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Survival units as the point of departure for a relational social theory

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Abstract:

Relational social theory can be found in the works of Hegel, Marx, Simmel, Mannheim, Mead, Saussure, Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Foucault and Bourdieu. However, one of the most consistent relational thinkers is Norbert Elias. In order to develop his figurational and relational social theory Elias makes two claims: 1) the only theoretically sustainable point of departure for a social theory is to study human beings, human society (and maybe also other animals but we leave this aside for the moment!) in a relational perspective! This claim is justified by a number of arguments among others his critique of methodological individualism, methodological holism, individual-society categories and the homo clauses perspective. 2) The other important assumption that Elias makes concerns the smallest social unit – a survival unit. In other words, the first social relation to be studied is not the single individual or a man-woman relation (family) or man-nature (subject-object). The first unit of analysis is the double relational binding of human beings in social groups. In the first order we find the relation between survival units ('state'-'state'). In a second order we find relations between families and individuals within each of the survival units.

*We accept these two claims and we intend to contribute to a further substantiation of these two claims. Moreover, we shall raise a particular problem which is not sufficiently addressed in Elias's work or in the critical literature on Elias. In particular we shall explore the problem of survival units. Elias assumes that human societies from very early on were divided into survival units (it is plausible that this can be traced back to approx. 4 million years ago when *Australopithecus afarensis* and upright walking began to spread). These survival units have been demarcated; in other words, they have demarcated themselves towards other units, and units from outside have generated a demarcation. The questions we need to address concern the problem of demarcation:*

a) Why are these survival units demarcated towards each other? Why has this been the case for at least 4 million years?

b) Why has the world not at any point been one survival unit? Is it a plausible future development? Can the world turn into one state/survival unit?

We shall argue that although Elias has given an explanation for this demarcation, he has overlooked another mechanism sustaining the separation between units. Furthermore, by incorporating Hegel and Clausewitz into Elias's relational theory we shall demonstrate that an answer to these two questions is possible.

European social theory has always contained different dichotomies. Action-structure, subjectivism-objectivism, and methodological individualism-methodological holism are conflicting and opposing positions which have been competing throughout the history of European social theory at least since Aristotle. Each of these positions enables and constrains one's perspective on the social world and in one's framework for a sociological analysis. Especially with the rise of modern social theory in the late 19th century a more explicit debate and contest between these different positions has taken place. The 'Methodenstreit' in Germany in the late 19th century between historians and economists is one example. Another one is the conflict in sociology between a Durkheimian methodological holism and a Weberian methodological individualism. In almost any theoretical or methodological discussion we have been faced with the problem of these 'two sociologies' (Dawe 1970). What position is to be preferred? What key concept is the most suitable to use as a point of departure? Action or structure, individual or society? What sort of ontological status do we assign our concepts? Do we only have individuals or is it plausible to speak about a society *sui generis*?

These different perspectives and dichotomies have been debated and contested for many years but over the last two or three decades a more consistent critique of these very dichotomies has developed. More recent social theorists such as Pierre Bourdieu, Niklas Luhmann, Anthony Giddens, Jeffrey Alexander, Jürgen Habermas, Nicos Mouzelis and Margaret Archer have all argued that social theory is trapped in these dichotomies, and a more adequate set of analytic tools can only be developed if we transcend these dichotomies. More careful reading of the history of social theory reveals, however, that a number of thinkers for many years have argued in favour of an alternative position – a position we refer to here as relational social theory or methodological relationalism. From G.W.F. Hegel to G.H. Mead and C. Pierce and later Bourdieu we have a long tradition which stresses the relational dimension as the key unit of analysis.

A social theorist who was particularly dedicated to a relational sociology throughout his whole career was Norbert Elias (1897-1990). This paper will explore some of the strengths of Elias's theory and we shall argue that in many respects Elias's figurational social theory is the most convincing contribution to a relational theory which overcomes many of the deficiencies we find in various actor and structural approaches and partly in other approaches to relational social theory. We shall also argue that Elias does not overcome all the problems pointed out by critics of a relational perspective. We shall demonstrate, however, that by introducing other German thinkers such as G.W.F. Hegel and C. von Clausewitz and incorporating some of their concepts into Elias's perspective a step towards a stronger relational theory has been taken.

The structure of the paper is the following: first we present the problem of substantialist sociology versus relational sociology. We take our point of departure in Emirbayer's (1997) article 'Manifesto for a relational Sociology'. He presents some of the key problems in social theories which are embedded in substantialist thinking. His alternative is a transaction perspective or a relational perspective. Emirbayer also discusses the still unsolved problems and challenges faced by relational thinking. After presenting the problem of relational thinking we turn to Elias's version of relational or figural social theory. After a presentation of his position we argue that Elias's theory is a step forward but there are still some problems which need to be addressed. Consequently, we move on to address these problems which revolve around the issue of demarcation and the starting point for his social theory – the concept of survival unit. We shall argue that his concept of survival unit is crucial for developing a relational social theory but we also need to draw on some of the key concepts found in the work of Hegel and Clausewitz.

Substantialist sociology versus relational sociology

In his article 'Manifesto for a Relational Sociology' Emirbayer (1997) discusses various approaches to a conceptualization of the social world. The majority of social scientists conceive the social world as consisting 'primarily in substances or in processes, in static 'things' or in dynamic, unfolding relations' (Emirbayer 1997:281). A whole range of sociological theory is embedded in rational-actor and norm-based models, functionalism, structuralism, statistical 'variable' analyses – all theories in which the entities are seen as prior to relations. As Emirbayer points out the alternative is a relational perspective that depicts 'the social' as dynamic, continuous and processual (Emirbayer 1997:281).

By referring to Dewey and Bentley (1949) Emirbayer distinguishes between two substantialist approaches: the perspective of *self-action* (rational choice, norm-following individuals, holistic theories, 'structuralisms') and the perspective of *inter-action* ('variable-centred approach', survey research and historical comparative analysis). Both approaches start their social analysis by studying a predefined social unit – an individual, an organization or a society. These units have an ontological status as being real existing entities and which act with capacities and powers. They are never defined; they are assumed to be. In some versions of substantialist approaches the units have a will, they have an identity and they have underlying interests. Even when they interact they remain the same, fixed, and independent of the existence of the other. The

units generate action and interaction rather than being constituted in the very process of interacting. The alternative to these substantialist positions is again the transaction perspective or a relational perspective.

What can a relational perspective offer? According to Emirbayer there is a fundamental shift from pre-given units and their pre-given attributed properties to a perspective in which ‘the very terms or units involved in a transaction derive their meaning, significance, and identity from the (changing) functional roles they play within that transaction’ (Emirbayer 1997:287). The transaction or put differently the relational process becomes the point of departure for the analysis. Emirbayer states that things ‘are not assumed as independent existences present anterior to any relation, but ... again their whole being ... first in and with the relations which are predicated of them. Such ‘things’ are terms of relations, and as such can never be ‘given’ in isolation but only in ideal community with each other’ (Cassirer 1953, p. 36 – from Emirbayer 1997:287). Emirbayer continues by saying that relational theorists reject that we can posit discrete pre-given units such as individuals and society as the point of departure of sociological analysis. Individuals, persons, or organization are inseparable from their relational context. They are always embedded in social relations and, consequently, they are not substances stepping into a relationship but they are elements which are articulated and constituted in social relations.

This shift of perspective has a number of implications. A relational perspective leads to a de- and reconstruction of our key concepts such as individual, person, agency, structure, power and society. The concepts are no longer conceived as a pre-defined entity. They must be redefined as relational concepts which imply that they are constituted in a process or in a process of ‘structuration’. In other words, a concept such as society is dissolved from being conceived as an ‘autonomous, internally organized, self-sustaining ‘system’ with naturally bounded, integrated, sovereign entities as national states or countries’ (Emirbayer 1997:294) to ‘a diversity of intersecting networks of social interaction’ (Mann 1986:16). Emirbayer agrees with Mann’s critique of the concept of society and his alternative approach of replacing society with the notion of societies as ‘constituted of multiple overlapping and intersecting sociospatial networks of power’ (Mann 1986:1). According to Mann societies are neither unitary nor social systems nor totalities.¹

¹ It is interesting that Emirbayer refers to Mann’s theory of social power. He might be able to argue that Mann rethinks the notion of society in a more relational perspective. Mann, however, remains deeply embedded in a substantialist approach because his theoretical point of departure are human beings who are ‘restless, purposive, and rational, striving to increase their enjoyment of the good things of life and capable of choosing and pursuing appropriate means for doing so’ (Mann 1986:4) The human being is a pre-given entity with a fixed set of properties and attributes – exactly what Emirbayer and other including Elias warned us against (*homo clausus*).

Mann accepts that occasionally we can observe some more stable form of interactions of power networks in a given social space – these more regularized processes of interactions can be seen as a ‘society’. Underneath, however, ‘human beings are tunnelling ahead to achieve their goals, forming new networks, extending old ones, and emerging most clearly into our view with rival configurations of one or more of the principal power networks’ (Mann 1986:16).

A corollary of this theoretical and methodological shift implies that our concepts need to be redefined as relational concepts and processes and it becomes more difficult to begin an analysis. How do we demarcate our unit of study? How do we apply our concepts? If there is no longer a clearly demarcated entity such as society which hitherto has provided us with a framework for our analysis, how do we know how to ‘draw lines across relational webs possessing no clearcut natural boundaries’ (Emirbayer 1997:303). To put it differently, how do we demarcate a figuration (Elias)? How do we demarcate a field (Bourdieu)? Emirbayer raises this as a problem for methodological relationalism and rightly in our opinion. As we shall see, however, Elias has an answer to this problem which some readers and critics of Elias have tended to overlook.

As Emirbayer points out the problem of boundary setting also raises some ontological questions (Emirbayer 1997:304). If we can demarcate a set of social relations – a matrix of transactions in Emirbayer’s terminology – with borders, how does one characterize what is inside the boundary? What sort of ontological status do we give this ‘entity’? Do we regard it as a ‘substance’, an ‘entity’ a ‘thing’?² Hereby we might end up in the position we attempted to avoid by moving to a relational perspective.

We accept the criticism of ‘substantialist social theory’ and we approve a shift towards a relational perspective. We also agree with Emirbayer that in most relational social theory there is a couple of unaddressed problems concerning the demarcation of the social relations and the problem of the primary unit or ‘entity’. These two problems are addressed by a prominent relational thinker – Norbert Elias – and surprisingly he is only briefly mentioned by Emirbayer. We shall argue that Elias’s notion of survival units conceived as a processual structure – or in Elias’s terminology a figuration – is a possible and sophisticated answer to the problems raised by Emirbayer. Elias carefully develops the concept of survival unit or more precisely the relationship between survival units as a point of departure for his social theory. Later in the paper we shall attempt to strengthen Elias’s approach by introducing a Hegelian notion of recognition. We will

² We find the same problem in discourse analysis. Having defined a discourse and having selected or observed a discourse one runs into the the same problem. Is a discourse ‘an entity, a thing, a substance’? What kind of ontological status do we describe to a discourse? Can we avoid this question?

argue that the survival unit should be seen as a figuration which does not exist prior to the processes in which it is always involved. These very processes in a social relationship define and constitute this very 'entity'. It cannot be conceived outside its relational context.

Elias's version of methodological relationalism: figurational social theory

Relational social theory can be found in the works of Georg W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Karl Mannheim, George H. Mead, Ferdinand Saussure, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu. However, one of the most consistent relational thinkers is Norbert Elias. In order to develop his figurational and relational social theory Elias makes two claims: 1) the only theoretically sustainable point of departure for a social theory is to study human beings, human society (and maybe also other animals but we leave this aside for the moment!) in a relational perspective! This claim is justified by a number of arguments among others his critique of methodological individualism, methodological holism, individual-society categories and the homo clauses perspective. 2) The other important assumption that Elias makes concerns the key social relation – survival units in a relational perspective. In other words, the first social relation to be studied is not the single individual or a man-woman relation (family) or man-nature (subject-object). The first unit of analysis is the relational binding of human beings in social groups. In the first order we find the relation between survival units ('state'-'state'). In a second order we find relations between families and individuals within each of the survival units.

Before we go deeper into Elias's relational thinking we shall briefly point to some of his intellectual sources. When it comes to his relational thinking Karl Mannheim played an important role. Mannheim criticized, just as Elias did later on, various dualisms in philosophy and social theory (subjectivism-objectivism, action-structure, individualism-holism), scientism, reductionism, reification, and economism (Kilminster 1993:85). Mannheim spoke in favour of structured processes, a continuum from more subjective to more objective knowledge, and the relation between interaction and interdependence (Kilminster 1993:85). Mannheim's response to these problems was relationalism. He argued that human knowledge is rooted in the existence of competing and co-existing human groups. In other words, human beings are always embedded in competing groups. This conflictual relational perspective was to a large extent taken over by Elias. Crucial to Mannheim was the notion of *Seinsverbundenheit* (existential boundedness) (Kilminster 1993:88) which bears resemblance to Elias's understanding of human beings born into and always

existing in survival units. It is clear that Elias's 'figurational conception of interdependency in antagonism' comes close to Mannheim's perspective. According to Kilminster, Mannheim and Elias have a shared view of relationism that is distinctive because it is situated within the flux of the historical process. It is impossible to stand outside the flux of the historical process (Kilminster 1993:90).

Another source of inspiration probably comes from Georg Simmel. Simmel was to a large extent also a relational thinker. Thus Simmel argues that society is "nothing but immediate interactions that occur among men constantly every minute, but that have become crystallized as permanent fields, as autonomous phenomena. As they crystallize, they attain their own existence and their own laws, and may even confront or oppose spontaneous interaction itself. At the same time, society, as its life is constantly being realized, always signifies that individuals are connected by mutual influence and determination ... Society merely is the name for a number of individuals, connected by interaction. It is because of their interaction that they are a unit – just a system of bodily masses is a unit whose reciprocal effects wholly determine their mutual behaviour" (Simmel 1964[1908]:9-10). The quotation demonstrates that Simmel also made an attempt to develop a relational approach to the study of social life. An attempt to delineate certain groups of interactions into a field can be seen as a very preliminary notion of figuration. This concept will be unfolded below.

A third influential thinker is E. Cassirer. As shown above Emirbayer also pays attention to Cassirer's work and his relational perspective. Without any doubt he influenced Elias but Elias always found this form of relationalism more philosophical than sociological.³ Elias states that in contrast to Cassirer he became a sociologist "dealing with real events, such as power struggles between human groups, such as cycles of violence or with long-term social processes such as state formation processes, of knowledge growth, of urbanization, of population growth and of dozens of other processes, now in the centre of process sociology, its theory, its empirical work and its practical applications" (Kilminster and Wouters 1995:101). In other words, a relational perspective must be historical, process-orientated and sociological.

Simmel, Cassirer, and Mannheim and possible others are used by Elias to bring an alternative to other forms of sociology dominating in the first part of the 20th century such as Marxism, functionalism, phenomenology, Weberian theories of social action and Durkheimian

³ For a further discussion of this critique Kilminster & Wouters (1995)

theories. By opposing the latter theories and by using Mannheim, Simmel and others Elias develops an alternative and more relational position. Let us turn to Elias's version of relationalism.

From homo clausus to figurations: Elias's version of relational sociology

Elias was very critical of most key concepts in social theory such as individual, society, power, structure, action, interaction and others. He developed an alternative vocabulary with concepts such as figuration, power-ratio, process, habitus, network, web, interdependence and others. Throughout his work Elias gives a strong critique of various dichotomous positions such as methodological individualism-methodological holism, action-structure, and subjectivism-objectivism. As an example we can mention his devastating critique of Weber's notion of the individual and his methodological individualism (Elias 1970: 116-118). The human individual is regarded as a *homo clausus* – a closed box. The individual seems like a 'completely self-reliant adult, forming no relationships and standing quite alone' (Elias 1970: 118). In 'The Civilizing Process' he writes

"The conception of the individual as *homo clausus*, a little world in himself who ultimately exists quite independently of the great world outside, determines the image of man in general. Every other human being is likewise seen as a *homo clausus*; his core, his being, his true self appears likewise as something divided within him by an invisible wall from everything outside, including every other human being (Elias 1994[1939]:204).

Elias's response to this problem of the closed individual is again stated in 'The Civilizing Process':

"the image of man as an 'open personality' who possesses a greater or lesser degree of relative (but never absolute and total) autonomy vis-à-vis other people and who is, in fact, fundamentally oriented toward and dependent on other people throughout his life. The network of interdependencies among human beings is what binds them together. Such interdependencies are the nexus of what is here called the figuration, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people. Since people are more or less dependent on each other first by nature and then through social learning, through education, socialization, and socially generated reciprocal needs, they exist, one might venture to say, only as pluralities, only in figurations" (Elias 1994[1939]:213-214).

In other words, Elias responds with the innovative concept of figuration. The concept of figuration is also an attack on and a replacement for other concepts such as actor, society, and system as long as these concepts retain their character as substantives and referring to isolated objects in a state of rest (Elias 1970:118). The concept of system is furthermore criticized for indicating harmony and integration. Systems tend to overemphasize the harmonious aspect of human relationships, ignoring

conflicts. The concept of system originates in the notion of organism and the idea of equilibriums and harmony. Power is another concept which is reconceptualized from a reified concept to a relational concept. Most often power is conceived as a substance, an object which can be possessed. Elias prefers to discuss power as power-ratios. According to van Krieken this is also an attempt to transcend another dichotomy – the problem of freedom and determinism. From Elias's discussion of homo clausus it is clear that no human being can possess absolute autonomy or freedom (van Krieken 1998:55-57). Autonomy and freedom have to be seen in relation to the web of interdependencies in which human beings always find themselves. We always find ourselves caught up in a figuration which provides us with opportunities and constraints. In order to properly understand our constraints and opportunities we must understand 'the shifting balances of tensions' or power-ratios.

The concept of figuration is a theoretical conceptualization of interdependent human beings. Human beings are always embedded and situated into these figurations which take different forms and contains different power-ratios between the people situated in a given figuration. A figuration is always dynamic and it changes all the time as a consequence of unplanned processes, unintended consequences and human purposeful and planned activities. These processes are constrained and facilitated by the presence of different forms of habitus (personality structure) which, again, is formed by the figuration itself. In 'The Civilizing Process' Elias states that

"... from the interweaving of countless individual interests and intentions – whether tending in the same direction or in divergent and hostile directions – something comes into being that was planned and intended by none of these individuals, yet has emerged nevertheless from their intentions and actions. And really this is the whole secret of social figurations, their compelling dynamics, structural regularities, their process character and their development" (Elias 1982:160).

The key elements in Elias's version of a relational sociology can be summarized as an understanding of social life as the planned and unplanned, intended and unintended outcome of human purposeful action. Human beings are social beings always embedded in figurations which are interdependent webs and networks which are always moving, changing and developing. In other words, Elias focuses on relations, processes and change in figurations more than on static structures and states.

So far we have provided a brief presentation to Elias's relational sociology and his key concept figuration. We need to ask if Elias overcomes some of the main problems in relational

sociology. Does he for example avoid substantialism? One could think that he does make assumptions about human beings which can be seen as a substantialist position. As an example we can ask the question: Why do humans bond? Is it a human attribute? Is it a property located in each and every individual? We will here argue that Elias does not fall into the substantialist trap. He develops a consistent and relational framework. Elias talks about affective bonds, and in his critique of Parsons he emphasizes that it is often forgotten 'that each person's striving for gratification is directed towards other people from the very outset. Nor is gratification itself derived entirely from one's own body – it depends a great deal on the other people too. Indeed this is one of the universal interdependencies which bind people together' (Elias 1970:134-35). Does the notion of gratification save Elias from falling into the substantialist – homo clausus – trap? We think it does. It is not a feature attributed to the human individual – a drive. It has some affinity with Hegel's notion of recognition and Bourdieu's notion of social honour. Gratification, recognition and social honour are properties of social relations. None of these concepts has any meaning outside a social relation. The mutual process of gratification or a constant struggle of recognition keeps the figurations very dynamic and fluid.

The next question concerns the uniqueness of Elias's relational sociology. As several scholars have pointed out most elements of Elias's sociological relationalism can be found elsewhere e.g. in Dewey and Bentley's work (van Krieken 1998:75-76). This is probably accurate although we find Elias's synthesis of various positions developed in opposition to mainstream sociology quite unique. His persistent attempt to rethink all sociological categories from a relational point of view and always studying social life as dynamic figurations seems to be innovative. Moreover, his combination of sociogenesis and psychogenesis in 'The Civilizing Process' is persuasive and unique. However, all these perspective are not entirely absent from other sociological approaches classical as well as contemporary. His real uniqueness is, in our opinion, his concept of survival unit and his overall relational approach.

Survival unit as the key figuration

In his discussion of figurations and human interdependencies Elias ask the question concerning human social bonds. Human beings are always bonded to each other, they always exist in interweaving social relations and they can never be seen as isolated closed entities. Why are human beings bonded? Elias discusses various affective and sexual bonds as important but he will not

reduce human bonding to sexual or emotional needs (Elias 1970:134-136). Subsequently, he argues that besides interpersonal bonds people are connected by symbols to larger units, ‘to coats of arms, to flags and to emotionally-charged concepts’ (Elias 1970:137). These forms of emotional bonds are no less important than interpersonal bonds.

“Blended with other more impersonal types of bond, they underlie the extended ‘I-and-We’ consciousness, which hitherto has always seemed indispensable in binding together not only small tribes but large social units like nation-states encompassing many millions of people. People’s attachment to such large social units is often as intense as their attachment to a person they love. The individual who has formed such a bond will be as deeply affected when the social unit to which he devoted is conquered or destroyed, debased or humiliated, as when a beloved person dies” (Elias 1970:137).

Elias is very much aware that social theory in the 20th century has been prone to stress the I-identity development (Elias 2001:156). This has been particularly stressed by theories based upon the individual or in recent years processes of individualization. Social theory has neglected that larger units most often states have been an object of common identification. Elias raises, and rightly in our opinion, the question: “Why do emotional bonds to state-societies – which nowadays are nation-states – take priority over bonds to other figurations?” (Elias 1970:138)⁴ Can we interpret this question in a direction in which we can carefully suggest that Elias is arguing that some figurations in some situations are more important than others? Maybe it is to push Elias too far but, on the other hand, in the book ‘What is Sociology?’ (Elias 1970) he characterises these various figurations which at different stages in human history ‘have bound individuals to them by this type of predominating emotional bonds’.

Elias argues that a common feature of these figurations is their attempt to exercise ‘strict control over the use of physical violence in relationships between their members.’ Moreover, he continues that these figurations have accepted – at times even encouraged – ‘their members to use physical violence against non-members’. This has a positive function for the ‘we-I-balance’. A ‘we’ is generated in this process. These figurations knit ‘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.’

He continues, and we quote in length:

⁴ He points out that at other stages of social development these figurations were towns, villages or tribes – but today it is states.

“Thus the primary function of such an alliance is either physically to wipe out other people or to protect its own members from being physically wiped out. Since the potential of such units for attack is inseparable from their potential for defence, they may be called ‘attack-and-defence units’ or ‘survival units’. At the present stage of social development they take the form of nation-states. In the future they may be amalgamations of several former nation-states. In the past they were represented by city-states or the inhabitants of a stronghold. Size and structure vary: the function remains the same. At every stage of development, wherever people have been bound and integrated into units for attack and defence, this bond has been stressed above all other. This survival function, involving the use of physical force against others, creates interdependencies of a particular kind. It plays a part in the figurations people form, perhaps no greater but also no more negligible than ‘occupational’ bonds. Though it cannot be reduced to a function of ‘economics’ neither is it separable from it.” (Elias 1970:138-139)

This figuration is a particular kind. It is a political bond because it revolves around the organisation of attack and defence. It cannot, however, be separated from economics.

In another context in which he discusses the concept of community Elias criticizes community-studies for a sociological disease:

“they are shrouded in a voluntaristic twilight. They blur the distinction between human bonds that can be made and unmade at will by those concerned, and human bonds which cannot be made and unmade at will ... More recent examples are concepts like ‘role’, ‘interaction’ and the ubiquitous ‘human relations’. Their use can easily give the impression that the central task of sociology is to study how individual people act or behave when they make contact or form relations with each other. The implications appear to be that human beings are always free to act, to interact, to form relationships as they like. In actual fact their ability to do this is limited and sociological studies are very much concerned with the problem of how limited it is and why.” (Elias 1974:xviii)

Here Elias points to a crucial element of not only human bonding but also to the demarcation of figurations. Do we find a figuration in which we are embedded neither by will nor decision but by destiny and fate? Yes, one particular form of figuration – the figuration Elias denotes as a ‘survival unit’ or a ‘defence or attack’ unit. Whether we like it or not we are all born into a survival unit. It is a fact that human beings cannot escape. We are not members by decision, volition or consent. It is in a Hegelian sense a community of fate. We cannot transcend this fact. We might dream about being born free, autonomous or in a world society but the way social life is organized and probably has been organized for several millions of years is into a structure of demarcated survival units. Since we all are born into such a structure the survival units are figurations with some form of primacy.

Another reason why they take on the role as the ‘primary’ or key figurations in Elias’s theory is due to their high degree of relative autonomy which no other figurations have. Of course, these figurations are also interdependent with other figurations but they have autonomy to the extent they can ‘fulfil effectively for their members their function as self-reliant and self-regulating defence and survival units’ (Elias 1974: xxii). Their high, relative autonomy consists in the ability to defend and survive. As long as a unit can defend its own domain of sovereignty (whether this territory, hunting fields, seaways or something else), it can be argued that it has autonomy. If no other unit can encroach upon your domain of sovereignty you are autonomous. When no figuration exists above your unit with the ability to conquer you – you are as autonomous as one can be. This is a crucial difference between survival units and other figurations such as families or companies. Very rarely families or companies can protect themselves from internal and external enemies.⁵ Moreover, they are dependent on a legal framework to operate. This framework – whether it is codified law or custom law – can only be provided and upheld by the survival unit. In this respect the family or the company are not autonomous entities. Their existence is in the last instance dependent on the autonomy of the survival unit. As long as the survival unit is capable of preventing external enemies from encroaching upon its domain of sovereignty, there will be freedom and autonomy for families, individuals, and businesses.

Apart from the defence and survival function which gives this figuration some form of autonomy – another characteristic of a survival unit is the level of integration. A survival unit – a village state or a nation-state – represents the highest level of integration in social life (or in a social structure) at a given time (Elias 1974: xxv-xxvi). The survival unit – whether a village state or a nation-state - has a centre. This centre is the knot in the figuration. The very centre can take different forms. It can consist of the old men in a village, the wealthiest burghers in a town, the king and the court, or a government. This centre is the locus of decision-making – a locus which provides the survival unit with an actor dimension. The survival unit is an actor and gives some form of agency to Elias’s relational theory. The survival unit can be defined as an actor because an actor is “a locus of decision and action, where the action is in some sense a consequence of the actor’s decisions ... reference to an actor always involves some reference to definite means of reaching and formulating decisions, definite means of action, and some links between the two”

⁵ These figurations are most often dependent on protection and conditions of existence provided by the survival unit – in modern terms a state. Previously we find examples of companies with this ability to defend themselves and provide their own conditions of existence such as the Dutch East India Company - in Elias’s terms this company can almost be considered as a survival unit!

(Hindess 1986:115). Consequently, the survival unit has ends and interests that go beyond any single class, family, company, community or individual within the survival unit.

It is important to stress that there is no claim that the centre on behalf of the survival unit makes decisions or actions because rationality is a property of the survival unit or the centre. Consequently,

... rationality ... is a property of the decisions that actors formulate, and therefore of the discursive conditions in which those decisions are reached. It is not an intrinsic feature of the actor qua actor (Hindess 1986: 117).

It must also be emphasized that despite the fact that survival units in larger figurations of multiple survival units aim at maintaining autonomy (sovereignty), there is no common form of rationality in all the European states. For example, it is not difficult to show that very different modes of political calculation were employed by different survival units (states) in the state system in the 16th and 17th century.

When a centre becomes particularly strong as we see in late renaissance Europe with the new court society a monopolization process can develop with larger, stronger and more territorially demarcated survival units. This process is interdependent with increasing differentiation and the level of integration moves to a higher level. The centre – the court society – becomes in some respect the knot in the figuration – a knot from which integration is streaming out from and structured around. The very character and structure of the court society in several European countries paves the way for a strong centralization and territorialization of these survival units. These processes are self-perpetuating and the centre becomes an even stronger integrating force.

Elias is stressing the key role of the states (survival units) and the problem of violence. At several occasions Elias carefully argues that a survival unit (a state) has a double function – defence and attack and economic reproduction of its population – in other words, a political as well as an economic function (Elias 1978[1970]; 1987:226ff). The political and economic relationship is a closely tied relationship. We can see that he gives primacy to the survival unit/state as the key figuration. In 'Involvement and Detachment' he tends to argue that the violent aspect of the survival unit is in the last instance the key dimension of the state/survival unit. In a discussion of the cold war, the bipolar world and the social dynamic between the two super powers Elias emphasizes how this social dynamic creates competitive pressures which continually change and move the states. Moreover, he argues that the violence potential of states is the key means to maintain and improve the position of a state in the system of states.

“Nothing is more characteristic of the structure of inter-state relations than this fact. It indicates that human beings, at the level of inter-state relations, are still bound to each other at the primeval level. Like animals in the wilderness of a jungle, like tribal groups in humanity’s early days, like states throughout history, so the states of today are bound to each other in such a way *that sheer physical force and cunning are, in the last resort, the decisive factors in their relationships (italics by authors)*. No one can prevent a physically stronger state from lording over weaker states, except another state which is its match in terms of physical force. If another such state exists, the two experience one another, with great regularity, as rivals, each trying to prevent the other from attaining hegemonial power within the whole field. Thus, unless a state is checked by another state that is militarily its equal, there is nothing to prevent its leaders and the people who form it from threatening, exploiting, invading and enslaving, driving out or killing the inhabitants of another state, if they are so minded” (Elias 1987:74-75).

The inter-state dynamic is simultaneously a life-and-death struggle including the use or threat of the means of violence. It is a contest without rules but it is not chaos (Elias 1970:76-80). The global figuration consists of many different forms of survival units mainly states which are all interdependent by the very fact that they are co-existing and competing with each other in a struggle for survival. This is a figuration without rules in the traditional sense. This figuration is not from the outset governed by rules but still it is not turning the world into anarchy or chaos. In the very conflict and in the struggle of survival an order emerges. The struggle between survival units is ‘a primal contest’. The two survival units struggle for survival – whether it is about prestige, scarce resources, or other things – they are dependent on each other. Each and every step taken by each of the two parties is watched by the other. As enemies they perform a function for each other and each move of one survival unit determines each move of the other survival unit and vice versa. A process of reciprocal action is taking place. The struggle of survival creates a dynamic relationship with crucial implications for the figural relations within states. ‘The internal arrangement in each group are determined to a greater or lesser extent by what each group thinks the other might do next.’ (Elias 1970: 77). In other words, the external pressure and the struggle for survival compel each survival unit to produce a will and a material foundation in order to survive. Consequently, the interdependence existing as a precondition for and as the outcome of the relationship between various survival units influences the character and nature of the internal structure of survival units. In modern terms the organization and structure of society is to a large extent determined by the character and intensity of the external struggle between states. The character and organization of internal social structures (societal structures) is a function of external structures but not a function in the structural functionalist sense.

‘Their function for each other is in the last resort based on the compulsion they exert over each other by reason of their interdependence. It is not possible to explain the actions, plans and aims of either of the two groups if they are conceptualized as the freely chosen decisions, plans and aims of each group considered on its own, independently of the other group. They can be explained only if one takes into account the compelling forces the groups exert upon each other by reason of their interdependence, their bilateral function for each other as enemies’ (Elias 1970:77).

The crucial difference between the inter-state and the intra-state relations is the presence and use of the means of violence. Elias draws upon Weber in his understanding and conceptualization of the survival unit since he clarifies that the use of violence is an ever-present threat and the normal instrument of last resort in inter-state relations. Violence as an instrument to put a pressure on someone else has almost been eliminated from normal relations within states. This is

“not only indicative of the fundamental difference between the structure of human relationships within states and that of the relationships between states. It also means that human beings live simultaneously at two levels whose structure is not only different, but in some respects contradictory. Correspondingly, they live with two different and contradictory codes of conduct. At one level it is strictly forbidden to assail violently and to kill people; at another, it is demanded as a duty to prepare for, and to use, violence in relations with other humans” (Elias 1987a:80).

Elias points out that there is a clear difference between figurations called states or survival units which are interrelated in a state system and figurations to be found at the intra-state level such as families, companies and voluntary associations. The existence of monopolies of the means of violence within states and the non-existence of such monopolies at the inter-state level explains clear differences in social structure. A given state-society – a network of functionally interdependent human beings – has a structure of its own. They are bound to each other in specific figurations whose dynamics have a constraining and compelling influence on those who form them (Elias 1987a:79).

“The existence of a monopoly of physical force within states and its non-existence in the relationships between states is an example of the firmness of the structure which interdependent human beings form with one another. It also shows the far-reaching effects which these structures have on those who form them.” (Elias 1987a:79).

We interpret these ideas as an attempt to argue that the inter-state struggle is constraining (and enabling) the conditions of existence within states.

Elias is completely aware that the survival units take on different forms in different periods in history. Or rather, as he prefers to put it, they express different levels of interdependence, different level of differentiation and different level of integration in different phases of the development of societal structures and figurations. Thus he speaks about village states as one form of figuration which is characterized by a much less differentiated society and which has to rely on its own resources. Another and more 'advanced' form of figuration serving the same defence and survival purpose is the nation-state but due to the much more differentiated and complex character and the higher level of interdependence it has to organize the fulfilment of these functions entirely differently. He does not develop an entire 'typology' but he mentions different forms of survival units. He argues that human populations always have been divided into survival units of one kind or another. Over time they have grown in size. From small bands, tribes, city-states, village-states, to modern large-scale states and nation-states (Elias 1987:225-231).

Let us summarize this part of the argument so far: Elias is in favour of a relational sociology. This relational perspective is based upon the concept of figuration and/or processes as an attempt to explain that all social life is embedded in interdependent and interweaving social relations. By conceiving all social life in a figural perspective – perennial interdependency between social units and human beings – we might start wondering where to start our social analysis. Do we find any figuration with some primacy? Usually, methodological relationalism has a problem of demarcation? How can we demarcate a figuration? How can we delineate and determine our 'unit of analysis' if all social life must be conceived as interdependent social relations? Is it possible to detect a demarcated figuration with autonomy? Yes, according to Elias, one particular form of figuration takes on some primacy – the survival unit. He provides an empirical and theoretical answer to this thesis. Empirically we can observe that human beings have always existed in survival units and these survival units have rarely been isolated without any contact to other survival units. In other words, survival units always exist in a larger system of multiple survival units.

His theoretical answer has five elements: First, the survival unit has primacy compared to other figurations because a survival unit is the figuration with the highest level of autonomy. No other figuration stands above the survival unit. If a survival unit cannot prevent a neighbouring survival unit from intervening into its domain of sovereignty and thereby providing protection and conditions of existence for generating material resources such as food and shelter for its members then it is no longer a survival unit. A survival unit is only a survival unit as long as it

succeeds in preventing encroachment. In similar terms a modern form of survival unit – the state - is only a state if the state can uphold its domain of sovereignty by securing its population from foreign intervention (either by cunning (alliances) or military defence). The survival unit is the most important figuration but only as far as it can defend itself. No other figuration has this high degree of relative autonomy. Companies, cities, towns, trade unions, or multinational corporations are not as autonomous because they are all dependent on a figuration superior to them – the survival unit. Only the survival unit gives other figurations some form of freedom to act and this freedom is entirely dependent on the autonomy of the survival unit.

The second theoretical dimension concerns the character of the survival unit as a particular form of figuration. We are born into a survival unit whether we like it or not. It is our fate. A survival unit is a ‘community of fate’. Whereas other figurations can in principle be joined by any social group or person the survival unit is an inescapable figuration. Whether we are born into Assyria 2000 B.C. or Sweden in 1950 we are born into a survival unit. All other form of categorizations such as class, caste, nationality, and ethnicity are different from time to time and place to place. These categories are not ‘universals’ such as the survival unit. A survival unit is a constant – only its form varies. Moreover, most often emotional bonds to survival units take priority over bonds to other figurations.

The third part of the theoretical argument concerns the character of the overall figuration in which the survival units are embedded – in modern time the state system. This figuration might or might not be normless – it still creates an order in which the survival unit emerges, consolidates and declines. This figuration still has an enormous impact on the norms emerging internally and on the internal social order. The state system – or the system of survival units – can according to Elias be conceived as a primal contest. The contest takes place in an environment which at the outset is not norm-regulated but neither is it anarchy or chaos. The interdependent structure of the system and the relationship between the survival units generates a particular order but no norms can be unilaterally forced upon the members for a long period of time because no survival unit can rule and sanction the system for ever. The system might be hegemonic but there is always a contest and a struggle of survival taking place which prevents the system developing into one survival unit (see later).

The fourth part of the argument concerns the level of integration. No matter what character and form the survival unit takes (feudal castle, town, village state, nation-state, or empire), the survival unit represents the highest level of integration in social life.

The last elements concerns, again, the difference between the survival unit as a figuration and other figurations existing within the survival unit or figurations transcending the demarcation of the survival unit (e.g. Amnesty International, the financial market or transnational corporations). A crucial difference concerns the problem of violence. Survival units seem to have exercised comparatively strict control over the use of physical violence in relationships between their members. In different historical contexts processes of monopolizations of the means of violence are developing. Since survival units tend to monopolize the means of violence other figurations need survival units to protect them. Without protection and security it is hard for social life to develop into stable figurations with production of food and shelter. At least since the Neolithic period and the emergence of agricultural modes of production physical protection of a domain has been crucial. The function of a survival unit controlling the means of violence is that ‘it knits people together for common purposes – the common defence of their lives, the survival of their group in the face of attacks in common on other groups’ (Elias 1970:138).

The survival unit and the problem of demarcation.

In the beginning of the article we refer to Emirbayer’s exposition of methodological relationalism. Emirbayer also raises some unsolved problems of a relational perspective. One of the key problems concerns the boundaries of social relations. How do we know how to ‘draw lines across relational webs possessing no clear-cut natural boundaries’ (Emirbayer 1997:303) To put it differently, how do we demarcate a figuration? Does Elias really solve the problem of demarcation as raised by Emirbayer? Elias has an answer but it is only a partial answer. We can observe survival units in relation to other survival units. Thus there is a demarcated figuration with primacy in his theoretical perspective. But why is it demarcated? A part of Elias’s response refers to our empirical observation of human history as a process of interdependent survival units competing and co-existing. New forms of survival units emerge and old forms decline. We can observe that social life is organized around survival units and survival units demarcate themselves against other units. Another part of his response is embedded in his very theoretical perspective. By conceiving social life as a web, a process of interdependent and interweaving social actors whether as organizations or as individuals, Elias in a subtle way offers an answer. Here he can be prepared with a Hegelian logic. Demarcation arises out of the relationship. The relationship is a confrontation which generates identities and boundaries. Hegel demonstrates that a state becomes a state when it appears in a social relationship

with another state. It is exactly in the very moment when two or more states are interacting that they constitute each other as states (Hegel, 1991).

The argument in favour of it being a social relation is illustrated with the possessive pronoun "mine" as an example. What is "mine" cannot be conceived of without making a distinctive line between "mine" and "not mine". This line must necessarily be drawn externally by someone else.

In order to think the exclusion of others from what is 'mine', I therefore have to experience my own exclusion, and then laterally inverse the relation (Boserup 1986:924).

Hegel explains exactly that the concept of state is unthinkable unless we see a state as a part of a social relationship - vis-à-vis another state. Similarly to an individual who cannot become self-conscious and know that 'I' is me before 'another' has recognized me - 'I' - from the outside, Hegel clearly sees that a state can only become a state with a bounded territory when the boundaries of this territory are drawn from outside. Elias follows the same kind of thinking by taking a relational perspective and thereby stressing the importance of the very relationship for the 'entities' – the survival units. In this very relationship the boundaries are created from 'outside'. The survival units are demarcated by the 'other' and not by the members of the survival unit itself. Or in Hegel's terminology the state has to be recognized by another state in order to be a state and vice versa.

Individuality, as exclusive being-for-itself, appears *as the relation* [of the state] *to other states*, each of which is independent [selbstständig] in relation to the others ... (§322) ... Without relations with other states, the state can no more be an actual individual than an individual can be an actual person without a relationship with other persons [see §322/Hegel's note] (§331) (Hegel 1991:359, §322:366-67, §331)

We have now clarified what determines one of the main characteristics of the state: the boundaries. Hegel and Elias demonstrate that the borders are always made from outside. Their explanation, however, goes deeper. The very relationship constitutes the states. This relationship which is analysed in detail in Hegel's *The Phenomenology of the Spirit* has a very special character: it is a mutual struggle of recognition between two entities - individuals - and it has a fundamental existential importance to these individuals: it is a life and death struggle (Hegel 1977 [1807]:§187-188).

Although the Hegelian struggle of recognition is applied most often to the relationship between individuals, Hegel is also aware that it can be found at a state level (Hegel 1991[1821]).

Hegel, however, cannot take us much further. By applying a relational approach Elias, unlike other methodological relational thinkers, provides us with an answer to the problem of demarcation. It is, however, a partial answer.

The unsolved problem of Elias's relational thinking

The key figuration in social life is the survival unit. The survival unit is a particular form of figuration organized in order to provide security and the material foundation of life such as food and shelter. Every human being is born into a survival unit and it is a condition of existence for human beings. Survival units never exist in isolation. It is always embedded in a web or system of more survival units. A survival unit is a relational concept. It cannot be conceived outside a relationship with other survival units. Survival units are constituted in the very relationship to other survival units. A village state or a nation-state is created from 'outside'. Denmark was never a fusion of Danes. Denmark was constituted in a struggle of survival against Germany, Sweden, Russia, Britain and other survival units. Consequently, the boundaries of a survival unit are generated in a confrontation with other survival units.⁶ The relationship between different survival units are the point of entry for Elias into his social theory and his sociological analysis. This relationship can be peaceful or conflict ridden but in the last resort it can end up with a violent confrontation and only the survival unit with the ability to defend a domain of sovereignty will survive. This observation places Elias among the few sociologists with an understanding of the role of warfare in social life. War and the survival unit are two constants in human history.

Two interrelated problems remain unsolved by Elias. The first problem concerns his point of departure in a web of survival units. The second problem concerns the often claimed teleological feature of Elias's theory. Does history end up with one survival unit? This question will be discussed in the last section.

Let's turn to the first problem. By taking a relational perspective Elias analyses the world as a network of many interdependent survival units which today has become one global system of different forms of competing and coexisting survival units. Why is the world divided into many survival units? Why is the system a permanent structure of survival units fighting a struggle of recognition and autonomy? Why is this global figuration continuing to split up into a number of survival units?

⁶ Elias is fully aware that boundaries can take different forms from loose geographical frontiers to city walls and modern territorial nation-state borders.

Elias does not provide an answer to the question. He provides us with the notion of the struggle of gratification and survival, and this notion enables us to understand that it is the relation - the struggle - between survival units that constitutes the survival units. He shows that a survival unit cannot develop from “within” and then enter the world as fully fledged. We know from Hegel – and we are arguing that Elias is applying the same relational thinking – that in order to be a state, a state can only gain recognition from another state. However, we have to look elsewhere in order to solve the problem of the struggle as an infinite process and the world as a continuous process of the rise and demise of competing survival units. Clausewitz’s concept of war can provide an answer.

Clausewitz and the superior defensive form of fighting

Clausewitz points out that there are two forms of fighting in war: offensive and defensive. The defensive form of warfare (D) is, in principle, always stronger than the offensive war (O) (D>O), which explains why wars stop (Clausewitz 1986: Chap. 1, Book 1:§§15-16).

The argument of the superiority of the defensive is rooted in the condition that the offensive only possesses means that can be freely mobilized (“the army”), whereas the defensive has not only those but also its own purely defensive forces at its disposal. These forces consist of a series of means that are only raised in consequence

... of the progress of the offensive itself and can only be mobilized by this, such as mountains and rivers, the resistance of the civilian population, and the support from those countries that fear the future strength of a victorious attacker (Boserup 1986:921).⁷

Thus, the defensive part has the possibility of strategically combining its bound and its freely mobilized forces, whereas the offensive is only capable of operating with freely mobilized forces in its strategy. The superiority of the defensive is the reason why there may be a real pause, and the length of the pause is conditioned by the strength of the defensive. But during this pause,

... the war is continued as a virtual war, for the action of war has ceased, it is true, but the war “goes on” in a particular sense, viz., as an always present possibility that is only not actual for as long as the conditions of the pause are

⁷ This and the following quotations from Boserup’s article “Staten, samfundet og krigen hos Clausewitz” are translated from the Danish version of the text. However, it is also available in a German edition “Krieg, Staat und Frieden. Eine Weiterführung der Gedanken von Clausewitz” in Carl Friedrich von Weizäcker (ed.) 1990. *Die Zukunft des Friedens in Europa - Politische und Militärische Voraussetzungen*. München/Wien: Carl Hanser Verlag.

maintained. The pause is only a precarious, temporary balance, conditioned by the forces keeping each other in check, and thus, therefore, even if the war is only “virtual”, it imposes real claims on the two antagonists (ibid.:915).

Had the defensive not been stronger than the offensive, history would have looked totally different. If the offensive principle of fighting had been strongest, history would have appeared as an uninterrupted state of war that would only have been terminated when the world was united as one global reign.⁸

Clausewitz’s concept of the pause opens up for a new understanding of peace as a pause based on the superiority of the defensive. Clausewitz demonstrates that it is the inequality of force between the defensive and the offensive that makes a "peace" possible during which societal and state units may exist. Elias also talks about an unequal or rather an asymmetrical power-ratio between the struggling survival units. However, the reason why the relationship between two survival units remains peaceful and rarely turns into violence is not due to the relative strength of the two units. It is only due to the superiority of the defense which can be provided either by its own forces and geographical conditions or by a membership from an alliance.

To put it differently, Clausewitz demonstrates that wars come to a halt because the defensive way of fighting is in principle superior. War turns into a halt – a pause. Consequently, no single survival unit can conquer all other survival units. When the offensive and aggressive survival unit moves forward more and more resistance is gathered around the defensive unit. Eventually, the aggressor will have to give up. If one aggressor succeeds in conquering all other units, the new global survival unit will split up straightaway because without any external force, there is no energy and no ‘other’ to tie the aggressor together.⁹ This explains why the world continues to be a world consisting of many coexisting and competing survival units.

The superiority of the defensive also explains why war is not taking place all the time. It would have been a corollary of Elias’s perspective stressing warring survival units. From a certain point of view an outcome of Elias’s perspective is constant war until a ‘winner’ and global conqueror will appear. Elias knows empirically that it is not the case but only Clausewitz can explain it.

⁸ It is important to emphasize that the principle of the superiority of the defensive as a form of fighting does not mean that specific wars are not won by the offensive part. It is always possible for a state to possess so much superior power that the antagonist can do nothing. The defensive war may be too weak and use its means in a bad way. But this does not alter the notion that "the defensive is, in principle, superior as a form of war" (Boserup 1986:918).

⁹ Elias is fully aware of this problem of the necessity of external pressure.

The concept of the pause is an important contribution to Elias's struggle of survival and striving for gratification. During the pause a genuine mutual recognition can take place and peace occurs, but it is very precarious, since the possibility of war is ever present. In other words, because the survival units in a struggle of survival are unequal (the defensive side > the offensive side) a pause (peace) can occur. The pause expresses a mutual recognition between two survival units.

Survival units are constituted by their mutual struggle. Recognition of each other and a respect for the other is only sustained and maintained by an ability of the survival unit to defend itself. Thus the *essence of the survival unit is the ability to defend its domain of sovereignty*.

By taking its point of departure in the relations between survival units, Elias explains why survival units possess a high degree of relative autonomy and therefore are the primary figurations for sociological analysis. They are constituted in a struggle of survival. There is no authority above the survival units, only their own struggle can provide them with status as independent survival units. Without an authority above and without any other entity that can subject the survival unit to its decisions, the survival unit and only the survival unit is an independent social unit. Any other actors and figurations must be regarded as more dependent figurations. The status of armies, people, companies or cities are dependent on a survival unit. (When we find a city with the ability to defend it and prevent any other city or state from intervening, such a city must be defined as a survival unit).

Consequently, the figuration of survival units is a structure of relations of self-defending and self-conscious survival units. The survival unit is not only synonymous with modern states. It is used more broadly to connote the self-defending unit by which we imagine all human life to be organized. In other words, it is important to notice that the concept of survival unit in this context is not a "state apparatus," but a whole unity that includes other figurations. It is not, however, a unity constituted of its internal elements.

According to Clausewitz "war is the continuation of politics by other means." Clausewitz and Elias elucidate the necessity of the means of violence in order to survive as a survival unit at the extreme. Violence and military means can become the *ultima ratio* of a state. As we know Elias argues that violence cannot be separated from economics. The survival unit is a political and economic figuration at the same time. However, he stresses the means of violence as a key feature of the survival unit. Here we find an affinity with Max Weber, Carl Schmitt and Karl von Clausewitz.

Elias has demonstrated that the mutual struggle of survival that constitutes the survival units and, therefore also, the modern state is a political relationship, and at the extreme this struggle involves the possibility of war. By adding some theoretical concepts from Hegel and Clausewitz to Elias's relational perspective a theory emerges based on the notion of a figuration consisting of a web of survival units. This web can be seen as a processual structure which divides into further interdependent survival units.

The global survival unit – a global state?

The second problem must be seen in continuation of the first and it concerns the outcome of the struggle. Will the present figuration end up with one global survival unit? The argument goes like this: a relational perspective excludes the presence of only one state or survival unit because the very relationship constitutes and defines the state/survival unit. Without at least two conflicting survival units it does not make any sense to describe these units as survival units. They are simply defined by the very struggle of survival against another survival unit. In Hegelian terms a survival unit always needs another to recognize you. Without 'the other' recognition is not possible. The German legal and political theorist Carl Schmitt (1888-1985) agrees with the Hegelian idea that the very struggle between two entities constitutes this relationship and their two identities respectively. Schmitt says that,

... the political entity presupposes the real existence of an enemy and therefore coexistence with another political entity. As long as a state exists, there will thus always be in the world more than just one state. A world state which embraces the entire globe and all of humanity cannot exist. The political world is a pluriverse, not a universe. ... The political entity cannot by its very nature be universal in the sense of embracing all of humanity and the entire world (Schmitt 1976:53).

According to Schmitt the world is a pluriverse and this is also a consequence of Elias's theory. Again, just as a thought experiment we can imagine one survival unit swallowing the others and turning into one unit. This will, however, only last a brief moment. Like a nuclear atom turning into a fission process the global survival unit will split up in many new units and, again, become a pluriverse. This will happen because according to Elias (and Hegel) only external struggle and pressure will provide the energy and compelling power to create an internal social order. When the

external pressure has gone, nothing can tie the internal elements together, and the unit will divide into a multiple of new and smaller units.

Concluding remarks

In this paper we have argued that Elias has developed an important contribution to a very coherent relational theory. He overcomes some of the major deficiencies usually found in relational perspectives. Thus he addresses the problem of boundary setting social relation. Elias develops the concept of survival unit. This is a figuration (existing in a larger figuration consisting of at least two but often more survival units) which is demarcated with other survival units and the very relation constitutes the units and generates the demarcation. The survival unit is the point of entry to Elias's social theory and his social analysis. This figuration has some form of primacy. It is 'a matrix' of social relations – with some form of demarcation. It is the key organizing principle of social life.

Elias does not explain, however, why the world has not turned into one survival unit. Why do we find survival units in a constant struggle against each other? Why is the process continuing and apparently not ending with just one survival unit left in the world? Clausewitz provides the answer by his observation of the superiority of the defensive form of fighting. When two survival units confront each other in a war the defensive part will in principle always be stronger. In the long run the offensive part cannot continue its movement forward and the war will come to a halt – a pause. In the pause the survival units coexist more peacefully but one movement from either side can be interpreted as an aggression from the other side and a new war can start. Thus we find world history as a continuous struggle of survival with winners and losers. The outcome is a world figuration with many or few survival units struggling but never with one survival unit left as the only one.

Another criticism against a relational perspective concerns the establishment and beginning of the figuration with competing and coexisting survival units. Often students ask about the origin of the figuration but, as Elias himself replied, there is no beginning and, we can add no ending. Relational theory can never explain the origin of relational structures but it can more convincingly analyse and explain developments, stability and change of the figurations over time.

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