

## A climate of (de-)civilisation?

This special issue deals with global warming and other cases of anthropogenic environmental change from a (mainly) process sociological perspective. This is particularly noteworthy given that the figural and process sociological approach founded by Norbert Elias has hitherto been largely neglected by environmental sociology. The *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*, edited by Riley E. Dunlap and William Michelson (2001), does not contain a single mentioning of Norbert Elias, Johan Goudsblom, or any of their students throughout its 618 pages. The same can be found in the broader field of sociologically informed sustainability research: Process sociological perspectives are broadly missing.

Although process sociology has hardly received any attention in environmental sociology and related fields, it provides promising *Denkwerkzeuge* – thinking tools – for studying socio-environmental relations and the current ecological crisis. Among these is Norbert Elias's concept of the so-called *Triad of Basic Controls* (Elias, 2012 [1978], 151), which finds its most rigorous application in Johan Goudsblom's work on the domestication of fire as part of the civilising process (Goudsblom, 1992). Further concepts that are valuable for the study of the relationship of humans to the extra-human nature can be found in Elias's sociology of knowledge, for instance, the *Fantasy–Reality Balance*, the *Involvement–Detachment Continuum*, or his theory of *The Great Evolution*, a model of different levels of integration of the universe, ranging from subatomic particles to human figurations and beyond (Elias, 2007 [1993]). In addition, Norbert Elias's sociological understanding of shame and studies on the social *habitus* can contribute to the understanding of phenomena such as 'flight shame', 'train pride', and more generally the emotional dimension of practices of (non-)sustainability (Rohloff, 2018; Sommer & von Querfurth, 2025).

Such Eliasian *Denkwerkzeuge* are applied in the articles of this special issue. Referring to Norbert Elias's understanding of social change as a long-term development that takes at least three generations and is unplanned, *Sighard Neckel* argues in "The quandaries of transformation. On the socio-ecological dilemma of simultaneity" that the rapid transformation, which is required for effective mitigation of climate change, appears unlikely from a sociological perspective. *Marta Gospodarczyk* operationalises the involvement–detachment continuum in order to study recent drought events in Poland. *Vincenzo Marasco* and *Angela Perulli* draw on Elias's notion of *social habitus* to interpret data from focus group interviews in Italy and explain the prevalence of high-carbon practices despite widespread environmental awareness.

\* Bernd Sommer ([bernd.sommer@tu-dortmund.de](mailto:bernd.sommer@tu-dortmund.de)), TU Dortmund University, Germany.  
Marta Bucholc ([m.bucholc@uw.edu.pl](mailto:m.bucholc@uw.edu.pl)), University of Warsaw, Poland.  
André Saramago ([asaramago@fe.uc.pt](mailto:asaramago@fe.uc.pt)), University of Coimbra, Portugal.

Norbert Elias's concepts of "civilising" and "civilisation" itself, too, can be applied fruitfully in order to make sense of the current socio-ecological crises. This brings us to the title of the special issue: *A climate of (de-)civilisation?*

In an everyday understanding, the concept of civilisation still predominantly "sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones" (Elias, 2000 [1976], 15). However, what exactly do "civilisation", "de-civilisation", and "civilising" mean within process sociology? In his theory of civilising processes (*ibid.*), Elias refers to changes on the level of sociogenesis as well changes on the level of psychogenesis that are inseparably linked. Empirically, he studied these developments by examining the emergence of the absolutist state in France and behavioural changes among the secular upper classes until the eve of the French Revolution. Elias described how societal units expanded and the capacity for executing physical violence became centralised. Complementary to this development, social functions and labour became increasingly differentiated, leading to longer and more complex chains of interdependencies. On the personality level, these developments went hand in hand with changes in patterns of behaviour and feelings that can be described by increasing foresight and mutual identification among individuals (independently from their group membership), the reduction of (internal) physical violence, and a decline of the fantasy-content of knowledge. Elias generalised his findings from historical research into a general theory of human development. In this broad understanding, some type of civilising process can be found in every human figuration. However, civilising processes are not intentional and they can be reversed. As Stephen Quilley (2011, 68) puts it by referring to Stephen Mennell: "Decivilization or an overall reduction in complexity is always a possibility, certainly in any particular locus". This means that the disintegration of social units, de-differentiation, and weakened chains of social interdependencies are linked to the decline in mutual identification, increased expression of aggressiveness, and the re-emergence of violence in social relations as well as increasing fantasy-content of knowledge. The current climate crisis represents a loss of societal control over extra-human events in a catastrophic form. According to Elias's notion of the interconnectedness of the *triad of basic controls*, a higher level of danger within the social or natural world is both a manifestation and a catalyst for processes of de-civilisation.

Following this perspective on de-civilisation, *Fritz Reusswig* and *Wiebke Lass* describe how populist narratives and movements contribute to such developments. *Kerrin Langer* and *Frank Reichherzer* reflect on the dynamics of de-civilising and civilising processes using the case of environmental dimensions of warfare: Violent military conflicts regularly lead to the destruction of the natural environment – sometimes even intentionally as a means of warfare. As a result, provisions that prohibit "ecocide" and constrain the destruction of the natural environment during armed conflict have been introduced in International Humanitarian Law. The

inherent ambivalence of civilising processes is examined by *Matthias Schmelzer* in his contribution “The dialectic of civilisation? Norbert Elias, economic growth, and the politics of social-ecological transformation”. Schmelzer illustrates aspects of civilising processes that are – under the conditions of global capitalism – simultaneously stabilising and destructive. By doing so, Schmelzer not only highlights the limitations of Eliasian process sociology but also argues for a reconfiguration of Elias’s *triad of basic controls* centered on collective self-limitation in order to avoid socio-ecological collapse.

In addition to these research articles, the special issue includes two introductory essays. By referring to Norbert Elias’s biography, *Adrian Jitschin* reconstructs his relationship with and viewpoints on extra-human nature. In addition, *Nikolaj Schultz* revisits *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class: A Memo*, co-authored with Bruno Latour (Latour & Schultz, 2022), that made use of a class concept inspired by Norbert Elias’s civilising theory.

*Culture, Practice & Europeanization* provides a highly fitting platform for publishing this special issue; not only because the issue comprises contributions that refer to cases in various European societies, but also because Norbert Elias himself can be described as one of the few genuine European sociologists: Born and raised in Breslau, he moved to Heidelberg and Frankfurt to specialise in sociology. Due to the rise of the Nazis, he left Germany via Paris to London, where he wrote his main work *On the Process of Civilisation*. After the World War II, he acquired academic positions in Leicester. After an intermezzo in Accra, Ghana, he moved back to continental Europe, with stations in Bielefeld and Amsterdam, where he died in 1990. During his (partially forced) *tour d’Europe*, Elias left traces and influenced the sociologies of his various European home countries, and many others. This special issue demonstrates how vital and productive this influence remains today in addressing the most pressing problems of our time.

## References

Dunlap, R.E. & Michelson, W., Eds., (2001). *Handbook of Environmental Sociology*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood

Elias, N. (2000 [1976]). *On the Process of Civilisation*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N. (2007 [1993]). *Involvement and Detachment*. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias, N. (2012a [1978]). *What is Sociology?* Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Goudsblom, J. (1992). *Fire and Civilization*. Harmondsworth: Allen Lane.

Latour, B. & Schultz, N. (2023). *On the Emergence of an Ecological Class. A Memo*, Oxford, UK: Polity Press.

Quilley, S. (2011). Entropy, the Anthroposphere and the Ecology of Civilization: An Essay on the Problem of ‘Liberalism in One Village’ in the Long View. *The Sociological Review*, 59, 65–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.01979.x>

Rohloff, A. (2018). *Climate Change, Moral Panics and Civilization*. London: Routledge.

Sommer, B. & von Querfurth, S. (2025). „Wäre mir dieses ganze Thema rund um das Klima egal, dann würde ich hier auch in Technik schwimmen.“ Zum Verhalten und Empfinden junger Klimaaktivist\*in. In S. Ernst, A. Jitschin & V. Dahl (Eds.), *Zur Transformation sozialer Kanons. Texte zu Norbert Elias* (56–74). Weinheim: Beltz Juventa.