, the state is grounded in the individual actions of individual persons. Thus, the state can be depicted as a complex of socially interdependent interactions (*Zusammenhandeln*). Central to this is the importance of predominant moral concepts, especially religious ethics, to which human beings partially submit on the grounds of their yearning for salvation. Thus, for Weber, the Western individual's desire for the intensified religious provision of meaning or purpose (*Sinnstiftung*) has through a *rational conduct* of life led to depersonalised routines and mechanisms for the collective administration of imperative authority or domination (*Herrschaftsverwaltung*). This in turn promoted new social action, which conditioned and accustomed the individual to rational control and generated consent, and could institutionalise itself as a 'shell as hard as steel' (original in Weber, *Soziologie* 131, 147; translation in Baehr 153). Simultaneously with his contemporary Werner Sombart and his concept of 'economic behaviour' (*Wirtschaftsgesinnung*), Weber thus developed a multi-layered model of analysis that, through the dimension of

values, convincingly couples the dimensions of agency and structure. This systematised alternation between the micro- and macro-level allowed Weber to develop a consistent model of analysis that avoids economic reductionism. This is certainly one of his most significant achievements, and it opened up new perspectives for state and authority analyses.

A Context-Sensitive Subject Conception

For Weber, action alone does not make the state, however: only the individual's meaningful order-oriented social action (*Gemeinschaftshandeln*) constitutes authority and the state. This is why Weber's methodical focus exclusively rests on forms of human behaviour that are subjectively meaningful to him, which for Weber is the actual foundation of sociological analysis. He hereby typologises meaningful behaviour and attributes to purposive-rational action (*zweckrationales Handeln*) the *greatest evidence of empirical research*; that is, action in which the individual actor's behaviour relates to his/her own expectations towards the behaviour of others or an object in an effort to pursue his/her own interests as successfully as possible through the use of a certain amount of (un)conscious self-reflection (Weber, *Soziologie* 99; Weber, *Economy and Society*). In other words, and to avoid a common misunderstanding, Weber by no means assumed that human social behaviour was principally instrumental and rationally determined. Rather, he had a clear view on 'instrumentally irrational' affects and emotional states. In fact, Weber constructed instrumental rationality as a 'borderline case' for his methodical approach; affects and fallacies could thus be classified as 'deviations', and a type could be described according to the degree of deviation. Thus, for Weber, each subject fundamentally has a disposition for rationality, the specific manifestation of which he categorises as a type rather than comprehending it as a mutual processual contingency between structure and agency. [9] This understanding establishes him as one of the founders of *methodological individualism*, which still today enforces the claim to the universalisation of Western theory and thus for good reason is central to criticisms

of Eurocentrism.

Consideration of Context Factors in Method

Weber understands the Western process of rationalisation in the context of the development of normative interpretive patterns, which become an objective frame of reference for social action and thus constitute the ideational legitimation basis of interest-guided individual action. Here, for Weber, the administrations of state and authority are key expressions of individually internalised value and norms systems and focal points of social action. He then believed one could identify the underlying types of authority in an axiologically neutral fashion via an analysis of reasonable patterns of action. Thus, Weber's method consists of a clear formulation of a problem, an approach of explanatory understanding and an ideal-typical technique strictly based on value freedom (Weber, *Society* 263; Weber, *Economy and Society*). The methodical prioritisation of instrumentally rational behaviour and the attempt to statically describe state and authority through typification not only starkly reduces context sensitivity, but also negates it entirely through the postulate of value freedom. After all, typification required Weber to develop often functionally or rationally guided and allegedly universally valid attributions or categories with a claim to comparative systematisation that correspondingly required de-contextualisation. [10]

Androcentrism

There are only scattered comments on gender issues in Weber's work, such as in the context of cultural anthropological examinations of the gendered division of labour and the transition from matriarchy to patriarchy. Neither his sociologies of religion and authority nor his modernisation theoretical analyses capture or theoretically conceptualise gender issues in a methodically systematic way. At best, then, Weber can be assigned a lack of sensitivity towards the constricted androcentric Western view of subjects. [11]

Local Contextualisation versus Evolutionist Universalism

While Weber's scholarship was driven by an effort to establish a universal theory of the state and authority, he did not assume that Western rationalism itself was universal and therefore, in principle, transferable. In this sense, Weber was quite conscious of the fact that the use of force and war coupled with the containment and expansion of the market played a central role in the genesis of the modern Western state. Furthermore, to him the development from the Protestant ethic to capitalism is neither the causal nor the linear process it is occasionally represented as being. Rather, the intentional behaviour of many individuals (religious salvation) has led to a non-intentional overall change (rational modernity). Indeed, this 'paradox of rationalisation' (Schluchter), in which religious meaning- and identity-giving norms and practices as a form of demystification mutated in the West into rational and efficient but meaningless domination, is for Weber quite unique. Therefore, Weber's theory of the development of worldviews (*Weltbilder*) aspires to be universal historical, but it is not, in contrast to the positions of many of his later apologists, universalist.

Thus, for example, it is easy to explain through Weber why Western efforts at state building frequently fail: these policies understand the development of administrative capacities as a lever of Western modernisation seeking to increase individual rationality by increasing state rationality. This, however, constitutes an inversion of cause and effect; in the West, rational authority was only established after the internalisation of individual rationality. Furthermore, when, as in the West, the transferred instrumentally rational principles have a destructive effect on existing structures of meaning, this actually drives counter reactions, such as extreme traditionalism and fundamentalism.

On the whole, it can be stated that Weber provides some methodical and analytical responses to the critiques of Eurocentrism. With his proposal for viewing actors' interpretive patterns and moral concepts as important determinants of action orientations, which shape (the objectives of) institutions as much as they

are shaped by them, he innovatively connects structure and agency in the analysis. Moreover, he by no means embodies the universalist idea of development as an evolutionary process guided by Western modernity but actually displays sensitivity to local contextualisation. However, his subject construct, which principally makes recourse to reasonableness and instrumental rationality, undoubtedly makes Weber one of the originators of the second dimension of Eurocentrism. This core idea of his entire work, which culminates in coupling the notion of the state as a compulsory political institution (*Anstalt*) with that of a rational authority itself based on the rational behaviours of individuals, renders Weber only partially suitable for decentred research. [12]

Transcending Max Weber: A Plea for Greater Passion in Analysis

Context-sensitive state analysis would have to integrate Weber's suggestion of understanding institutions as sedimented forms of subject action with a subject concept that also considers affects. Therefore, what is essentially advocated here is to focus, within a changed subject perspective, on the rationally and affect-guided interrelations between humans, their social environments and the state; that is, a *complementary* view of the ongoing and visible reciprocal forms of articulations and a systematic analysis of this interwovenness among individual action and (state) collective as a *process*.

This effort to transcend the Weberian rational subject towards one that considers its relations to society and institutions has been a concern of numerous social theorists, including Bourdieu, Fraser, Foucault, Giddens and Habermas, yet a complete separation from the concept of the rational subject has in most cases only been partially achieved, or these approaches have remained too firmly rooted in the experiences of Western societies. In the following, I will refer to a classic that appears to offer particularly inspiring responses to the previously stated criticisms of Eurocentrism, thus providing interesting suggestions for context-sensitive state research: Norbert Elias' figuration model.

This choice may come as a surprise. The Elias civilisation theory, in particular, has not only been criticised for its historical representations and interpretations, but also for its theoretical premises. [13] After all, the title of his *The Civilising Process* (1994 [1939]) already evokes associations of a normative and teleological understanding of development, which in addition explicitly refers to European social trajectories. Indeed, the view Elias expresses in the book, that the development process of Western states is best described as a process of increasing affect control, can and has to be questioned, especially in consideration of some recent dynamics of Western societies. [14] Such criticisms and the persistent ignorance towards making the Eliasan approach fruitful for decentred state research are probably derived from the tragic fact that Elias is not only one of the most cited scholars in the social sciences, but also one of the most misinterpreted. [15] The multifarious and indeed justified criticisms, however, have largely obfuscated the fact that the model of figuration presents a template that excellently accomplishes the complementary integration of affect in social and state analyses, while its relational understanding of the individual and the collective simultaneously facilitates new methodical approaches. This, in fact, would be in the spirit of Elias: as he once stated, the notion of figuration seeks to provide a conceptual tool through which the flawed society–individual duality can be overcome (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 123ff). [16] The following section will outline the kind of inspirations that Elias provides for decentred research. To facilitate a methodical comparison with Max Weber, the work of Elias will be examined in accordance with the same dimensions already deployed with respect to Weber. In addition, specific positions of Weber will be referred to in a contrasting fashion. [17]

Structure and Agency

Just like Weber, Norbert Elias attempts to methodically and theoretically decode the relations between subject and (state) collective action. In this regard, however, his approach is significantly more complex than Weber's, as he does not take individual subjective behaviour

as the starting point of his examinations. Rather, he consistently assumes a dialectical relation between the collective context and the individual sphere of life, which also includes the affect dimension. In order to explicitly balance the two dimensions of structure and agency, he disaggregates the understanding of state and society formation into *figurations* in which a multitude of persons, who to him are not individuals, are bound together in different ways through a range of interrelated, unstable power balances. Thus, the figuration approach is based on a theory of power relations that, while viewing power as control over resources, does not understand the exercise of power as a unipolar mechanism but as fluctuating transformations. The social force field of power does not rest in individual human beings (and not only in the political) but in what happens between people and in what is changing. Power is the dynamic essence of interpersonal relationships, which means that its recognition, legitimation, counter power and the possibility of empowerment for those over whom power is exercised are also always integral. For Elias, power is *the* central relationship attribute between people and authority, the examination of which permits the empirical investigation of structure and agency (Elias, *What is Sociology?*).

A Context-Sensitive Subject Conception

Elias is convinced that the 'homo clausus', i.e. the essentialist individual isolated from society, does not exist. [18] Rather, humans can only be conceived of in the plural, as they are integrated in inter-generational interdependences that they shape as much as they are shaped by them in their affections, thoughts, and actions. Here, rather than understanding rationality and affect as antipodes, in which one side neutralises the other, Elias conceives of these as a complementary relation, and consideration of both sides is necessary to understand social action and state formation. For Elias, affects are also constitutive, that is, humans are always rational and passionate at the same time. He thus assumes that individual action is not primarily grounded in a rationally guided individualism, as was ideal-typically assumed

by Weber for the West and to some extent empirically demonstrable, but that the individual simultaneously tends to identify via collectives (often the family, tribe, sex, class, ethnicity and nation), organises in these, orients its action in accordance with them, and in this is also guided by affects. This is so because, within actions, emotions cannot be fully separated from cognitive understanding, nor are ritual acts, such as state ceremonies, performed completely unreflectingly or unconsciously. An examination of the particular relations and intertwinings of affective action and (state) collective then facilitates a context-specific analysis without predefining all subjects through the specific Western rationality–affect balance.

Consideration of Context Factors in Method

Elias rigorously opposes static analyses and typologisations as introduced by Weber and principally criticises the method of generating de-contextualised isolated factors or variables. Instead, he proposes approaching the object of study via its relationship dynamics. In this, social practice becomes the focal point of his analysis, as to him it is within social *processes* in particular that the individual and the (state) collective become identifiable and describable in their totality. [19] For Elias, the human being is not simply embedded in processes, it *is* the process; the only immutable thing about humans is their mutability emanating from evolutionary change (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 108ff). Thus, Elias encourages future research to rely less on typologisations and associated quantitative analyses and adopt a stronger relational perspective rather than a strictly static and/or (field) isolated one.

Androcentrism

Throughout his work, Elias problematises androcentrism at great length, to which the important thesis of ‘situated knowledge’ is immanent (Haraway). By applying his figuration approach, he formulated key ideas that are intensely discussed within today’s gender research, particularly in intersectional approaches. For him, gender relations are also

dynamic power balances that unfold among the sexes at the macro-level of the states and in the gendered division of labour, as well as in subjective and affective relations at the micro-level. [20] In his studies, he also showed that power balances between men and women always operate simultaneously in the public sphere, in the economy and politics, in the family, and in marriage and sexuality. Conversely, changes in the political framework, such as through reforms, also shapes gender relations (Brinkgreve).

Local Contextualisation versus Evolutionist Universalism

Elias’s integration of the affect dimension enabled him to create a strong contextual connection between social and state analysis, and history, culture and the local beyond the micro-perspective. Accordingly, Elias imagines development processes as models in space and time while emphasising that not only intra- but also inter-state influences have to be integrated in the analysis by understanding the latter as an extension of chains of interdependence. Subsequently, Elias extends his elaborations to countries in the Global South, convinced that his methodical framework of figuration is open and therefore, in principle, applicable to different forms of social development (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 162). In accordance with Elias’s conception of power, social and state structures are then produced through the volitional acts, plans and passions (as articulations of power) of many. However, due to existing interdependences and fluctuations, these social processes in their totality are uncontrolled, that is, social and state development is always contingent. In this regard, Elias clearly transcends Weber; for Elias, the contingency of social change is constitutive. Thereby he clearly rejects universalism.

On the whole, the Eliasan focus on social interdependences permits the development of proposals on how the characteristics between the individual and the collective may be systematically explored, categorised, and thus made accessible for empirical measurement. On the one hand, Elias develops the category of *affective valences*, i.e. an also affectively

shaped web of relationships between people, in which for Elias human satisfaction is always primarily related to other humans (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 133). With regard to larger units, such as the state, such affective attachments are not restricted to humans but also involve unifying symbols, such as coats of arms and flags, emotive concepts, such as the homeland, or emotionalised mass events, such as football. [21] Here, affect articulation is already becoming directly related to (state) collective articulation. This example in particular illustrates how Elias, with his focus on affect, avoids cultural relativism. While culture and the state usually have ‘the nation’, ‘ethnic identities’ or some other historical myth as their central reference points, affects for Elias always also refer to social positionings; traditions, for example, are not only locally or ethnically rooted but directly tied to changes in state and society (Hobsbawm and Ranger). Change itself moves into the focus of analysis rather than solely viewing the respective state as the origin and place of shaping power.

Furthermore, Elias’s categories of integration and differentiation facilitate the measurement of the quality and quantity of social interdependences (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 133). *Integration*, above all, is a physical violence-reducing group survival function which produces social structures, societal organisation and, finally, state monopolies. *Differentiation* and the division of labour in particular (which in capitalism reached a new intensity) deepen and broaden the interdependences. Both processes are inextricably intertwined. This means, for example, that the state formation of bourgeois society cannot be separated from the emergence of capitalism. Therefore, Elias does not place economic structural constraints or political regime configurations at the centre of analysis, but rather the power differentials and power balances that integrate these chains of interdependence. Elias systematises these three categories into a basic regulatory triad in which differentiation represents the control dimension of extra-human contexts of events, integration represents the control of inter-human relationships, and his assumed affect reduction represents self-control (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 147). With this approach, which

combines psychogenetic and sociogenetic studies, Elias develops definable and empirically deployable categories that permit the analysis of social and personal structures within a specific state process.

Thus, Elias’s figuration model first focuses on affects and explicitly also examines these with regard to their collective expressions through state symbols and forms of political articulation (e.g., populism). Second, it is non-essentialist both with respect to its understanding of the subject and of structures, as it seeks to relate social and political with economic and other determinants, the interdependences of which have to be empirically determined and can lead to varying social (socialisation) modes and patterns of the state. This means that the figuration model is neither state nor market centric and that it operates largely free from normative presuppositions. This comes very close to approaching states in an unreserved manner. Third, the model’s category of integration further allows for the scrutiny of perpetuated and naturalised social and political exclusion as simultaneities of inside and outside, which is a globally increasingly relevant component virtually unexplored by Weber. [22] Fourth, by contrast, via the notion of fluctuating power balances, Elias takes into account the dynamics of spaces of social order and their forms of legitimation, placing power and social positioning at the centre of his explorations. [23] Therefore, by not neglecting affect and context, Elias provides a form of analysis that avoids slipping into cultural relativism and ethnologisation. [24] Fifth, with its notion of space–time, the concept offers not only the possibility of a strong contextualisation of the state, but also a methodical-analytical perspective on how social processes in societies can be traced and explained as interdependent (including transnational) multi-level trajectories.

With his figuration approach, Elias thus radically breaks with the two narratives of Eurocentrism. In this, just like Weber, he connects structure and agency. However, Elias offers not only a consistent but also an open, context-sensitive methodical framework that is particularly apt for research into the particularities of states. This methodical understanding is best illustrated by a concrete example. For this purpose, we select

a major country in the Global South, which at the beginning of the 20th century had the same per capita income as Germany and that in 1940 was still predicted by agricultural economist Colin Clark to become one of the four nations with the highest per capita income worldwide within the next thirty years: Argentina. Soon after this prognosis, however, Argentina was hit by severe social and political dislocation and economic decline; instability, poverty and deep inequalities have since become key features of society. Most commonly this is attributed to structural (e.g., deferral of agricultural reform) and institutional (e.g., hyper-presidentialism and weak rule of law) distortions. However, the Eliasan figuration approach could expand such stunted explanations by introducing the following considerations: on the one hand, the emergence of the Argentine nation was based on massive external resource influx. Referred to as Belle Époque, which lasted until the First World War, this nourished an almost forty-year economic boom during which the nation experienced a cultural heyday. The leading agricultural elites quickly learned to optimise the use of their fertile soils while banking on a poorly diversified export basket of everyday necessities (wool, grain and meat), which ensured a relatively steady demand, even during international sales crises. On the other hand, liberal migration laws that demanded few concessions be made towards the new homeland led to a remarkably high immigration rate; at the turn of the century, one-third of the population was made up of migrants. The economic boom facilitated high collective upward mobility, leading to the formation of a broad middle class relatively early within the region while easing integration in a general sense. At the same time, however, this complicated the emergence of identity-establishing collectives and intensified the strong self-referential acting of the subjects motivated by gains in freedom. Ideal (family) relations shaped by the European countries of origin remained important reference points for the elites and later migrants. Argentina viewed itself more as a European outpost than as a nation of its own. Such collective experiences in state formation generally favoured outward-oriented solution options, which impeded efforts in national identity politics, the development

of political institutions and the consolidation of their conflict resolution mechanisms. Therefore, due to the massive resource influx and the European migratory background of broad sectors of society, no profound *integration* and *differentiation* occurred in Argentina. The elites never had to struggle for a central monopoly as the cash inflows initially ensured sufficient resources (and power) for all relevant groups. It did not appear necessary to build up a strong central state; the majority of institutions, such as monetary currency, laws, state bureaucracies, and even the establishment of a capital city were only created after state formation, and the pronounced non-compliance of (not only) the elites in paying taxes to the present day (Cetrángolo et al) demonstrates the state's limited legitimation and powers of self-assertion. Self-interests were best realized through the development of social conflict potentials (and violence) rather than through active participation in the state; progressive *affect control* was neither necessary nor conducive to this. The economic concentration on exports, which due to a redistribution of export revenues was never abandoned in its final logic even during periods of inward orientation, further reduced the need for social differentiation. Therefore, growing interdependence, with which Elias by reference to Europe associates first consolidation followed by gradual horizontalisation and de-personification of state power, never occurred. This explains why populism and violence are still important political means in Argentina today. The latter, in particular, is remembered in the form of the most recent military dictatorship, which even by regional comparison was extremely brutal and perfidious. For Elias, social interdependence is inextricably intertwined with affect control: if the first is coarse-meshed, the probability of the use of political violence increases. [25]

However, the figuration approach also offers concrete explanations with respect to the current political developments in the USA and in Europe. It allows us to link Thomas Picketty's research findings on the dramatic increase in social inequality in industrialised nations with Zygmunt Baumann's insight that nationalism and reference to ethnic affinity constitute a substitute for integration factors in a disintegrating society

(*Strangers at Our Door*). Accordingly, due to growing inequality, social integration in Western societies is decreasing, and the importance of affects is again increasing. Initial manifestations of this are the successful mobilisation of and support for political discourses and behaviour that strongly appeal to the emotions and passions of people, and through this they seek to revitalise forms of identity formation that may often have been suppressed or hitherto regarded as functionally counterproductive. These more recent processes are, in accordance with Elias, indeed alarming. After all, when banking on exclusion and mobilised against minorities or more vulnerable people, they may subsequently lead to direct violence. Elias's approach, however, also leaves no doubt about how to deal with this threat: the dimensions of integration and differentiation have to be strengthened politically. This is only possible through broader participation, which would have to be functionally legitimate and rest on positive attributions in terms of identity rather than on exclusion.

Towards New State Research with Max and Norbert

To be sure, an updated deployment of Norbert Elias's theory also requires its revision in various respects. In order to make the figuration model applicable for contemporary research, the three categories of the Eliasan triad should be rethought. With respect to the category of *affective valences* it should first be positively noted that this implies historical retrospective (i.e. the historical social research approach), which in principle promises a decentred analysis, as here Elias works with a three-generation view. Nonetheless, for the sake of the practicability of data collection, it has to be asked whether this method could be optimised in research economic terms. A further advantage is that both a historical perspective and the integration of affects provide key criteria that permit a systematic contextualisation of social and state processes without being restricted to local particularities.

However, it would be necessary to clarify to what extent Elias's interest in progressive affect control and, therefore, self-control would have to be extended towards other motives for action.

For example, Elias stylises competition as the principal source of social dynamics while, just like Weber, insufficiently engaging with cooperation. Elias assumes an archaic fear of the individual towards the Other (nature, humans) as the driving force of such competitive constellations, which can be transformed into security principally through domination; this is an interpretation that essentially follows Hobbesian natural law and Sigmund Freud's conception of the human being (Wickham and Evers 2-11). Context-sensitive research, however, would have to acknowledge a broader range of motives for action in order to capture the relevant aspects of social change. After all, the cohesiveness of a state requires not only the internal renunciation of violence but also empathy and solidarity. In this respect, a synthesis with Spinoza's affect cataloguing appears useful, starting with the basic affects of pleasure and displeasure, which enter awareness as greed and then lead to secondary affects (of which hate and love are fundamental). This would permit a broader research focus (Lord 83) as, in Spinoza's ontology, affections not only have an effect on the individual but also on other relational categories, such as identity, power and politics, while in turn being influenced by them. [26]

As regards the issue of *integration*, the assumption that the diffusion of affects primarily occurs as a statist top-down tendency has to be corrected; this is an assumption that has largely been made relative by more recent historical analyses. Moreover, although Elias explicitly delimits his category of *differentiation* from structural functionalist assumptions, he nonetheless implicitly draws from these in his own analysis. In this respect, it would have to be examined, inter alia, whether a less passionate engagement with those theoretical approaches opposed by Elias could facilitate new syntheses that would permit the development of indicators and operationalisations without having to neglect the research focus on state processes. [27] In addition, the degree of integration and the thickness of differentiation that state interdependence chains have to dispose of in order for them to maintain their efficacy and not to rupture would have to be further specified. This is above all of significance if the analytically

relevant transnational dimensions of state interweavings, as also considered by Elias, are to be analysed with respect to their degrees of efficacy (Mann).

Two other tasks are of cardinal importance. On the one hand, further development of the figuration model would require continued serious consideration of the criticisms of androcentrism in all respects (Walby). On the other hand, the Eliasan model's understanding of state change and the subject–structure relationship would have to be vigorously calibrated with the positions and knowledge of non-European doctrines and world views, as well as with the state of knowledge of postcolonialism in order to clarify whether and what analogies exist and where syntheses are possible for an even more refined application of the figuration model to states in the Global South.

These are undoubtedly only some initial explorations of the directions in which the figuration model may be further developed as a methodological toolbox for a decentred analysis of state and society. The fundamental objective would be to sharpen its categories, update it to the latest state of knowledge, and adapt it to the corresponding conditions of the current dynamics of state processes in order to develop new indicators for empirical inquiries.

In sum, the preceding systematisation sought to illustrate that with respect to empirically grounded and decentred state research, Eliasan figuration analysis is more advantageous than the Weberian approach. Max Weber's analyses of the state and authority rest on arguments for a universalism that is becoming increasingly counterproductive, both politically and scientifically. Weber himself provided the basis for this through his one-dimensional, reductionist subject concept. [27] Nonetheless, Max Weber equally offers assistance in the effort to refine the Eliasan figuration model. After all, one crucial element is absent from Elias's significantly more complex social analysis: the orientation of action. Today, as affects in the politics of Western societies once again gain in apparent relevance, an application of Elias's extended subject concept appears expedient. However, Weber continues to provide assistance to Elias as he rightly admonishes us not to lose sight of ethics

and values. In today's rapidly changing world, such a method framed by an extended figuration analysis appears to be a productive approach towards better understanding contemporary states and societies.

Endnotes

[1] See Ertmann 1997.

[2] See Centeno and Enriquez 2016; and Tilly 1985, 1990.

[3] See Centeno 1997; and Schlichte 2005.

[4] For example, after 9/11 by reference to the new deficit concept of *failing states*, state research unabashedly relied on Western models, while political consulting called for their reproduction through *state building* (see Fukuyama 2004).

[5] Certainly, by reference to Smith's earlier writing *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, it has been pointed out that this ascription would do the Scottish moral philosopher wrong (see Máiz 2010). However, what can be stated with certainty is that *The Wealth of Nations* became a key foundation of social study and research focused on rational interests.

[6] For critical accounts, see Chakrabarty 2000; Coronil 1997; and Samir 1989.

[7] See Gerstenberger 2007.

[8] See Schlichte 2005.

[9] In a synchronic approach, this presupposition of an always existent subject disposition for rationality then permitted Weber in his sociology of religion to categorise different cultures in which no rational authority had developed. The approaches of 'multiple modernities' (see Eisenstadt 2006) picked up this thread. Even though it was not the intention of the inventor, such a methodical design once more promotes the analysis and evaluation of state configurations against a Western backdrop. After all, Western rational behaviour is not only of conceptual centrality to the analysis, but it also is empirically all-encompassing as all aspects of behaviour (and with it social and political institutions) are rationally systematised and geared towards a particular objective or stipulated in accordance with an ideal value.

[10] It should be noted, though, that Weber's method is not entirely de-contextualised. His dimension of values and ethics, or the complex of meaning (*Sinnzusammenhang*) of action, certainly always also reflects local contexts. Yet, Weber largely leaves such value setting to religion as an almost anthropological constant, which, despite variations, to him always constituted a soteriological expectancy (*Heilserwartung*).

[11] See Ciaffa 1998.

[12] This also applies to the continued efforts to recycle Weber's categories for analyses of contemporary global changes in state and society. For example, the concepts of

cosmopolitanism (see Beck 2006) and neo-institutionalist studies (e.g., Acemoglu & Robinson 2012; North et al. 2009) are noteworthy in this respect.

[13] For an overview, see Dunning and Hughes 2013.

[14] Baumann 2000.

[15] Gabriel and Mennell also explain this ignorance by quoting an email from Alan Sica: “The reason Americans don’t take to Elias is that he writes about European historical and cultural change and American sociologists don’t feel comfortable with that sort of thing, except for [Jack] Goldstone and that small lot; and because he is theoretically very adventurous and synthetic, and they don’t go for that; and because he trashed Parsons, who many of them liked back in the day; and because he could be mistaken for a closet Freudian, which they don’t like; and because he brings up really obnoxious qualities of humankind, which they particularly don’t like; and because he wrote a helluva lot of stuff, which takes a long time to read, they don’t have time; and because ‘figuration’ is a word that has a distinctly effete connotations in this country, and sounds like art history” (18).

[16] For an overview, see Dépelteau and Landini 2013.

[17] Surprisingly, to date hardly any scholarly work appears to be available that systematically compares the theories of Weber and Elias. Despite differing starting points (meaning giving norms on the one hand and changes in moral behavioural patterns on the other), the key interests are identical, which are namely to understand and explain the genesis of Western capitalism and the state.

[18] Elias, who according to him was highly appreciative of Weber’s work in many respects, was aware of Weber’s reductionist subject concept, which probably inspired his own reflections (see Goudsblom 2003).

[19] Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault and Anthony Giddens, amongst others, whose influential social theories are also based on studies of social practice, were strongly influenced by this approach. See also Gabriel and Mennell (2011) for Elias’s international impact on social science research.

[20] In gender research, the latter has long been referred to as ‘doing gender’ (see West & Zimmermann 1987).

[21] For the latter, see also Elias and Dunning 2003.

[22] See also Elias and Scotson 2008; Rehbein and Souza 2015.

[23] This relational understanding of power bears a double benefit for state research: on the one hand, it *per se* avoids the power-blind reductionism still often practiced with a control-oriented and technocratic bias and the economic or functionalist narrowness of power-sensitive approaches. On the other hand, it does not restrict the definition of power to the Weber-influenced and still widespread notion of power as a unilateral assertion of one person’s will in a social relation; that is, the exertion of influence on others (‘power over’) as an interpretation of power that inadequately simplifies the contextual analysis of complex power relations. After all, if such a one-dimensional

approach (also often by reference to Weber) is coupled with a corresponding formalist and institutionalist angle, this can hardly be expected to produce valid knowledge about the current state dynamics. However, Elias’s understanding of power far transcends Weber’s, who was first and foremost interested in the distribution of power among different instances of power but not in the relation between the individual and power. Rather, Elias’s perspective, according to which the dominant power figurations are also articulated outside the political and inscribed or reflected in the individual, has also influenced Bourdieu’s and Foucault’s definitions of power. In fact, his discussion on the issue of the genesis of power may even have been more profound than theirs. Furthermore, the figuration approach may provide inspiring contributions to more recent debates on power, which in pursuit of an integral concept of power address both the repressive and productive character of power through the concepts of ‘power over’ and ‘power to’ (for an overview, see Clegg and Haugaard 2009). It is therefore all the more striking that Elias’s positions continue to receive little attention in contemporary sociological and political science debates on power.

[24] This is exactly how Gayatri Spivak would argue later by pointing out that all struggles of cultural discrimination are equally struggles of social progress (Spivak 2003).

[25] This cursory illustration alone gives us some idea of the kinds of questions that may be posed and engaged with through a figuration method. For example, the figuration model permits us to understand the state fiscal monopoly, which in contrast to democracy and the monopoly on the legitimate use of force has barely been enforced in Latin America, not as a pre-modern system deficiency or technocratic implementation failure but as an expression of a specific, historically grown and to date (in essence, political regime neutral) legitimating power asymmetry between groups that can be empirically delimited. Therefore, this could permit us to concretely identify the extent to which functional considerations (power and resource maintenance) and/or affective guiding patterns (such as the traditional external orientation of elites) play a central role in order to explain why, for example, more recent reforms to increase tax revenue in the region have often remained ineffective.

[26] See Kisner and Youpa 2014; Nadler 2015; and Soyarslan 2016.

[27] Essentially, the two Eliasian categories of integration and differentiation are not completely alien to modernisation theoretical ideas. However, Elias has a much more sophisticated understanding of progress in rationalisation than Weber: Elias assumes a differentially strong ‘awareness’ of simultaneously existing orders, and Weber attempts to illustrate a process in which rationalisation *per se* (in the sense of a progressing cognitive control of reality) only represents a partial aspect of gradually extending interdependent chains of action and condensing figurations. Nonetheless, the two theoreticians are in close quarters here: both assume that the genesis of Western modernity was grounded in a growing rationality within social relations.

[28] What has also to be neglected here is Weber’s ‘double constitution of the subject’: Weber was not only an

intentional observer of the historically newly constituting capitalist society in Germany, astutely distinguishing between a private bourgeois entrepreneurial spirit and a far-reaching bourgeois ideology, which led to an overall reconstitution of the way of living. As a political activist, he also was an ideological designer of a new bourgeois subjectivity aiming at moral reform of the upper classes and the integration of the intellectuals and the skilled labour force so that precisely this new form of social organisation could develop and stabilise itself. Max Weber presented himself as a class-conscious apologist of the German national interest, who in the sense of a 'liberal imperialism' was desirous of a foreign politically self-assertive German power state.

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