

Expanding the horizon of history: A few notes on Norbert Elias and *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo.*

1. One of the more curious analytical suggestions in *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class. A Memo* (Latour & Schultz, 2022) was that certain ideas from the authorship of Norbert Elias could prove useful for describing this class as being legitimate and rational in its (re)definition of the vector of history than the old ruling classes. Although this suggestion caused a bit of grumbling, I do not believe it was an unreasonable argument to put forward. However, given the memorandum-style of our book, we were only able to briefly hint at this historical-theoretical inspiration, which probably did not help as well. For this reason, in this short essay, I will try to add a few more comments on this argument, in the hope of strengthening its usefulness for the continued, collective reflection on the emergence of an ecological-political subject – that is, what we called the ‘ecological class’. Like the *Memo* itself, this intervention is structured in a set of concise discussion-point paragraphs.

2. Neither Bruno Latour nor I were experts on Elias, but after discussing his historical-sociological work with French philosopher Bruno Karsenti, it struck us as fruitful to draw inspiration from his ideas on classes. First, it interested us how class struggles – according to Elias – initially manifest in relatively subtle changes in habits, manners, life styles, taste and distastes, values and attitudes, before they crystallise into more visible, intense and articulated conflicts of interests. Consider how ecological conflicts today can be detected particularly in changing habits and matters of taste and consumption, for example, in what one eats, how one travels, etc. Secondly – by avoiding an economised reading of history – his definition of classes does not primarily depend on relations of production, but rather on social groups *detecting, formulating, articulating and transmitting* a given sense for history and its movements. And thirdly, finally, but no less importantly, then one finds in Elias’s thoughts on class struggles no teleological perspectives or historical determinism, which allows to escape the idea that collective historical action and its actor – or, simply, *the* political subject – is already carved in stone (Latour, 2021; Latour & Schultz, 2022).

3. Due to these thoughts on social classes, we began examining more specific aspects of Elias’s historical-sociological analyses in our discussion of the possible emergence of a new ecological class. Here, we need to take a step back. Unlike the old ‘traditional’ classes, which all continue down the paths of modernisation,

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development and production, we defined the ecological class as the social collective that assumes responsibility for the long-term issue of preserving the planet's habitability – and which therefore can claim to have a broader, a longer, or a more complex perspective on history. This, we argued, is ultimately the reason in political ecology breaks with the old ideologies of the 19th and 20th century, and why the ecological class find itself in conflict with the old 'bearing classes' – because neither the liberals, the socialists, nor the classes they claimed to represent took into account the preservations of the planet's habitability conditions.

4. The ecological class hence *looks further ahead* than the other classes. By seeking to maintain the planet's habitability conditions it expands its calculations and sensibilities in both time and space – and it is in this sense we in the *Memo* suggested the ecological class could be regarded (and should regard itself) as more 'rational' than the traditional classes. As Bruno Latour had previously noted elsewhere, it is important here to remember the specific conceptual meaning Norbert Elias attached to the notions 'rational' and 'rationality':

"(...) there is nothing cognitive about it, nothing rationalist in the old-fashioned sense; it does not draw on the Enlightenment, there is nothing teleological in its argument; it is a series of entirely contingent events. No, one class can only claim to be a little more rational than another when its horizon is a little broader, a little more consistent than that of others, because it is concerned precisely with the long-term meaning of history and the cosmological framework in which it will unfold" [My translation from French to English] (Latour, 2021, 10).

5. In other words, those classes that *avoid* working against their own civilisation project can claim to be more rational than the others. And again, by fighting to preserve Earth's habitability conditions as well as by taking responsibility for inventing and promoting the engendering practices that ensure their maintenance, the ecological class *broadens the horizon of action*, which is why it can claim to see itself as more *rational and more legitimate* in defining the direction of history and how to "progress" forward. At this point, we found it interesting to mobilise an analogy from Elias's *oeuvre*: Just as the ascending bourgeoisie class criticised the aristocracy for its naïve and limited visions, values, and practices, we argued that the ecological class challenges the lack of rationality, legitimacy, and the inconsistencies of the old ruling classes, who have proven incapable of diverting from the destructive horizon of production, and who historically and continuously continue to deprioritise the planetary habitability conditions, as well as the practices that ensure them – conditions and practices that themselves are *conditioning* the very production and prosperity these classes claim to pursue.

6. Based on this argument, we proposed two things. First, that it is precisely from this self-understanding of historical legitimacy that ecologists – who often appear humble or even apologetic about their own political project – could find a source of *mobilising energy and pride*, which is essential for the development of any class consciousness. Secondly, that by undertaking the task of redefining what is 'rational' in relation to the history's trajectory, the ecological class could challenge the role

of the traditional classes in serving as what Bruno Karsenti calls “the pivotal class”. Drawing on Elias, Karsenti (2024) understands the pivotal class as the class around which the distribution of political positions is organised – the class that draws the other classes with it toward a specific goal and a given civilisational horizon, and which, through its ways of life and orientations, inspires, and structures new rationalities, practices and paths into the future.

7. Thus, we found in Elias’s work a historical analogy, a model, an idea of how an emerging ecological class could avoid merely limping apologetically behind the other classes, and instead strive to *give meaning* to both its own political project and history. As we noted in the book, political ecology could thus grow out of its infancy (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26), cease to appear as a humble or “backward-looking” movement on the wrong side of history, and instead assert its right to criticise the traditional classes, whose narrow-minded economized reading of history blinded them to the planetary limits of a production system, the horizon of which still confines them.

8. As we write in the *Memo*: “In classical terms, one could say that the liberal tradition, largely shared by the socialist traditions, betrayed its own project of development and progress” (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26–27). One could perhaps excuse them on the grounds that they could not have anticipated the extent of the climatic catastrophe. However, we still argued that the former ruling classes have forfeited any right to claim that they are acting in the name of civilisational rationality, just like they no longer possess any legitimacy to define the direction of history, or for that matter the right to demand respect from those other classes they once claimed to lead. Instead – and this was our idea in a nutshell, expressed in more performative terms – expanding the horizon of action *beyond* production is and remains the task of the ecological class, and it is through this endeavor it may inspire and lead the other classes along with it (Latour & Schultz, 2023, 26–27).

9. To summarise our argument: With the concept of a ‘pivotal class’, Bruno Karsenti outlines the idea of an *avantgarde class* – one that leads the way in defining the cultural and political horizon of civilisation, a class around which the political positions end up being organised, and whose practices, rationalities and horizons inspire the other classes. As mentioned, this analysis stems from Elias’s description of the ascending bourgeoisie rupture and conflict with aristocratic court society, whereas we used it to portray the emerging ecological class as a more *rational* and *legitimate* class than those still stuck in the political horizons of development and production. Why? Because the ecological class *extends* the horizon of history, and continues the civilisational project through its expanded awareness of the conditions of earthly habitability – and because in doing so, it aspires to define a different understanding of ‘progress’, and to inspire the other classes through its ways of life and perspectives.

10. Was this proposal naive, overly hopeful, or perhaps even slightly “extravagant” (Blok, 2023)? Possibly, perhaps – but as mentioned above, it was simply our way of suggesting that the ecological class shouldn’t be ashamed or humble, but that it should strive to become a new pivotal class, a proud one, more rational than the others, more civilised even, precisely because the other classes have betrayed their own civilisational project by leading us towards the ruins of ‘development’ and ‘progress’ (Krøijer et al., 2021). Ruins that – no matter what – require us to collectively reflect on or examine all possible historical analogies in the attempt of creating a strong political ecological subject....

References

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