Adrian Jitschin*

Climate and civilisation – perspectives from the viewpoint of Norbert Elias

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

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

* *Adrian Jitschin,* Norbert Elias Foundation, Netherlands

CPE, 10. (2) 2025, 133 – 139 DOI: 10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

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

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -

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

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

https://doi.org/10.5771/2566-7742-2025-2-133 - am 20.01.2026, 04:54:53. https://www.inlibra.com/de/agb - Open Access -