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‘Problems of involvement and detachment’: Norbert Elias and the investigation of contemporary social processes

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[T]he longer this present situation goes on without anything being done about it, the more likely is it that the tension... will harden – Norbert Elias. [1][#N1]

Abstract: *In this paper, we seek to move beyond dominant interpretations of Elias by drawing attention to an increasing body of work in the fields of social and public policy. We engage with debates about secondary forms of involvement to facilitate an appreciation of how this as yet undocumented tranche of empirical work can lead to greater understanding of the negative effects of state/elite policies in the current period. We conclude that by adopting a position of ‘detached involvement’ figurational sociologists can generate reality-congruent knowledge that allows them to make concrete statements about contemporary social processes.*

Keywords: *Contemporary social processes; involvement–detachment; policy; politics; sociology of knowledge.*

Introduction

It is over 60 years since Norbert Elias’s (1956) original article discussing ‘problems of involvement and detachment’ was published in the *British Journal of Sociology* and the ideas therein are as relevant today as they have ever been. In the decades since publication, Elias’s unique sociological approach has moved from the wilderness into the mainstream sociological canon in line with growing recognition for his best-known works (2007; 2008; 2012) – the most renowned of which is *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, originally published in 1939. [2][#N2] Throughout this period, Elias’s work and legacy have been proclaimed and disseminated by a group of international scholars (cf. Gabriel and Mennell 2011) and it has recently been argued that figurational sociology [3][#N3] offers the potential for a ‘relational turn’ within the discipline involving a programme of ‘research theorising’. Dunning and Hughes (2013) argue that this turn, centring on the unification of theory and research, can contribute to the betterment of the human condition through the creation of a more reality-congruent fund of knowledge.

At the same time, Dunne (2009) laments the lack of political engagement by figurational researchers and calls for a ‘renewed consideration of figurational sociology’s engagement with questions of the political’ (Dunne 2009: 29). Dunning and Hughes reject this assertion, arguing that ‘Dunne is manifestly wrong to suggest that figurational sociologists are conspicuously silent on issues of policy, resigning such commentary to *later generations*, or perhaps shirking such responsibilities’ (2013: 47, our emphasis). While there are fundamental

differences between these readings of Elias, the ultimate goal – contributing to an improvement in the human condition through theoretically and empirically informed knowledge – is broadly the same. What is also common to both is the relatively narrow engagement with a core group of figurational sociologists.

In this paper, we challenge this narrow interpretation of figurational sociology through a more wide-ranging engagement with figurational works that engage with contemporary political concerns and policy debates. This necessitates a discussion of the contemporary relevance of Elias's theory of involvement and detachment, and the potential that figurational sociology offers for understanding *contemporary social processes*. It also requires engagement with debates about what has been termed a 'detour via detachment' – or 'secondary involvement' – on the part of the researcher in moving toward a more reality-congruent fund of knowledge (Elias 1987; Quilley 2004; Kilminster 2007; Dunne 2009; Saramago 2015).

The growing breadth of sociological and interdisciplinary work drawing on Elias is evident in areas such as life-course research (Ernst 2016; Goodwin and O'Connor 2016), long-term studies on violence (Eisner 2014; Pinker 2011; Sharpe 2016), media/ communications (Ludes 2016) and international relations research (Linklater 2007). Space restricts a review of these works and by necessity we draw on a selective reading of work from the fields of social and public policy to illustrate how Elias's approach offers fruitful avenues to researchers wishing to expose the often misguided and detrimental policies of governments and elites. These developments have not been documented before. We argue that such research is not driven by a preordained and utopian prescription of what *ought* to be, but rather by historically informed, empirical investigations that expose the negative impact of social and public policy on the human condition (Elias 2010). These impacts usually impinge on the *least powerful* groups within society, as it is they who invariably bear the brunt of the 'unintended consequences' of such policies. It follows that such empirical investigation demands a focus on the interdependence of social groups; and conversely, a focus on group interdependencies inevitably draws attention to the uneven effects of state policy across different social strata.

Given that one of the central and defining features of Elias's sociology is the *developmental* nature of knowledge (Elias 2007, 1987), we believe this issue is of great importance. This is considered all the more imperative given persistent growth in inequality (Wilterdink 1995, 2016; Piketty 2014), unsustainable global processes (Quilley 2011; Dauvergne 2016) and emergent trends in technology and automation (Wilterdink 2016; Harari 2016), all of which question Elias's theory of growing social interdependence, mutual identification, higher level integration and functional democratisation over the long-term [4],[#N4] (Mennell 2014). Debates about the 'hollowing out' of the nation-state have been evident for some time (Ferge 1997; Jessop 2004; Lever 2005), and the release of *The Panama Papers* [5],[#N5] in 2016 (see Harding 2016) confirmed that the state's redistributive function is being undermined by the erosion of its monopoly on taxation at the global level (Flint and Powell 2013; see also Shaxson 2011). This wider context is increasingly recognised as central to understanding the global financial crisis and related international processes of financialisation, welfare retrenchment, growing food insecurity, household displacement and expulsion (Aalbers 2016; Desmond and Gershenson 2016; Evers and Lever *forthcoming*; Sassen 2014). The recent anti-EU Brexit vote in the UK and the election victory of Donald Trump in the US were each seen in their own way as a response to the failure of elites to address a range of interrelated problems – the 'left behind' thesis being key to understanding such issues, many have argued (see Haidt 2016). Our aim in this paper is to illustrate the usefulness of Elias's work for this endeavour. In so doing, we demonstrate that the 'research theorising' demanded by Dunning and Hughes (2013) and the engagement with the political called for by Dunne (2009) are in fact *already* continuing apace.

The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. In the next section we explore the connections between the process of civilisation (Elias 2012) and Elias's (2007) thesis on involvement and detachment in

positioning knowledge (the sociology of sociology) centrally within Elias's work. This is followed by a brief discussion of the relevance of Piketty's work (2014) and the growing period of inequality that has emerged since the 1980s, as it is in this period that figurational works engaging with contemporary social processes have emerged in greater number. We then turn to the issue of contemporary figurational sociology and outline how scholars and researchers can use insights from Elias's work to develop a historically informed engagement with the present. In the final section we discuss the as yet undocumented tranche of figurational works that engage with contemporary social processes in the field of social and public policy.

The centrality of the sociology of knowledge

It is important to state at the outset that Elias's 1956 paper was not – as it was widely seen at the time – simply another way of framing Weber's (1946) discussion of 'objectivity' and 'value-freedom'. It was, in fact, the first statement of his sociological theory of knowledge and the sciences (see Elias 2009; Mennell 2015). For the concerns of this paper, it is thus necessary to briefly outline the connections between the overall *process of civilisation* (Elias 2012) and Elias's (1956, 2008) thesis on involvement and detachment, as this illustrates the central issues in his sociology of knowledge.

Taken in its entirety, Elias's work on the process of civilisation (2007, 2012) illustrates how the notion of 'civilisation' gradually came to be associated with the *innate* superiority of European nations and the development of the modern nation-state over the course of many centuries. As Elias states:

[A]n essential phase of the civilising process was concluded at exactly the time when the consciousness of civilisation, the consciousness of their own behaviour and its embodiments in science, technology or art began to spread over the whole nations of the West' (2000: 43).

As the complexity of the social, political and economic figurations individuals formed with each other increased during the state formation process – driven by increasing differentiation, specialisation, competition and the internal pacification of public space – Elias argues that individuals were compelled to show more self-restraint in their relations with each other. Over time, alongside advances in scientific knowledge, he shows that these *psychogenetic* and *sociogenetic* processes lessened the individual's *involvement* in the 'external world' by increasing the capacity for self-reflection, calculability and foresight, and hence *detachment* from the 'natural events' unfolding around them.

The consolidation of these 'solipsistic tendencies' in the personality structure around the time of the Renaissance provided the foundations on which Western philosophy, science and the subsequent development of sociology stand (Kilminster 2007). In this sense, as Lepenies (1977) notes, there are clear links between 'detachment' and the rise of science as a way of acquiring knowledge. Elias (2009) discusses these developments in relation to Max Weber's work on 'objectivity' and 'value-freedom'. In his two famous essays – 'Politics as a vocation' and 'Science as a vocation' – Weber (1946) drew a distinction between instrumental rationality (means–ends calculation) and value rationality (the organisation of reality into values) by considering the task of the politician alongside that of the scientist. While the politician can allow his 'values' 'to permeate everything he says and does', wanted to know if the same rules applied to the sociologist (Elias 2009: 41). In accordance with the prevailing scientific theories of the day, and the dominant focus on the search for truth and objectivity, Weber concluded that they did not, and he thus drew a distinction between 'political values' and 'value-freedom' in science. While values are necessary in social science, he argued that an individual's position is always 'value-laden' and that values must never be allowed

to distort the pursuit of truth, 'value freedom' thus being necessary for social science to pursue truth objectively.

Elias's thesis on involvement and detachment (Elias 1956, 2007) was undoubtedly influenced by Weber (Kilminster 2004), yet Elias set out to counter the rational individualism of Weber by focusing on the development of sociological knowledge *within* figurations of interdependent individuals (Kilminster 2014). As Dunning and Hughes (2013: 196) confirm, for Elias 'it is not just a question of whether or not knowledge is value-laden, but a question of the degree to which and the ways in which it is value-laden.' Indeed, for Elias (2007) there is no such thing as absolute 'value-freedom' or 'total detachment', as detachment must always be understood in relation to the structure, values and interests of certain groups – in other words, in relation to 'involvement'. Elias (2009) argues that the contradiction between the political and social scientific writings of Marx clearly illustrates how the 'reality congruence' of sociological knowledge can be undermined by excessive involvement – be it political or otherwise – in this sense.

In recent years, a latter-day version of the involvement–detachment debate has unfolded amongst figurational sociologists. At the end of the 'Reinventing Norbert Elias' conference in Amsterdam in 2012, a discussion emerged as to whether or not figurational sociologists should be more willing to speak out on *affairs of the day*. Stephen Mennell (2012) summed things up on the Norbert Elias Foundation' blog [6][#N6] some weeks later, stating that figurational sociologists have 'often seemed inhibited by our own reputation for pursuing relatively "detached" sociology and long-term perspectives, rather than the short-term policy-orientated research that is "bread and butter" for much of mainstream sociology.' While there was broad agreement that it is difficult to separate the reality of involvement and detachment in practice, there was a divergence of opinion as to whether it is legitimate for figurational sociologists to engage in *contemporary affairs* through a long-term, detached perspective. Some scholars came out strongly against this proposition, yet it is our contention that figurational sociologists can, and indeed *should*, be prepared to engage in contemporary political debates perpetuated by mainstream economic thinking and concurrent policy discourses. This is crucial, we contend, if we are to make the insights that emerge from Elias's work germane for investigations of contemporary social processes, and for sociologists of all persuasions.

From the past to the present

It is worth noting Piketty's (2014) challenge to mainstream economics at this juncture and the implications of his work for sociology, and for figurational sociology in particular. According to Savage (2014), Piketty's careful historical study of 'capital in the twenty-first century' refutes the superficial temptations of 'presentism' evident in contemporary sociology and the varied claims made in recent decades that we are living through 'post-modern', 'neo-liberal' times qualitatively different from any previous historical period. To some extent, Piketty replicates Elias's (2007) standpoint that contemporary sociology ignores history through a 'retreat into the present' that disregards the influence of earlier societies. The work of Elias is often aligned with French *Annales* School of history (van Krieken 1998) and their focus on the *longue durée* and the slow pace of change – a claim Savage (2014) also makes about the work of Piketty.

If we agree with Piketty's thesis that when wealth grows faster than economic output and income inequality soars, and that this potentially leads to future economic and political instability, we start to understand the significance of recent arguments made about the 'hollowing out' of the nation-state, the decline of the state's redistributive function, and the potential implications of #Brexit, #Trump and the so-called 'left behind thesis'. Over twenty years ago, Wilterdink (1995) recognised the significance of what he called the short-term reversal of growing income and wealth equality since the 1980s within the longer time frame of the civilising

process. He argued that the growth of socioeconomic inequality could potentially have future dysfunctional consequences for society amongst the poor (by generating apathy and hatred), the middle classes (who may experience anguish and resentment) and the wealthy (who may come to display indifference and contempt for those below them). In this paper, we focus specifically on the changing power relations between established and outsider groups that have emerged during this period, as it is the issues involved that are key to understanding the sociological impact of the trends identified above.

The issue of changing power relations is perhaps illustrated most clearly through the decline in social welfare provision and the recasting of citizen-state relations. Indeed, as we demonstrate throughout the remainder of this paper, during the relatively short period of growing inequality that has emerged since the 1980s, politicians, policy-makers and other elites have come to identify *less* with the poor (Lever 2011; Vertigans, 2015). Contrary to the growth of welfare provision in Western nations over the course of the previous four centuries – when elites gradually came to sympathise *more* with the poor – the civilising process has slowed and even suffered reversals in particular social and spatial contexts (Newton 2001; Ferge 1997; Fletcher 1997; Wacquant 2004; Rodger 2008; Lever 2011). However, before moving on to look at the figurational works that have emerged in the fields of social and public policy during this period, we first briefly explore the emergence of concern for contemporary social processes amongst figurational sociologists, as well the problems they face developing a reality congruent fund of knowledge.

Figurational sociology and contemporary social processes

The work of Elias, and figurational sociology in general, has been subjected to a number of wide-ranging critiques in recent decades (see, for example, Arnason 1987; Duerr 1988; Dunne 2009). Dunne (2009) is paramount for the concerns of our argument in this paper, given his critique of the work of those he considers to represent *contemporary* figurational sociology. Dunne engages with a very narrow body of work that excludes a wide range of empirical investigations and studies of contemporary political and policy issues that he accuses figurational sociology of bypassing.

While we recognise that engagement with *current affairs* is contentious for some figurational scholars, we also believe that Elias's work offers great potential for exploring contemporary social processes. Existing research in this area has been largely overlooked by figurational sociologists, and also by their critics, resulting in a limited understanding of the breadth, scope and *imagination* of contemporary figurational sociology. Elias's (1994) personal engagement in debates about the risk of nuclear war in the later years of his life, where he was arguably less relatively detached than his friend Godfried van den Benthem van den Bergh (1992), demonstrate that he was indeed prepared to engage with and speak out on *affairs of the day*. While a strong dose of 'detachment' is always necessary to counter excessive 'involvement' in sociological enquiry, we argue that it is also necessary for sociologists to engage with contemporary concerns of the day through a long-term, detached perspective if we are to generate more 'reality congruent' knowledge of contemporary social processes.

A younger generation of figurational sociologists, and other social scientists making use of Elias's insights, are already moving beyond the position adopted by an earlier generation of figurational scholars. The development of sociological theory evidenced by this move is part of a changing set of attitudes towards different forms of knowledge – as evident in the rise of more involved forms of identity politics, for example – and to the evolution of the knowledge process more generally. These changes can be linked to increasing levels of functional democratisation in recent decades, and to the need for individuals to be more reflexive and sophisticated within more complex networks of social and political interdependence. As Kilminster

(2004) notes, while younger researchers:

[...] will probably experience their relations with others [...] in ways that will make the methodological imperative of greater detachment and suspension of value-judgments [...] seem simply inflexible and even authoritarian [...] sociologists still wedded exclusively to the greater detachment, fantasy-control, ideology banishing model of scientific activity will find the contemporary kinds of sociological activity and preferences [...] decidedly disconcerting (Kilminster 2004: 38).

If we agree that the reality congruence of sociological knowledge can be undermined by excessive involvement, and that a 'detour via detachment' is necessary to move beyond this impasse and engage with contemporary social processes, we need to clarify what 'secondary involvement' entails for the researcher in practice (Dunning and Hughes 2013; Saramago 2015).

To illustrate the developmental nature of sociological knowledge, Elias (2007) uses the metaphor of a spiral staircase. Ascending the staircase allows for greater understanding of the previous levels humanity has passed through in a relatively detached way (Kilminster 1998), which – given that previous balances of power and knowledge are taken by some groups to be part of an innate and established social order – underlies a key methodological principle. The call for a 'detour via detachment' is thus best understood, on this understanding, as an attempt to move up the spiral staircase towards a position where involvement does not hamper the capacity of researchers to produce reality-congruent and detached forms of scientific knowledge. Figural sociologists have generally characterised such an approach in terms of 'involved-detachment' (Kilminster 2007), in line with the need for appropriately detached forms of scientific enquiry and engagement unhindered by excessive involvement. Yet Saramago (2015) has argued that the over-emphasis on the disciplinary nature of 'detachment' and its political implications limit the ability of researchers to engage more fully in social research. By adopting a position of 'detached-involvement', we agree with Björk (2005) and Saramago (2015) that figural researchers *are* able to engage more openly with contemporary social processes, much as Elias became involved in intellectual debates about the problems and future of democracy between the wars in Germany.

The figural works outlined below demonstrate the nature of this engagement, illustrating how it is possible to make reality-congruent statements about negative forms of human development facilitated by politicians, policy makers and other elites in the current period. The underlying approach, we contend, combines empirical research with a figural theoretical model in seeking to expose contemporary 'myths', whilst striving to 'provide more realistic knowledge about the ways in which human beings are bonded together' (Goudsblom, 1987: 334).

Towards a historically informed engagement with the present?

One of the principal figural engagements with contemporary social processes is Abram de Swaan's work on transnational social policy (1992, 1994, 1995a, 1997a). In his earlier work on the historical development of welfare regimes, de Swaan (1989) explores the changing nature of welfare over four centuries through the growth of poor relief, mutual aid and central state provision. His intention was to explore the ways in which rich elites eventually came to sympathise more with the poor and deprived, and how, over time, the

collectivising process slowly aligned itself with the civilising process in particular geographical and spatial contexts (see Lever 2011). His latter work, conversely, illustrates how the rise of neoliberalism started to unravel the gains made during this period. In the early 1990s, de Swaan (1992; 1995a) focussed on the trend towards greater levels of mutual identification alongside the possibility of developing transnational social policies. Yet by the end of the decade neoliberalism had shaken this belief and the focus had switched towards the *receding* prospects for transnational social policy (de Swaan 1997b).

In this sense, de Swaan's work clearly illustrates the importance of engaging with contemporary social processes through a long-term detached perspective. Moreover, the growing scholarly engagement with Elias's work in the fields of social and public policy arguably builds on de Swaan's work by highlighting how politicians, policy-makers and other elites have come to identify less with the poor, and how, in recent decades, the collectivising process has become detached from the civilising process in particular social and spatial contexts (Newton 2001; Ferge 1997; Fletcher 1997; Wacquant 2004; Rodger 2008; Lever 2011).

Key contemporary figurational works in this area have explored the shifting position of working-class youth over time (Law and Mooney 2012; Vertigans 2015; Crisp and Powell 2016), and an increase in the scope and intensity of governance involving a wide range of actors and spatial contexts in the targeting of 'problem' families and neighbourhoods (Garrett 2007; Rodger 2008; Law and Mooney 2012; Flint and Powell 2012, 2014; Ball, Batty and Flint 2016). Recent studies have also examined how these shifting relations contribute to differing outcomes for the lower strata of society in terms of access to housing (Powell and Flint 2009; Stewart 2014) and labour markets (Ernst 2016; Goodwin and O'Connor 2016; see also Lever and Milbourne 2014; 2017).

Such accounts can be usefully situated alongside figurational works on 'civilising offensives' (de Rooy 1979; Kruithof 1980; Mitzman 1987; van Krieken 1999; Powell 2013) and 'civilising campaigns' (Goudsblom 1994), which have sought to extend Elias's civilisation theory (de Regt 2015). This body of work explores the historical continuities and developments in terms of the governance of behaviours and populations through a theoretical lens that places power and dynamic group relations at the centre of our understanding, and addresses the social constraints bearing down on individuals beyond those emanating from the state. [7] [#N7] As these examples illustrate, the tranche of figurational work that has emerged around social and public policy in recent decades underscores the potential of Elias's theoretical work in contributing to 'questions of the political' by exposing the gulf between how things *actually are* and how they are *assumed to be* by economists, politicians, policy-makers and other elites.

Many figurational sociologists also stick rigidly to Elias's methods in seeking to uncover gradual changes in standards of behaviour linked to wider social transformations (see for example, Goudsblom 1994; Mennell 2007; Wouters 2007). A distancing from the present is thus often reflected in method, particularly in terms of geographical scale, with the nation-state and national habitus often being seen as central to Eliasian theorising. Elias was, however, far more creative, innovative and sensitive about the 'the spatial' than the dominant national comparative approach suggests, as his work on the social and spatial dimensions of *The Court Society* (Elias 2006 [1969]) illustrates. In adhering to a long-term perspective via a 'detour via detachment' some scholars have arguably lost sight of Elias's engagement with both the contemporary and the micro-level. In contrast, we see the space of the home/family (Ball, Batty and Flint 2016), the city (Flint 2009, 2009a; Powell 2010), the ghetto (Wacquant 2004), the neighbourhood (Lever 2005; 2011; Powell and Flint 2009) and 'ethnic enclave' (Flint 2009b; Powell 2013), as well as spaces of cultural, commercial and occupational diversity (Lever 2013; Lever and Milbourne 2014, 2017; Evers and Lever *forthcoming*) as legitimate spaces for sociological enquiry. Indeed, it is within these spaces that subtle variations within policy and contemporary social processes are played out and where counter-trends are observable through the study

of social organisation and human behaviour.

Overlapping with the work outlined above, research developing Elias's legacy has also focused on the power relations and social interdependencies associated with minority ethnic groups and immigrant populations across a range of geographic scales. Flint (2009a, 2009a) draws on Elias to understand the regulation of immigrant populations in the UK and in exposing their differential treatment in policy terms (see also Lever and Milbourne 2014; 2017). Other recent research has explored the asymmetric power relations of specific ethnic minority communities through a figurational lens, including the stigmatisation of 'outsider' groups and their cultural practices (Powell 2008, 2011; Powell and Lever 2017). Spatial differences are of course masked by ceding to a predominant focus on the nation-state as the primary unit of analysis and national habitus as the most important socialising force. Yet the focus on group interdependencies at a range of levels, from very small figurations to humanity as a whole means that Elias 'side-steps the much debated dualism between macro and micro perspectives' (Quilley and Loyal 2004: 6). The theory of established-outsider relations (Elias and Scotson 2008) moreover shows how theoretical concepts developed with regard to the gradual development of earlier societies are equally important in understanding the changing nature of social relations and contemporary social processes (Lever and Milbourne 2014; Mennell 2015a).

At the extremes, de Swaan's insights into the hatred of distant strangers, widening circles of dis/identification, decivilisation and compartmentalisation (2001, 1995a, 1997a, 2015) provide an Eliasian-influenced account of how governments and elites can mobilise dis-identifications for political ends, often with tragic decivilising consequences. The concept of compartmentalisation highlights the separation of groups within contemporary societies at all levels (psychological, social and spatial), while his theorising on the mentality of mass murder emphasises historic context alongside habitus and individual dispositions, thereby contributing to an understanding of genocide studies and developing Elias's framework on decivilising processes. It is also worth noting that compartmentalisation works by degrees and that it often occurs under seemingly innocuous conditions in consumer societies (de Swaan 2001). Indeed, as Lever and Milbourne (2017) demonstrate in their analysis of the meat processing industry in Wales, migrant workers often experience poor working conditions and ill treatment in tightly defined occupational spaces hidden from view behind factory walls.

Contemporary figurational research has also sought to synthesise Elias's theories with those of other theorists, including Foucault, Bourdieu and Wacquant (see Dunning and Hughes 2013). John Rodger (2012) has situated Elias's theory of de/civilising processes alongside the empirical and process-informed work of Wacquant, who was a pupil of and collaborator with Bourdieu (cf. Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). Power, historical and group analysis, social processes and research-theorising are all central features of Wacquant's sociology. Furthermore, his contribution to an edited collection on Elias (Wacquant 2004) suggests that the latter played some role in informing the development of the former's empirical-theoretical account. Moreover, following Comte, Wacquant sees the goal of sociology as being 'to explain and to interpret, which is to say to supply the instruments of verifiable knowledge, which can also become tools for reasoned public action' (Wacquant 2009: 283).

In *Criminalising Social Policy*, Rodger (2008) fuses Elias and Wacquant through an examination of criminal justice and social policy under New Labour in the UK. His main arguments revolve around neoliberal reforms in the US and UK that furthered a growing intolerance of anti-social behaviour while giving policy legitimacy to the development of putative policies that 'punish the poor' and replace welfare-based social policies with punitive criminal justice. Rodger argues that this has effectively reversed the civilising process in marginalised communities through policies that help to dissipate empathy and heighten intolerance towards the communities and groups left behind by the advance of neoliberalism. Drawing on Wacquant's analysis of

'hyperghettoisation', Rodger explores the relations between individuals and groups categorised as anti-social/criminal and those doing the categorising in order to shed light on the bonds and interdependencies that bind individuals together. In so doing, he highlights the cultural dimensions of incivility, the political shift towards inauthentic modes of governance, the decline in civilised attitudes towards poverty, and subsequent changes in levels of emotional self-regulation – all of which are seen to further, in Wacquant's terms, 'advanced marginality' (Rodger 2008, 2012). Not surprisingly, the concept of decivilising processes has also gained traction among criminologists as a means of detailing a perceived 'decivilising of punishment' and a decline in mutual identification and concern for outsiders within western societies (Franke 1992; Garland 2001; Pratt 1999). [8][#N8]

Conclusion

In this paper we have demonstrated that a largely unrecognised and expanding tranche of research inspired by Elias in the fields of social and public policy is engaging with *contemporary social processes*. Significantly, this work highlights how politicians, policy-makers and other elites now identify less with the poor, and how, within Western societies in particular, the civilising process has become increasingly detached from the collectivising process in a growing number of social and spatial contexts. What is common to these works is their critique of the partiality of accounts that tend to over-emphasise the role and control of politicians, policy makers and other elites in steering society in a specific direction, whilst ignoring the complexity of figurational dynamics (from the local to the global) and important sites of social and spatial socialisation. Our approach helps to rectify the presentism of contemporary sociology (Savage 2014) – what Elias (1987) refers to as the retreat into the present – by situating the investigation of contemporary social processes within a longer history, that acknowledges earlier precedents and continuities in questioning the novelty of emergent trends within the current period.

From our perspective, prior political involvements *can* be overcome via a detour via detachment. But if researchers are to develop detached scientific analyses that produce new knowledge of human social development, these involvements must be transformed rather than lost via secondary forms of involvement. In taking a detour via detachment from the standpoint of 'involved-detachment' some figurational scholars have arguably lost sight of Elias's engagement with the spatial and micro-level, thus undermining the breadth, scope and *imagination* of contemporary applications of his work. While a position of 'detached-involvement' recognises that our knowledge of social development is still too limited to make concrete statements about the future of humanity as a whole, it arguably allows us to make statements that generate reality congruent forms of knowledge about contemporary social processes. Given the emotionally charged nature of contemporary social relations and the inherent political threats to many social groups brought about by the rising tide of inequality and unsustainable global processes, we agree with Saramago (2015) that this is a hugely fragile position to maintain. Kilminster's (2007) observation that those making use of Elias's insights must apply the principle of cognitive evaluation to achieve the level of detachment that would be possible if a better understanding of human figurations had already been achieved seems prescient.

We leave the last word to Peter Emmerson (2017). In a recent letter to the editor of *Network* – the magazine of the British Sociological Association – Emmerson responded to an article on the question of 'optimism' in the current period. In the letter he argued that 'contemporary sociological problems are not about a lack of 'critical optimism', but about 'a lack of comparative detachment', and that sociologists must take a 'detour via detachment' to develop more reality congruent forms of knowledge of the current period. We share Emerson's conclusion that, if sociologists had taken a more radical approach to 'theoretical collapse' focused on change

rather than philosophy in recent decades, they would have potentially been better placed to more adequately understand contemporary social processes, and the potential future problems facing humanity. We thus call for a more open-minded engagement with the work of Elias and a new generation of figurational scholars.

Notes

1. Transcript of Norbert Elias's (1984) lecture at the Prinsenhof Conference against Racism and Discrimination, Amsterdam 27 January 1984, our emphasis. [\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. In English, the book became known as *The Civilising Process*. The definitive version of the text, issued as volume 3 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias, was however published under the more accurate title of *On the Process of Civilisation*. The Collected Works in English, which run to 18 volumes, were completed in 2014 (see www.ucdpress.ie [\[http://www.ucdpress.ie\]](http://www.ucdpress.ie)). [\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. Figurational sociology is the term used to describe Elias's unique sociological approach which emphasises power, long-term social processes and interdependence and centres on the dynamics of human figurations, or the 'modes of living together of human beings' (Elias cited in Kilminster 2014: 6). This approach is also sometimes referred to as process sociology, which was the term Elias himself came to prefer. See Goudsblom (1977) for a summary of the key characteristics of Elias's distinct approach. [\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. Functional democratisation refers to the 'long-term, unplanned process of the lessening of the power gradients and social distance between interdependent groups in societies that have become increasingly differentiated' (Kilminster 1998: 151; see Elias, 2000). [\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. <https://panamapapers.icij.org/> [\[https://panamapapers.icij.org/\]](https://panamapapers.icij.org/) [\[#N5-pt1\]](#)
6. <http://norberteliasfoundation.nl/blog/> [\[http://norberteliasfoundation.nl/blog/\]](http://norberteliasfoundation.nl/blog/) [\[#N6-pt1\]](#)
7. See the special issue of *Human Figurations* in 2015. [\[#N7-pt1\]](#)
8. Rohloff, A. (see 2011, for example) has also made some useful and insightful links between civilising and decivilising processes in relation to moral panics about climate change, the significance of which is yet to be fully realised (see also Hier 2016). [\[#N8-pt1\]](#)

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