



POWER AND THE STATE AS PROCESS: ELIAS'S FIGURATIONAL ANALYSIS OF STATE FORMATION AND ITS LIMITS

Moć i država kao proces: Elijasova figuracijska analiza nastanka države i njena ograničenja

ABSTRACT: *This paper analyses Norbert Elias's understanding of the role of relational power within figurations and of the formation of the modern state. It compares classical sociological theories in which the basis of power is the possession of resources or institutional positions with Elias's relational model, in which power is based on uneven distribution of dependence among figurational actors. Subsequently, the article examines Elias's conception of the state as a processual outcome of long-term changes in the balance of power and the extension of chains of interdependence. Special attention is paid to Elias's account of state formation as a transition from feudal fragmentation to modern centralisation. The article also addresses the role which monopolisation of physical coercion and taxation, as well as the demographic, economic and political changes played in this process. Finally, the paper considers the limitations of Elias's model, particularly with regard to the absence of comparative analysis, the partial neglect of capitalism as a cause of social change and the lack of a hierarchy of figurations. It proposes the concept of fundamental figurations as a possible basis for further development of Elias's figurational sociology. In conclusion, the paper indicates the value of Elias's figurational sociology for a better understanding of the present and the future and refers to Elias as one of the most significant historical sociologists.*

KEYWORDS: Norbert Elias, figuration, power, state, historical sociology

APSTRAKT: *Rad analizira Elijasovo razumevanje uloge relacione moći u figuracijama i shvatanje nastanka moderne države. Polazi se od poređenja teorija moći u klasičnoj sociologiji, u kojima se moć izvodi iz posedovanja resursa ili institucionalnog položaja, sa Elijasovim relacijskim modelom moći, u kojem moć proizilazi iz neravnomerne zavisnosti figuracijskih aktera. Potom*

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se prikazuje Eliasovo shvatanje države koja se razume kao procesualni ishod dugoročnih promena u balansu moći i produžavanja lanaca međuzavisnosti. Posebna pažnja je posvećena Eliasovom objašnjenju procesa nastanka države, shvaćenog kao tranzicije od feudalne fragmentacije do savremene centralizacije. Analizira se i uloga koju su u tom procesu imali monopol nad fizičkom prinudom i oporezivanjem, te demografske, ekonomske i političke promene. Na kraju rada se razmatraju granice Eliasovog modela, posebno u pogledu nepostojanja uporedne analize, delimičnog zanemarivanja kapitalizma kao uzroka promene i nedostatka hijerarhizacije figuracija. Rad predlaže uvođenje koncepta fundamentalnih figuracija kao osnove za potencijalno unapređenje Eliasove figuracione sociologije. U zaključku, rad ukazuje na vrednost Eliasove figuracione sociologije za bolje razumevanje sadašnjosti i budućnosti i ističe Eliasja kao jednog od najznačajnijih istorijskih sociologa.

KLJUČNE REČI: Norbert Elias, figuracija, moć, država, istorijska sociologija

Introduction

Most sociologists have understood power as a condition of an individual or group that primarily derives from the possession of a property, object or position. Vilfredo Pareto (1916/1935: 1421–1425), a classical theorist of elites, argues that certain individuals occupy elite positions because they possess particular psychological and functional qualities. For Marx (1859/1904: 11–14), the power of a given class is indicated by the ownership of the means of production. According to Weber (1922/1978: 926), power, understood as the probability of imposing one's will despite resistance, is a relational phenomenon that depends on the possession of goods and positions. Economic power emerges from control over goods and opportunities for income (Weber, 1922/1978: 53; 926), while political power is sourced from parties' capacity for political control (Weber, 1922/1978: 938–939). Michael Mann (1986: 6–7) defines power as the position of a given individual within networks of power. Departing from the approaches of most of these authors, Elias formulates power through further articulation of Weber's relational definition.

For Elias, power is a characteristic of relations between interdependent actors, whereas the main source of power imbalance is the uneven distribution of dependence. In other words, power does not only depend on the possession of a property, object or position, but on involvement in a relation of interdependence as well. Simply put, the party in a relationship that is less dependent has more power, while the more dependent party has less power. Power is therefore not the property of an individual, but is always manifested within networks of interdependence (Elias, 1970/1978: 74; Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994: xviii). This definition of power allowed Elias to review power-related phenomena, such as the state, differently. Elias (1939/2000: xiii) agrees with Weber (1922/1978: 54) in the most general definition of the state as a monopoly over physical coercion. Nevertheless, Elias does not refer to the state as a given condition or

a static entity, but as a figuration whose full historical manifestation depends on long-term processes of increasing/decreasing interdependence. Where chains of interdependence are short, the state is weak or non-existent, while the long chains of interdependence enable the emergence of the centralized modern state (Elias, 1939/2000: 236; 344).

This paper aims to present in detail how power and the state are understood in Elias's figural sociology and how the historical process of state formation is interpreted in relation to it. The systematic reconstruction of Elias's thought is not only expository as its goal is to highlight the limits of his model by exploring the internal logic of his conceptualisation of figuration, power and state. At the end of the paper, it is suggested that figural sociology would be strengthened by the concept of fundamental figurations (fundamental relations of interdependence), understood as empirical phenomena that structure power relations in society over the long-term and crucially shape the character of other figurations. While Elias does not explicitly distinguish fundamental figurations from 'ordinary' figurations, this paper argues that hierarchisation of figurations, in which economic, political and military relations are treated as more influential, would increase the explanatory capacity of figural sociology, without completely negating its processual and relational foundations. Methodologically, this paper combines reconstructive analysis of Elias's theory and a conceptual synthesis that may create a basis for further comparative and historical research.

Conception of Power in Elias's Figural Sociology

One of the oldest debates in sociology is the dispute between realism and nominalism. According to realists, phenomena such as the state, class or social formation exist as an independent reality separate from individuals, or, as Durkheim (1895/1982: 50–60) writes, as independent "social facts." Nominalists, by contrast, are of the opinion that society represents a collection of individuals and that the state, class and similar concepts are abstract entities through which the actions of a multitude of individuals are explained (Weber, 1922/1978: 89–90). Elias identifies the dispute between nominalists and realists as a false dilemma, which he avoids by introducing the concept of figuration (Van Krieken, 2005: 5; Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 54–56). A figuration is a relation of interdependence between individuals structured by power balances (Elias, 1939/2000: 482). Multiple figurations form a chain of figurations or a network of figurations. Society could, therefore, be understood as a branching network of figurations (not as the sum of individuals or social facts). Figurations may refer to relations at the micro level: for example, an individual family constitutes a figuration, since it represents a relation of interdependence among its members. They may also refer to higher levels: the state, for instance, also constitutes a complex figuration of interdependence among a multitude of individuals.

An important aspect of every figuration is power, due to the fact that power balances are inherent to every relation of interdependence. Since Elias does not

regard power as a substance which one can possess, he argues that it exists only within relations of interdependence, in which power ratios are continuously shifting (Van Krieken, 2005: 6). Thus, Elias understands power as a level of dependence within a relation:

From the day of his birth, a baby has power over its parents, not just the parents over the baby. At least, the baby has power over them as long as they attach any kind of value to it...Equally bi-polar is the balance of power between a slave and his master. The master has power over his slave, but the slave also has power over his master, in proportion to his function for his master – his master's dependence on him. In relationships between parents and infants, master and slave, power chances are distributed very unevenly. But whether the power differentials are large or small, balances of power are always present wherever there is functional interdependence between people. In this respect, simply to use the word 'power' is likely to mislead. We say that a person possesses great power, as if power were a thing he carried about in his pocket... Power is not an amulet possessed by one person and not by another; it is a structural characteristic of human relationships – of all human relationships (Elias, 1970/1978: 74).

Power relations do not arise only from economic interdependence, such as the division of labour or political interdependence, such as relations of coercion, but from every possible form of interdependence, which may be psychological, emotional or symbolic in character:

We depend on others; others depend on us. In so far as we are more dependent on others than they are on us, more reliant on others than they are on us, they have power over us, whether we have become dependent on them by their use of naked force, or by our need to be loved, our need for money, healing, status, a career or simply for excitement (Elias, 1970/1978: 93).

To offer an implicit critique of Marx's position that the power of a given group depends predominantly on the possession of the means of production, Elias, together with John Scotson, conducted research in 1965 that resulted in the study *The Established and the Outsiders*. The study aimed to examine power relations between established residents and newcomers in a suburb of Leicester (referred to in the study by the pseudonym Winston Parva). Although both the established residents and the newcomers belonged to the same class² and ethnic group, a power imbalance formed between them, with the established residents

2 According to Loyal (2004: 132–137), Elias's understanding of class bears affinities with the approaches of Weber, Marx and Thompson, while at the same time remaining highly distinctive. For Elias class is "at once historical, concrete, reflexive, relational and processual. This is achieved in part by his use of a deceptively simple figurational model to understand class processes. This allows him to see the two-way pressures on individuals from both above and below, but also horizontally, in relation to intra-class relations and power ratios. On this basis, intra and interclass dynamics are theorized from both a 'we' and 'they' perspective. Here boundaries between groups are fluid and shift as the overall nexus of interactions and interdependencies within a figuration changes" (Loyal, 2004: 137).

becoming dominant in relation to the newcomers. The power of the established residents was manifested through the stigmatisation and exclusion of newcomers (via gossip) and granted easier access to local political offices to the established group. This power was not based on the possession of economic resources, but on longer settlement and the social cohesion that was drawn from it. (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 63–64; Malešević and Ryan, 2013: 168). As Elias states:

One could see here the limitations of any theory which explains power differentials only in terms of a monopolistic possession of non-human objects such as weapons or means of production and disregards the figurational aspects of power differentials due purely to differences in the degree of organisation of the human beings concerned ... As one came to gradually recognize in Winston Parva, the latter, especially differences in the degree of internal cohesion and communal control, can play a decisive part in the greater power ratio of one group in relation to that of another (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994: xviii).

Elias acknowledges that, in certain historical situations, the possession of non-human economic objects may lead to greater disparities in power. This is particularly the case in situations where social inequalities are so pronounced that the subordinate group has difficulty reproducing itself biologically and economically. However, in situations where economic differences between the dominant and subordinate groups are small or non-existent, power disparities are mainly produced by non-economic factors (Elias and Scotson, 1965/1994: xxxii; Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 65–66). Although Elias insists that the power of a given individual or group always derives from the degree of their dependence within a figuration, he is also aware that the possession of particular attributes and resources can significantly shape the extent to which a group or individual is dependent. Therefore, in *The Civilizing Process*, Elias emphasizes that the possession of qualities such as aggressiveness greatly increased one's chances of becoming a feudal lord. He also stresses that the power of an individual feudal lord depended on the possession of armies and wealth (Elias, 1939/2000: 234). It can be argued that Elias's definition of power is a further articulation of Weber's relational conception³ in which power derives both from one's position within interdependence and from the possession of particular attributes and resources.

The principal weakness of Elias's conception of power is the absence of a precise analytical framework that could clearly determine the extent to which the possession of a particular resource or attribute shapes the power of an individual or group within a figuration. Elias does not explicitly establish a clear hierarchy that would make it possible to determine which type of resource (economic, political, military, ideological, etc.) is most important in enabling a particular group or individual to attain a dominant position within figurations and affect

3 "In general, we understand by 'power' the chance of a man or a number of men to realize their own will in a social action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action" (Weber, 1922/1978: 926). "Power means any chance within a social relationship to realise one's own will, even in the face of resistance, regardless of the basis on which this chance rests" (Weber in Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 66).

power distribution in wider society. In other words, a key limitation of Elias's approach is the lack of a systematic differentiation of figurations according to the type of resources or properties on which they are based. This paper seeks to address this by introducing the concept of fundamental figurations, which will be discussed in detail later.

Elias's Conception of the State

Elias's basic definition of the state does not differ greatly from the classical definition. He identifies two basic features of the modern state: the monopoly over the means of physical coercion and the monopoly over taxation (Hadas, 2017: 41). What is specific to Elias's understanding of the state is his argument that the fully developed modern state is not a fixed institutional entity, but the consequence of a long-term process. The state emerges as a result of a process of monopolisation, an elimination contest among various competing political entities (centripetal forces) (Elias, 1939/2000: 344). The process of monopolisation itself is not a historical inevitability, but the unintended result of competition between different political entities. This process is based on the following logic:

If in a major social unit, a large number of smaller social units, which, through their interdependence, constitute the larger one, are of roughly equal social power and are therefore able to compete freely, unhampered by pre-existing monopolies, for the means of social power (primarily the means of subsistence and production), the probability is high that some will be victorious and others vanquished. As a result, fewer and fewer groups will gradually control more and more opportunities, while more and more units will be eliminated from the competition, becoming directly or indirectly dependent on an ever-decreasing number of dominant groups (Elias, 1939/2000: 269).

If the process of monopolisation leads to the centralized state, the process of feudalization (centrifugal forces) leads in the opposite direction: towards the disintegration of the state and the transfer of state-like attributes to the feudal estate as a kind of "mini-state" (Elias, 1939/2000: 236). Just as the process of monopolisation is connected with the growth of social interdependence, the process of feudalisation goes together with the decline in social interdependence. The state can be classified within a broader set of similar processes that Elias calls the "survival unit" or the "attack-and-defence unit" (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 61–62). Elias describes the basic historical function of these units as follows:

These units all seem to have exercised comparatively strict control over the use of physical violence in relationships between their members. At the same time, they have allowed, and often encouraged, their members to use physical violence against non-members. To date, sociology has lacked any clear conception of the common features of this type of solidaristic

grouping at different levels of social development. Its function is obvious: it knits people together for common purposes – the common defence of their lives, the survival of their group in the face of attacks by other groups and, for a variety of reasons, attacks in common on other groups (Elias, 1970/1978: 138).

If Elias's understanding of the development of the state is carefully reconstructed, the subsequent conclusion could be reached. Under conditions of a gradual increase in interdependence and the unfolding of the process of monopolisation, the development of survival units proceeds in the following direction: tribe > city-state/feudal estate > absolutist state > modern state. According to Elias, although the monopolisation process is not a necessary phenomenon, once it begins to occur it unfolds in a structured manner (Elias, 1939/2000: 367). It may be concluded that the dynamics of the monopolization process arise from the probabilistic mechanism governing the outcomes of conflicts between units of approximately equal strength. The multitude of actions by individual survival units leads to the elimination of most of the units, an increase in interdependence and an unintended transformation of the social order and the emergence of the modern state (Elias, 1939/2000: 366; 369). Through this explanation, Elias attempts to reconcile determinism and voluntarism by emphasising that the direction of historical movement is often accidental (Dunning and Hughes, 2013: 46–47). Elias assumes that the conflict between modern nation-states will lead to the further development and enlargement of survival units, until the whole of humanity becomes connected in one large unit (Elias, 1970/1978: 139). Nevertheless, he underlines that the development of figurations is not necessarily one-directional (the process can always revert to feudalisation), and that, in addition to the level of interdependence and the monopolisation process, it depends on the preservation and transmission of the fund of human knowledge which could always be lost (Elias, 1969/1983). Although Elias's theory may superficially appear close to theories of modernisation, it is, for all the reasons mentioned above, very different from them. Elias emphasizes that progress is not a social inevitability and does not specify the increase of civilisation as normatively positive, but retains value-neutrality on this question (Elias, 1939/2000: 1–5). When focusing on the development of survival units, Elias illuminates another important aspect of figurational sociology. Networks of interdependence do not presuppose only cooperation and may also be based on war and violence. In other words, war and violence are also networks of interdependence:

Fierce antagonists (...) perform a function for each other, because the interdependence of human beings due to their hostility is no less a functional relationship than that due to their position as friends, allies, and specialists bonded to each other through the division of labour... The internal arrangements in each group are determined to a greater or lesser extent by what each group thinks the other might do next (Elias, 1970/1978: 76–77).

Elias's Account of the Formation of the Modern State in the Second Volume of *The Civilizing Process*

Elias's most important study, *The Civilizing Process*, examines how the extension of chains of interdependence led to the process of "civilising" and to the emergence of the modern state. In this study, he offered one of the most comprehensive and elegant historical analyses of European society. At first glance, it may seem surprising that his work was overlooked by later historical sociologists and social historians, such as Charles Tilly, Barrington Moore Jr., Michael Mann and Perry Anderson, etc. This could partly be explained by the fact that his main works, written in German in the 1930s, appeared in English much later, and were, therefore, not available to authors in the English-speaking world (Mennell, 2015; Kojić, 2023: 1). The delayed English translation of Elias's work revealed an interesting fact: the substantial elements of his analysis converged with those of later historical sociologists who had no access to his works or didn't draw from them. This convergence highlights the originality of Elias's theory and its pioneering importance for historical sociology. It is worth mentioning that, when *The Civilizing Process* is discussed, greater attention is usually paid to the first volume, which examines the civilising process at the micro level by focusing on psychogenetic processes. By contrast, the second volume, which focuses on more fundamental sociogenetic processes, on how monopolisation and the formation of the modern state led to psychogenesis, has been somewhat overlooked. This is the reason why this chapter will focus primarily on the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* (and only partially on the first volume).

In the second volume, Elias analyses the impact of processes of monopolisation and feudalisation, on the development of the modern state in Europe. Elias argues that centrifugal tendencies predominated in Europe after the collapse of the Western Roman Empire, from the fifth to the eleventh century (Lau, 2022: 44). Feudalisation weakened central authorities and transferred economic and political functions to the level of the autarkic feudal estate based on natural production. The independence of the feudal estate also implied an underdeveloped network of interdependence (Elias, 1939/2000: 197–208; 370). Men with physical strength and a disposition towards violence became feudal lords. Since their position did not depend on relations with many people, feudal lords behaved in an unrestrained manner, were prone to extreme violence towards women, subjects and defeated enemies, while also lacking regulation of instinctual impulses in eating, drinking and sexual life (Elias, 1939/2000: 162–168; 370–372).⁴ Because of their intense emotional outbursts and sudden changes of mood (from brutality to generosity, from repentance to surrender to pleasure), Dunning and Hughes (2013: 88–89) argue that their behaviour resembled what contemporary psychology calls manic depression or bipolar disorder.

4 Because of Elias' attitude that violence is a core part of human behaviour, Malešević and Ryan (2013: 170–171) criticize him for a Hobbesian understanding of violence as a naturalistic quality of the human race. According to them (2013: 171; 175) organised violence and mass murders are products of modernity and civilisation rather than "animalistic" layers of human nature. It can be argued that this position overemphasizes Elias's "Hobbesianism" by overseeing his emphasis on short chains of interdependence, not biology, as the main cause of a more violent society.

From the eleventh century onwards, centripetal forces or the process of monopolisation, gradually gained strength (Lau, 2022: 45). One of the driving forces of the process of monopolisation was the growth of population in medieval Europe. Population growth led to greater population density and, therefore, to increased complexity in social relations (Elias, 1939/2000: 211). It encouraged the settlement in the European hinterland and the development of a land-based network of roads (Elias, 1939/2000: 225). Unlike Rome, whose main urban centres were located on the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, medieval Europe developed urban centres and trade routes deep in the continental interior (Elias, 1939/2000: 228). Population growth also brought about an increase in agricultural production and a more developed division of labour which in turn led to the development of the merchant stratum, the movement of surplus agricultural labour into towns, increased exchange and the monetisation of the economy (Elias, 1939/2000: 222–223).

These changes affected the behaviour of both major and minor feudal lords (large and small feudal landowners), but also of landless knights.⁵ Filling space simply by expanding existing or founding new feudal estates through clearing of uncultivated land became increasingly difficult. Under these conditions, acquiring and enlarging a feudal estate was possible only through internal military conquest in wars against other feudal lords or through external conquest, as in the conquest of foreign territories, for example, during the Crusades (Elias, 1939/2000: 215–221). Monetisation of the economy enabled major feudal lords to collect taxes more efficiently and thereby finance military forces. Continuous military conflicts transformed taxes from temporary contributions into permanent sources of state revenue (Elias, 1939/2000: 350). Minor feudal lords, oriented towards natural production and small autarkic estates, were neither interested in nor capable of successfully taxing monetary flows and instead relied on the sporadic plundering of merchant caravans and on kidnappings (Elias, 1939/2000: 239). Moreover, minor feudal lords depended on fixed incomes, natural dues converted into money and were, therefore, more adversely affected by rising prices of goods, caused by the increased amount of money in circulation (Elias, 1939/2000: 191). A change in military technology began during this period as well. Major feudal lords, due to their greater fiscal power, became less dependent on heavy cavalry composed of members of the feudal stratum and started to hire professional heavy infantry (Elias, 1939/2000: 193). Under ever-increasing competition pressure, greater fiscal power and a stronger monopoly over violence enabled major feudal lords to weaken minor ones. In the struggle among numerous feudal estates (survival units) the major feudal lords succeeded in defeating the smaller ones (degrading many of them

5 According to Elias the classes were divided not only vertically but also horizontally. Stanley Loyal (2004) points out that according to Elias “on the one hand ... stood land-monopolizing warrior families, noble houses and landowners, but also peasants, bondsmen, serfs and hospites who occupied a piece of land that supported them. On the other hand, we see individuals from both classes deprived of land. Thus both the knightly and the labouring classes became increasingly divided in their relationship to ownership of and access to land. Vis-à-vis the former, Elias identifies a tripartite distinction between those knights who ruled over one or more small estates, a smaller number who ruled large estates, and those without land, who placed themselves in the service of greater knights” (Loyal, 2004: 125).

to the status of landless knights), similar to the way in which, in capitalist competition within the economic sphere, large enterprises gradually take over small ones (Elias, 1939/2000: 260; Bakić, 2011: 15).

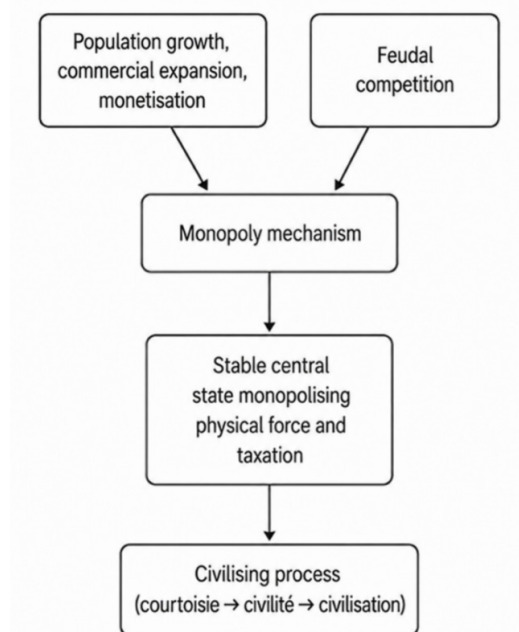
Population growth, the strengthening of trade, the rise of the bourgeois stratum and the intensification of monopolisation together contributed to the extension and increasing complexity of chains of interdependence. Minor feudal lords no longer depended only on their autarkic estates. Many of them lost landholdings and became propertyless knights. Their life chances now relied on the kings and great nobles (Elias, 1939/2000: 238–240). For that reason, they had to change their patterns of behaviour and pursue their interests not only through violence, but also through indirect methods such as intrigue and diplomacy.⁶ These behavioural changes required greater self-control and restraint (Elias, 1939/2000: 190). In the Late Middle Ages, the castles of great feudal lords and kings were transformed into courts, which became the main political arena for the pursuit of the interests of different factions of the feudal class. *Courtesie* emerged at the courts of magnates as a set of rules governing conduct and the regulation of impulses (Elias, 1939/2000: 252). It was the earliest layer in the civilising process, limited only to aristocratic groups, within which belonging to the court meant belonging to a code of conduct (Elias, 1939/2000: 52). Progressive growth of fiscal power between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries enabled rulers to gradually completely replace the feudal warrior stratum with a standing army and a permanent bureaucracy thus halting the effects of centrifugal forces (Elias, 1939/2000: 343). In addition to ownership of the state apparatus, the absolute ruler based his power on balancing the power of the different factions of the nobility and the bourgeoisie (the royal mechanism) (Elias, 1939/2000: 320–321). *Courtesie*, in the form of *civilité*, spread from the court and was no longer a matter only of the aristocracy, but of a broader stratum of the elite, especially the bourgeoisie. Among members of the elite, behavioural self-regulation became internalized (the development of the superego), as the norms defining “good behaviour” expanded significantly (Elias, 1939/2000: 88; 386–387).

In absolutism, the state was the property of the ruler, an extension of the ruler’s household (Elias, 1939/2000: 343). However, for a complex society to function, the ruler required a significant network of people whom he employed as professional members of the bureaucracy and the army. Monopolisation made rulers increasingly dependent on other people. As administration professionalised, the state ceased to be the ruler’s private possession and transformed into the nexus of chains of interdependence. The state became an instrument for satisfying the interests of different classes and the monopoly over coercion and taxation became socialized (Elias, 1939/2000: 372–374). The process of the emergence of the modern market and the “general state”

6 Alongside Europe, Japan was one of the few premodern societies in which feudalism was the dominant form of social and political organisation. As in Europe, in Japan a highly developed warrior aristocracy was present, composed of the daimyo, the upper stratum of the nobility, and the samurai, the lower stratum. With the establishment of the Tokugawa shogunate in the seventeenth century, the Japanese feudal polity underwent a process of centralisation. Eiko Ikegami argues (1995: 10–12) that this process led to the taming and civilising of the samurai in a manner comparable to the process Elias identifies in Europe. The taming of noble classes in both cases was necessary for effective state creation (Górnicka and Mennell, 2020: 280).

raised *civilité* to the level of *civilisation*. Civilised behaviour, first required of the aristocracy and then of the broader elite, now became established as a firm norm of conduct for the middle and upper strata and as a demand addressed to society as a whole. Forms of behaviour became uniform and were assumed to be universal (Elias, 1939/2000: 88–89; 427–428). As the interdependence of different groups increased, so did the power of each individual group in relation to other groups. Consequently, “functional democratisation” emerged, establishing a balance of power between rulers and the ruled and between the upper and lower classes (Elias, 1939/2000: 117; 433). The formation of European “civilisation” as a subjective perception of one’s own superiority in relation to “savage” ancestors and poorer countries (Elias, 1939/2000: 5) is the consequence of long-term sociogenetic processes. The psychogenesis of civilised behaviour itself, and the psychological manifestations of the development of civilisation as a form of internal control of behaviour, *superego*, that Elias dealt with in the first volume of *The Civilizing Process*, cannot be understood without Elias’s discussion of the fundamental sociogenetic processes examined in the second volume.⁷ All aspects of the civilising process are presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Representation of aspects of the civilising process



Note: The initial inspiration for this diagram came from a diagram presented in D. Smith, *Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory* (2001: 22). The diagram, however, differs substantially from Smith’s original.

⁷ Elias contrasted successful French centralisation with Germany where centrifugal forces were more powerful due to a large size of the Holy Roman Empire. The centralisation of Germany only began in the 19th century and was more militaristic due to the stronger role of martial nobles in contrast to the middle classes. This specific context influenced the course of German politics in the 20th century (Elias, 1989/1996).

Critical Discussion of Elias's Understanding of the Process of the Formation of the Modern State

The reconstruction of Elias's thought displays both the strength and the underlying ambiguities of his model. The understanding of the state as a long-term historical process should be considered as the main strength. The principal limitation of Elias's approach is that the processual and relational openness and Eurocentric approach of his theory sometimes weaken its explanatory precision. This weakness is reflected in three more specific limitations: methodological, structural and theoretical. The basic methodological problem is his focus on the European case. Although in certain passages he sporadically mentions premodern China as another valid example of a separate civilising process⁸ (Kojić, 2023: 1), Elias's analysis is comparative, only within Europe, and not global in scope, which limits the universality of its conclusions. Later authors attempted to apply Elias's figurational approach to analyses of civilising processes in case studies of non-European societies or of humanity as a whole (Goudsblom, Jones and Mennell, 1996; Stebbins, 2009; Lau, 2022). Nevertheless, figurational sociology has not established a developed comparative analysis of civilising processes in different premodern societies.

In the premodern world, political centralisation was the norm rather than the exception. The decentralisation of European feudalism (Antonić, 1995: 129–133; Mandić, 2022: 187–189) is a characteristic that can rarely be found in other premodern societies, perhaps except in premodern Japan (Mandić, 2022: 201–204). Polities such as imperial China, ancient Egypt, ancient Persia, the Inca Empire and colonate Byzantium were all based on the existence of permanent bureaucratic administration and standing armies. In these societies the main ruling class was not the decentralised nobility, but the centrally organised state. Max Weber was aware of this and therefore classified these societies as patrimonial in contrast to European feudal society (Weber, 1922/1978: 1044–1051). Similarly, Karl Marx attempted to encompass these societies through the concept of the Asiatic mode of production (Marx and Engels, 1972: 33–37; Anderson, 1974b: 473–483). If all these societies developed centralised administration the question of why modern rational state did not emerge there before it did in Europe should be raised.

It can be argued that the crucial difference lies in the absence of capitalist relations of production in the mentioned societies. Capitalist development was not possible in traditional patrimonial (centralized) societies where state-imposed restrictions on profit generation disturbed capital accumulation (Weber, 1909/1976: 62–63; Sanderson, 1994: 44). On the other hand, capitalism, as a minor social formation, or as a figuration, structured by the emerging wage

8 "In the political strategies of China, for instance, one can discover a level of self-restraint at least on a par with that of the most highly developed industrial nations. Although in terms of its own economic development China still lags behind, its state formation process in terms of duration and continuity surpasses that of most other existing state societies of our time" (Elias, 1939/2000: 410).

labour/capital relation, originated in the European trading cities as early as the thirteenth century. It was precisely the decentralisation of European feudalism, due to the process Elias refers to as feudalisation and which Perry Anderson (1974a: 150) calls the parcelisation of sovereignty, that enabled the unobstructed development of capitalism.⁹ Without capitalism as a minor formation, the growth of productivity that became the basis of the greater fiscal power of major feudal lords and kings would not have been possible. Capitalism initiated the process of rationalisation of production and the rationalisation that arose in production later became the basis for the rationalisation of the state apparatus. Thus, for example, a social historian Henri Pirenne (1925/2014: 146–147) notes that one of the sources of modern bureaucratic administration was precisely the institution of the bailiff, which was recruited from the urban stratum. Early capitalism therefore made the European central state more productive, more instrumentally rational and more economically sustainable, enabling the emergence of absolutism as a more rational form of centralised state (as neo-patrimonialism or post-patrimonialism).¹⁰ According to Kapteyn (2004: 178) the monopolisation process which takes place under favourable natural condition can be used to explain the formation of the premodern centralized states (China, Korea, Japan, Turkey, Iran, England, France). Still, this cannot explain why the modern central state emerged only in the European case, without taking capitalism into consideration.

Elias emphasises the importance of the development of the merchant stratum for the process of monopolisation, but it remains secondary in relation to the population increase, the growth of interdependence and the monopolisation process. In other words, Elias treats proto-capitalism as one of the driving forces, but not as the most important underlying cause.¹¹ From the methodological weakness of the absence of a comparative method follows the structural problem of neglecting the significant role of capitalism. Without capitalist development, the process of monopolisation would have led to the gradual evolution of

9 The political and economic decentralisation of European feudalism enabled the merchant stratum to accumulate monetary wealth with relatively limited interference. From the thirteenth century onward, this accumulated wealth increasingly began to function as capital in European urban centres. Merchants employed wage labour in the production of woollen textiles, glassware, metal goods and other commodities (in Flanders and the cities of northern Italy). With the establishment of continuous commodity production based on wage labour, capitalism emerged in Europe as a minor economic figuration embedded in feudalism as a dominant economic figuration. For more on this see Mandić (2022).

10 The inspiration for connecting rationalization with capitalism is partly derived from Weber. However, in contrast to Weber, the argument advanced here is not that modern rationality (shaped by Protestantism, the emergence of the modern state, etc.) made capitalism possible (Mandić, 2022: 123). Rather, capitalism is understood as the source of modern rationality, (in its accounting, administrative and economic forms) which then expanded into the sphere of the state.

11 Nathalie Heinich (2013: 38) notes that Elias avoided causalism, and therefore didn't want to "provide every phenomenon one single cause" instead focusing on "close description on interdependencies". In this paper a somewhat different position is held. Elias was, to some extent, theoretically against causalism, but in the empirical explanation of the emergence of modern state he uses a multicausal approach.

feudalism into traditional patrimonialism, which was a frequent occurrence throughout history. In China, the unified central state disintegrated on several occasions, leading to phases of partial feudalization (quasi-feudalism) (Deng, 2002: 50; 54; 77). Yet, with the growth of monopolising processes, the traditional central state was re-established.

Methodological and structural problems also illuminate the main theoretical shortcoming of Elias's model. Elias makes no explicit attempt to establish a hierarchy of figurations according to the significance of the type of resource control on which they are based. This creates an analytical limitation because, at the explicit level, there is no intention to determine which figurations are most important for long-term organisation and transformation of the society. The argument proposed in this article is that the most consequential social changes and most important social structuring are generated by fundamental figurations. Power in these figurations derives from position within relations of interdependence, but also from the possession of material and social resources. The 'fundamentality' of these figurations is determined by the social importance of the resources on which they are based (that is, by the importance of these resources for social reproduction). Fundamental figurations could be defined as long-lasting and structurally stable empirical relations of interdependence between dominant and subordinate groups that are organized around control over socially significant resources and that exert disproportionate and long-term influence on the distribution of power in the society and on the configuration of other figurations. Criteria for differentiating fundamental figurations from 'ordinary' figurations are therefore the following:

1. fundamental figurations are based on the control of the resources that are crucial for social reproduction;
2. fundamental figurations significantly influence the character of other figurations and societal power distribution;
3. fundamental figurations' reconfigurations cause long-term societal consequences.

Three proposed fundamental figurations are economic (control over the means of production),¹² military (control over the means of coercion),¹³ and political (control over the means of administration) (ideological and religious figurations could potentially also be defined as fundamental, but this question

12 Economic figuration is identical to Marx's understanding of production class relations. It can be concluded that both Elias and Marx were highly interested in the analysis of processual aspects of human relations. Christopher Powell (2013: 92) argues that "Marx and Elias both theorize society in relational and processual terms" and "explain social life in terms of embodied social practices". However, their theoretical approaches were at the same time vastly different: "For Marx, one type of social relation—relations of production—inform and constrain all other relations. Elias makes no comparable assumption and explicitly treats relations of force as having their own irreducible dynamics."

13 The concept of means of coercion can be found in Tilly's (1990) analysis of the interaction between capital and state in premodern times.

lies beyond the scope of the present paper).¹⁴ The influence of the fundamental figurations is intertwined, thus, no complex historical process can be explained without an analysis of their interaction. Which of the fundamental figurations is hierarchically most important depends on the historical situation. However, this paper assumes that the economic figuration provides stronger long-term constraints on other fundamental figurations. The proposed supremacy of economic figuration is not a return to base-superstructure model or economic determinism and should be considered as historically contingent rather than universally applicable. The economic, military and political figurations should be understood as co-constitutive and co-causal. For example, military defeat can destroy economic figuration of a given society, just as economic decline can cripple military and political might. However, economic figuration is regarded as imposing more long-term constraints, because the mode of surplus product extraction often establishes a long-term framework within which military and political figuration can typically operate (for example, without sufficient level of surplus product a standing army and a permanent bureaucracy are not possible; without the economic autarky of feudal estate there is no political and military independence of the feudal lord etc.).

In analysing concrete historical instances of fundamental figurations and their interrelations, it is essential to establish whether they are undergoing a process of increasing or decreasing centralization and monopolisation. This distinction provides a basis for two types of fundamental figurations:

1. Decentralized fundamental figurations – In this historical type control over the means of production, coercion, and administration is dispersed among numerous actors or units, resulting in the existence of a larger number of individual figurations.
2. Centralized fundamental figurations – In this historical type, control over the means of production, coercion, and administration is concentrated in the hands of a small number of actors or units, resulting in the existence of a smaller number of individual figurations.

In accordance with the earlier definition and elaboration of the fundamental figuration, this concept can be operationalised through the following dimensions:

1. the object of control (what resource constitutes the source of dominant power within the figuration);
2. the type of interdependence (what fundamental groups are constitutive elements of the figuration);
3. the degree of centralization or decentralization;
4. the long-term structural impact (how a fundamental figuration influences long-term social change and other figurations).

14 While the concept of fundamental figurations might appear similar to Mann's (1986) concept of networks of power, the former focuses more on the relational dynamics of the underlying constitutive groups, whereas the latter conceptualizes power simply as a position within the network.

It is worth noting that the fundamental figurations are presented as a heuristic outline, with the intention of more precise future development of the concept. The goal of the four dimensions of fundamental figuration is to provide basic elements for future research. The paper does not provide more detailed operationalization (precise indicators for dimensions) because it is not empirical and thus, does not have a goal of testing concrete hypotheses. A more detailed overview of fundamental figurations is given in Table 1.

Table 1. *Types of fundamental figurations and their basic characteristics*

Fundamental figuration	The object of control	The type of interdependence	The degree of decentralisation/centralisation	The long-term structural impact
Economic	Means of production, surplus product, money, trade flows	Relation between fundamental classes (main exploiting and main exploited class)	Decentralised – large number of autarkic economic units or interconnected economic actors (feudalism and liberal capitalism); Centralised – few large capitalist units (monopoly capitalism); state as only or dominant economic unit (patrimonialism, real socialism)	Expands chains of interdependence, weakens feudalization, creates basis for monopolisation
Military	Means of coercion (arms and military technology)	Relation between survival units	Decentralised – large number of independent survival units (warring bands, feudal armies, citizen militias); Centralised – one dominant survival unit based on standing professional army	Reduces number of competing units, drives territorial consolidation, increases monopolisation
Political	Means of administration (bureaucracy, tax system, law)	Relation between ruler and the ruled within the survival unit	Decentralised – many independent and semi-independent administrative and legal centres within the larger survival unit; Centralised – one political centre with control over administration and legislature in the survival unit	Transforms tribute into regular tax, military victory into durable rule, royal retinue into professional administration, solidifies monopolisation

Source: Author

To demonstrate the potential heuristic value of the framework, a brief comparative illustration of premodern China and Europe will be given.¹⁵ The comparison is schematic on purpose rather than exhaustive. It does not aim to account for the full complexity and diversity of Chinese and European history (characteristics of different Chinese dynasties, different regional sub-forms of European feudalism, etc.) but to identify the long-term interaction between fundamental figurations. In premodern China, due to the process of monopolisation and irrigation-based agriculture, the political and economic figurations appeared in a centralised form very early on. The centralisation of the political and economic figurations led to the existence of a unified imperial bureaucracy and a standing army. The process of monopolisation conditioned the early initiation of the civilising process and the creation of a specific form of the Chinese understanding of civility. The centralised economic figuration manifested in the form of state monopolies over taxation and trade, which prevented the development of capitalist economic relations. In Europe, on the other hand, the decentralisation of the political and economic figuration enabled the development of capitalism. The strengthening of capitalism led to the centralisation of the political figuration. Dialectically, the initial political and economic decentralisation led to latter unintended political centralisation. However, while the centralisation in China was based on traditional relations, the European centralisation, driven by capitalist development, was by its character more rational because it adopted rational patterns of organisation from capitalism. The comparison of the European and Chinese examples shows that, although the economic figuration often imposes more long-term constraints, it can fully manifest itself only when in synergetic interaction with other fundamental figurations.

Unlike Marx, who emphasises the primacy of a single figuration (productive/class relations) (Powell, 2013: 92), and unlike Elias, who manifestly offers no hierarchy of figurations and assigns equal analytical value to a plurality of them (Powell, 2013: 99), the structural figurationism proposed in this paper would occupy an intermediate position. This approach ascribes explicit importance to the economy, but also the military and politics and treats resources and interdependent relations as equally important aspects of the figurations. Structural figurationism is as relational as classical figurationist sociology, insofar as power can manifest itself only through relations of interdependence. It is, however, somewhat less processual because the direction of change is not entirely open-ended but is in every historical case significantly conditioned by the characteristics of the fundamental figurations.

Despite our criticism of Elias's approach, it should be noted that Elias was a pioneer of historical sociology and that in the 1930s he conceptualised certain fully developed positions and/or proto-arguments that other authors would reach or further develop only several decades later:

15 This brief comparative illustration is largely based on detailed empirical analysis given in Mandić's doctoral dissertation *The Influence of European and Japanese Feudalism on the Emergence of Capitalism* (2022).

1. centralisation as the unintended outcome of class and elite struggle – a thesis defended from the 1970s onwards by representatives of historical institutionalism such as Theda Skocpol (1979) and Charles Tilly (1990);
2. the importance of population growth for changes in social relations – from the 1970s onwards, a central thesis among social historians of neo-Malthusian orientation (Aston and Philpin, 1985);
3. the importance of the merchant stratum for the emergence of the modern state – a thesis defended by Charles Tilly (1990) and Perry Anderson (1974a, 1974b);
4. the importance of trade for the dissolution of feudal relations – a thesis present in the works of Paul Sweezy (1978), Perry Anderson (1974a, 1974b), as well as Wallerstein (1974/2011) and Braudel (1977);
5. the importance of studying long-term processes for understanding social relations – the central thesis of Braudel's (1977) social history.

None of the later approaches attempted to connect the historical analysis of social processes with the analysis of the development of psychological consciousness in such detail, which is Elias's distinctive feature and which also indicates the breadth of his work, encompassing diverse influences, from Marx, Weber and Mannheim to Sigmund Freud and the Frankfurt School. Not many sociologists had the capacity to establish themselves as accomplished scholars in related disciplines such as history, economics, psychology and the theory of international relations. Elias may therefore be described as a total social scientist.

Conclusion

The greatest value of Elias's sociological thought lies in its understanding of phenomena such as the state social formation and class as figurational processes of long duration, which can be understood only through thorough socio-historical research. Equally important is his view that power is relational and that it is, to a significant extent, determined within relations of interdependence. Elias's inquiry into how power and the state as process have manifested themselves throughout history has one very important implication. Processes of the present, such as the modern state, cannot be understood without prior investigation of their historical genealogy. Similarly, attempting to predict what forms of sociality may appear in the future is impossible without in-depth historical analysis.

Nevertheless, Elias's position has several limitations, such as the absence of global comparative analysis, the partial relegation of capitalism to the 'background' cause, and the avoidance of a hierarchy of figurations. These limitations could be addressed through the concept of fundamental figurations, which enables analysis of a hierarchy of figurations according to the resources on which they are based and the extent to which they shape broader social relations. The concept of fundamental figurations could potentially improve figurational sociology and contribute to strengthening its analytical apparatus by making it more applicable to comparative research in historical sociology. In that sense,

the concept of fundamental figuration should not be understood as a rejection of Elias's theory, but as an attempt to make it more structured while preserving its relational and processual nature.

The brief comparison of Europe and China illustrates the analytical potential of the framework. Chinese political and economic centralisation provided a basis for traditional patrimonial state and prevented capitalism from emerging. European political and economic decentralisation, on the other, hand allowed the development of capitalism and of a rational modern centralised (post-patrimonial) state. It should be noted that the concept of fundamental figurations proposed in this paper is not a fully developed theory, but a potentially promising heuristic outline. Further theoretical elaboration and empirical research could build on this argument by operationalising the concept of fundamental figurations more precisely and by comparatively examining how variations in these figurations shaped processes of state formation across different premodern societies, thereby contributing to the emergence of different types of states. The above-mentioned may significantly contribute to the further understanding of the historical development of the state and of the dynamics of the current social processes.

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