The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Global Civilizing Processes and International Society *

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I. Introduction

I begin with the curious fact there is no tradition of thought, no established body of literature, that deals with the problem of harm in world politics, the problem of controlling the human capacity to cause violent or non-violent harm not only to other persons but to non-human species and to the natural environment. Discussions of the varieties of harm are scattered across different disciplines rather than integrated in such a way as to give the study of harm a more central place in the social sciences and humanities. Reflecting that condition, some have called for a new sub-field of inquiry; various labels for that area of investigation have been suggested: *zemiology* or *zemiotics*, the equally unloveable *kakapoeics*, and the more promising 'social harm perspective' which, by taking a broadly historical materialist approach to the criminal law within societies, is narrower than the perspective I have in mind. It might be thought that the diffuse analysis of harm is no bad thing, to which the following responses are offered. First, there is nothing more fundamental in social life than organising the capacity to harm (whether to defend society from enemies or to punish offenders) and controlling that capacity so that people are not free to injure, humiliate, exploit and in other ways harm others at will. Second, and more generally, human inventiveness in causing harm has been central to the success of the species, to its domination of many non-human species and

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to its conquest of the planet. Third, that very ingenuity now poses a threat to human security and possibly to human survival. The evolution of the capacity to cause ever more destructive forms of harm to more and more people over ever greater distances is important here – as is the fairly recent realisation that the human impact on the physical environment may have reached the point where radical changes in social and political organisation and in personal conduct and orientations towards the world are now imperative (see Linklater, 2011).

The remainder of this paper has four objectives. The first is to develop the earlier point about the fundamental importance of conventions for controlling the capacity to harm. The second is to clarify the nature of the contribution that process sociology can make to the study of harm. The third and fourth aims are to note how the English School analysis of international society can contribute to the development of a process-sociological analysis of harm in world politics.

II. Harm Conventions

The fundamental importance of harm is evident from the plain fact that all humans are vulnerable, albeit to different degrees, to mental and physical harm, and from the reality that some people are only too willing to inflict harm on others. That is why all societies have harm conventions: conventions that distinguish between harmful and harmless conduct and which further distinguish between socially-acceptable and socially-prohibited forms of harm. Systems of punishment explain my meaning since they distinguish between actions that people are free, and are not free, to commit, and because they differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable levels of pain or forms of suffering that can be inflicted to punish violations of social norms. Suffice it to add that harm conventions are interposed between the condition of vulnerability and the willingness of some people or groups to exploit susceptibility to mental and physical harm.

Harm conventions govern relations between people in the same society, and they are formed in response to the injury that societies cause in their relations with each other. In the second domain, many harm conventions are

self-interested, as in the case of placing constraints on what the warrior can do. Societies usually issue a temporary license to kill, injure, and so on in order to guard against the dangers that returning warriors may pose to others in their community. Societies have often forbidden certain acts – such as the slaughter of prisoners of war – because each wants its prisoners back unharmed. Societies may also prohibit certain forms of harm for moral reasons – for example, because they believe that it simply wrong to cause unnecessary harm to civilians, or to torture enemies and so forth.

Perhaps moral or cosmopolitan reasons for limiting harm have not been the norm in human history. To make that point is to indicate that is possible to compare harm conventions in different international systems – and indeed to compare harm conventions at different points in the evolution of any particular states-system. It is possible to ask whether all international systems are more or less the same, whether the modern states-system is therefore no different from its predecessors, or whether there is evidence of progress in supporting, for example, cosmopolitan harm conventions (conventions that are designed to protect all people from certain forms of harm, irrespective of citizenship, nationality, race, gender, class, sexual identity and so forth). I should add that there is an ethical dimension to the sociological project I have in mind – one that is grounded in the belief that most people at most times and in most places have had an interest in avoiding mental and physical suffering. Most have not wanted to see their lives end prematurely, or to be left in chronic pain, or to be disfigured. That is one reason why certain laws of war have developed in most civilizations, and why societies may accomplish more by collaborating to reduce and eliminate unnecessary harm than by attempting to find some shared vision of the good society or the good life.

It seems to be the case that modern societies have been unusually preoccupied with the problem of harm, as can be seen from practical measures to ground the criminal law in the liberal 'harm principle,' and from related theoretical inquiries into what it means to harm and be harmed, and from attempts to determine how many forms of harm exist in society. Various works

have provided an explanation of this preoccupation with harm. They include Charles Taylor's, *Sources of the Self*, which emphasises the political influence of the Enlightenment notion of the 'affirmation of everyday life,' of the value of ordinary pursuits. Also significant is Rey's *The History of Pain* which refers to 'the secularisation of pain,' that is the decline of the belief that suffering has sacred significance. The impact of those developments on modern societies is especially evident in John Stuart Mill's defence of the harm principle in *On Liberty* where the argument is made that only harm to others should come within the province of the criminal law. In general, Mill argued, the state has no right to use the criminal law to promote a person's own good. Because of the importance of the harm principle in liberal societies, it is hardly surprising that liberal theorists have been unusually preoccupied with analysing the concept of harm and with classifying harms. (The key study is Joel Feinberg's 4-volume study of harm and the limits of the criminal law). But to understand the liberal preoccupation with harm, it is useful to turn to Adam Smith's *Theory of Moral Sentiments* which argued that, in modern societies, millions of strangers are thrown together; most do not feel much sympathy for each other, and they do not think it is reasonable to be asked to behave altruistically towards others, or to expect much altruism from others; they are, for the most part, preoccupied with their own interests; but they believe that relations between strangers should comply with principles of justice which, Smith argued, dictate that they should refrain from causing unnecessary harm.

III. The Civilizing Process

Some of the themes that have been discussed resonate with the central argument of Elias's *The Civilizing Process* – specifically with the argument about how lengthening webs of interconnectedness have led to changed sensitivities to violent and non-violent harm (for further discussion, see Linklater, 2010). *The Civilizing Process* was a study of how Europeans came to think of themselves as more civilized than their ancestors and the peoples around them; it is important to stress that it was not a defence of notions of European superiority. The

process of civilization was influenced by the following developments: the rise of stable monopolies of power, and with them the development of urbanised, marketised and monetarised economies that bound people more closely together. As a result of those changes, people experienced pressures to become better attuned to one another's interests; powerful strata were pressed to modify their objectives lest they endangered the social order on which they depended. In significantly pacified societies, public displays of violence and evidence of cruelty aroused feelings of revulsion. Efforts to abolish certain forms of public violence – judicial torture or capital punishment, for example – or to move it behind the scenes, as in the case of the abbatoir – came to be regarded as central to the nature of a civilized existence.[1]

To connect with the study of harm: in *The Germans*, Elias (1996, p.31) describes the civilizing process as one in which people go about 'satisfying their most basic needs without killing, injuring and in other ways *harming* each other time and again' (italics added). He argued in several places that levels of personal security are higher in modern societies than they were in many earlier periods, and that the threshold of repugnance towards violence is lower today than it was in those times. But in their relations with other societies, civilized societies behaved much as earlier societies had behaved – that is, with a singular devotion to the pursuit of self-interest and with little respect for civilized restraints. The fact that Elias made such observations at all is worthy of comment. Elias was critical of sociological approaches that analysed social and political change without considering the influence of relations between societies. As for the problem of harm, he strongly inclined towards the view – which is endorsed by realist and neo-realist theories of international relations – that little of substance changes in world politics. So much is evident from his claim that modern peoples are living much as their ancestors did in their so-

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(1) Elias did not regard those processes as inevitable or irreversible. He thought that decivilizing processes had gained the upper hand in Germany in the 1930s and later added that civilizing and decivilizing processes always develop in tandem – the question is where the initiative lies at any moment. The argument is developed in Elias (1996).

called 'barbarism'. Modern peoples may take pride in their civilized existence, but the paradox of their condition is that they live with the permanent danger of mass incineration in nuclear warfare. It was therefore hard to see how modern international relations differ from 'primitive' warfare in which people were ready to use poison against each other. True, 'primitives' were brought up with the expectation that they would torture their captives and would be tortured by them if they had the misfortune to fall into their hands. The male warrior found pleasure in warfare and in killing. The military in modern societies may not be required to cultivate joy in killing; they may be expected to observe at least something of the self-restraint that is demanded by those who perform civilian tasks in the larger social division of labour (Elias, 2000, p.170). The civilizing process has therefore suppressed some of the lust for killing that existed in past eras. But, in reality, all that has changed is the manner of killing, and the number of those involved. Elias argued in *The Civilizing Process* that modern states emerged from 'elimination contests' between the nobles; exactly the same process then governed their inter-relations. They too had to compete for power and security not because they necessarily wanted to extend their power as far as they could, but because they were forced to attempt to prevent adversaries from gaining control of strategically-vital territory. There is a parallel here with 'defensive realism' in international relations theory and with the notion of security dilemmas. There is a parallel too with the neo-realist conception of the 'self-help system' that breeds levels of suspicion and distrust that frequently end in war – although it should be stressed that Elias (2000, postscript) was opposed to systems theorizing because it was 'process reducing' and ignored long-term changes in the ways in which peoples are bound together. Such competition and the resulting elimination contests, Elias argued, look set to continue until such time as the whole of humanity is brought under the dominion of a world state.

Those comments suggest that there has been little, if any, progress in controlling harm in international politics. Elias argued in *The Germans* that societies have long subscribed to a double-standard of morality, observing one set of principles within their boundaries, and a more permissive code when it

comes to dealing with other societies. What was forbidden in relations between members of the same society has usually been permissible, and highly-valued, in relations with other groups. Elias qualified that observation in interesting ways, for example by arguing, again in *The Germans*, that modern people were shocked by the scale of the Nazi atrocities, whereas in antiquity the mass slaughter of people was often regarded as an inevitable aspect of warfare. It would, in any case, be counter-intuitive to suppose that the civilizing process did not spill over national frontiers and influence world politics. But the key point, for Elias, was that such civilized restraints invariably crumble rapidly when states fear for their security (the speed with which the Bush Administration set aside the 'torture norm' following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 illustrates the point). In short, states have always tried to promote their interests by any means at their disposal – unless they confronted external restraints and the 'fear of retaliation.' Only rarely have they decided that it might be in their long-term interest to comply with international principles.

Elias did emphasise that the modern world is unique in that all people are being drawn into longer webs of interconnectedness. Lengthening social relations have ambiguous consequences as far as the control of harm is concerned. Some groups resent growing entanglements: they fear or resent threats and challenges to their power and prestige. The forces that are driving global integration give rise to counter-thrusts that are capable of gaining the upper hand. On the other hand, the pressures to become better attuned to the interests of people over greater distances have increased, as have pressures to display higher levels of self-restraint lest societies endanger the order on which they all depend, especially in the nuclear age. Mutual dependence creates incentives to think from the standpoint of others and to acquire detachment from parochial attachments. But the movement towards more detached standpoints (which would create the conditions that favour the development of cosmopolitan harm conventions) is not inevitable. Progress in thinking from the perspectives of others can be thwarted or reversed when people fear for their security, when they succumb to pressures to intensify feelings of identification with the relevant

'survival unit,' and when they believe that observing inhibitions on harming adversaries is a danger they cannot afford.

IV. The English School and Process Sociology

Elias's reflections on international relations raise many important questions that need further analysis. How far are relations between modern societies similar to the dominant patterns of interaction in earlier eras? To what extent has the modern society of stares been influenced by 'civilized' attitudes to violence, and how far is it therefore different from international relations in the ancient world or in Latin Christendom? Does the lengthening of the webs of interconnectedness create the possibility that the modern states-system will develop along new pathways marked by higher levels of self-restraint and foresight, and by higher levels of responsiveness to the interests of distant strangers? To answer those questions, it is essential to assess the influence of civilizing processes in different states-systems.

The idea of a comparative sociology of states-systems which was advanced by Wight (1977) remains one of the most interesting features of the English School theory of international relations. Its importance for process sociology is evident from Elias's comment that the system of states is the highest level of social integration that currently exists – the highest global 'steering mechanism' that societies have for the purpose of grappling with the challenges of interconnectedness. Elias's interest in global political structures reflected his belief that people remain at the mercy of largely ungoverned processes, and that advances in creating 'unions of states' are essential if societies are to bring those forces under control. There is clear recognition that if there is to be a new phase in the civilizing process – a global civilizing process that curbs the power to cause violent and non-violent harm – then people will need to couple loyalties to traditional survival units with attachments to 'supranational' institutions. To date, the *habitus* (the general emotional dispositions that are evident in everyday life) has lagged behind advances in the level of human interconnectedness. Many people recognize the rationality of new forms of social and political

organization while admitting that they find little 'emotional warmth' in them.

Various approaches to international relations have addressed such issues in their analyses of the prospects for international cooperation. They have investigated global civilizing processes in the technical sense of the term – which is not to say that they have been influenced by Elias's writings, only that there are important parallels between those enterprises. One of the peculiarities of Elias's approach is that it recognized the need to understand societies in their international setting while neglecting the literature on international relations that specialized in analyzing global civilizing processes. Perhaps the most obvious reason for that neglect is Elias's tendency to deny that civilizing processes take root or develop very far in the absence of stable monopolies of power that provide security for people, and therefore free them from many of the dangers that arise when they are compelled to acquire weapons to protect themselves. There is an obvious contrast between that approach and the English School focus on 'anarchical societies' and its investigation of levels of civility and civilizing processes that impose some restraints on the capacity to harm even though there is no higher power monopoly that can enforce compliance with the relevant global harm conventions (Linklater, 2004). In short, on encountering Elias's writings, members of the English School might wonder why there is so little on the rise and development of the European society of states and on its expansion to all parts of the world (see Bull & Watson, 1984). They might ask where the discussion of the civilizing role of diplomacy and international law is to be found. They might stress that Elias's inquiry would profit from reflecting on the influence of the 'standard of civilization' on international society – the European convention that in the nineteenth century asserted the right to stand in judgment of non-European societies, to control their development, and to decide the changes that uncivilized societies had to undergo before they could be considered for membership of international society on equal terms with Europeans. Understanding more recent versions of the standard of civilization – including Western human rights standards and the idea of 'market civilization' – is no less important (Donnelly, 1998; Bowden & Seabrooke, 2006).

Members of the English School would be perfectly justified in thinking that process sociology can profit from analyzing those dimensions of world politics. But it is possible to reverse the argument by stating that the English School investigation of international society can benefit from understanding the European civilizing process, as explained by Elias. To rephrase the point, the study of international society can profit from understanding the larger transformation of human society that *The Civilizing Process* set out to explain. Alluding to the existence of something rather like a society of states, Elias observed that Europe's court societies were bound together by notions of chivalrous or honourable conduct that gave the conduct of war some of the hallmarks of the aristocratic duel. Rather like Carr in *Nationalism and After*, and Morgenthau in *Politics Among Nations*, Elias maintained that 'aristocratic internationalism' declined with the rise of the national bourgeoisie (which failed, he added, to make world politics comply with universal and egalitarian principles). As that argument indicates, the aristocratic phase had not been influenced by commitments to promoting perpetual peace – although that is not to say that no civilizing process existed. Indeed the general argument invites a discussion of how the civilizing process influenced relations between states by incorporating them in what members of the English School describe as a society of states.

To develop the point further, it useful to turn to an author whose writings on manners were discussed in *The Civilizing Process*. The author is Francois de Callieres, a member of the court of Louis XIV and at one time ambassador to Spain, who published *The Art of Diplomacy* in 1716. Callieres' treatise on diplomacy contains many insights into the relationship between court society, the civilizing role of diplomacy, and the international society of states. Of central importance was his contention that ambassadors should not be recruited from the higher nobility with its love of war, or from the military which was 'naturally violent and passionate', but from court officials that belonged to the lower nobility (Callieres, 1983, pp.75, 86, 166ff). Experienced in court rituals and etiquette, they were more likely to have the civilized qualities that

the ambassador needed, and they were less likely to behave in 'a severe rugged manner' that 'commonly disgusts and causes aversion' (Callieres, 1983, p.89). They could be relied on to possess a 'civil and engaging carriage', and to have an aptitude for civil conversation that would find favour and win influence in foreign courts (Callieres, 1983, pp.140, 143). Those obscervations established a crucial link between the civilizing character of court society and European diplomacy. They also provide support for Elias's thesis that the French court was the model of civilized conduct that was emulated across much of Europe (see Keens-Soper & Schweitzer, 1983, p.23 on how the dominant conception of diplomatic conduct that was adopted across Europe reflected the standard-setting role of the French court).

Callieres was adamant that the civilised qualities of court society were crucial in an era of increasing interconnectedness between societies. The lack of concern about harmful conduct that was evident in the tendency for the prince to act on the principle, *sic volo, sic jubeo; stat pro ratione voluntuas* – 'let the fact that I wish this, be sufficient reason' – was outmoded under conditions of mutual dependence (Callieres, 1983, p.62). New levels of restraint, greater sensitivity to the interests of others, and the willingness to compromise could bring 'mutual advantages'. The conviction that impulsive conduct should be replaced by the dispassionate quest for common interests was not based on political idealism but on an assessment of the challenges of interconnectedness. Change in one state, Callieres (1983, pp.68, 70, 97, 138) argued, was perfectly 'capable of disturbing the quiet of all the others' so that all had an interest in acting as members of 'one and the same Commonwealth' that sought to cultivate a reputation for fair play and honesty (Callieres, 1983, pp.83, 110-11; also Keens-Soper & Schweizer, 1983, p.36). Callieres' claims are therefore cast in the language of international society. No higher authority could direct states in the system that had replaced the *respublica Christiana*. Even so, the constituent units were 'parts of a *civilization*' that could promote 'order and adjustment by *civilized* means' (Keens-Soper & Schweizer, 1983, p.35, italics added). Civilized diplomacy in the late eighteenth century was the creation of court society (Keens-Soper &

Schweizer, 1983, pp.29-31).

V. The Global Civilizing Process and the Standard of Civilization

Every discourse of civilization, Walter Benjamin argued, is also a discourse of barbarism. Illustrating the point, Europeans contrasted their civilization with the world of the 'savage' and 'barbarian.' From the time of Columbus, the idea of civilization was used to justify force, the appropriation of the land, and the enslavement or displacement of 'backward' peoples. Elias observed in *The Germans* that Napoleon announced that the French had a civilizing mission, a responsibility to export civilization to conquered territories. Such attitudes were embedded in international society in the nineteenth century, as the idea of 'the standard of civilization' reveals (Gong, 1984; Suzuki, 2009). The idea of extra-territoriality which was designed to ensure that non-European societies would treat Europeans in a 'civilized' way shows how the society of states stood between the civilizing process and the overall transformation of human society. Pressures to conform to European rules led the Ottomans, China and Japan to import Western practices, including the institution of diplomacy. It is important to stress that the European powers were not a little appalled by non-European societies that assumed they were superior to them (Bull & Watson, 1984). The expansion of international society as influenced by the European standard of civilization transformed human society by eroding hegemonic conceptions of world order in China and elsewhere (while preserving the European's sense of their cultural and racial superiority which was enshrined in their belief that the society of states was one of the hallmarks of their civilization).

The idea of civilization has always had highly ambiguous consequences for how Europeans understood their rights and duties to the wider world. They were evident in the first contacts between European and non-European peoples in the Americas when opinion divided between those who thought that civilization gave the colonial authorities unlimited – or virtually unlimited – rights over the newly-conquered peoples, and those who believed that Christendom formed part of a larger human society, and that non-Christians had rights against Christians –

rights to be spared physical cruelty if not colonial efforts to bring about religious conversion. From those examples, one can see how the idea of civilization was used by some groups to claim that almost anything was permitted in relations with 'barbarians,' and harnessed by others to protest against imperial cruelties, or to argue that the suffering that was caused by the Atlantic slave trade and slavery should be forbidden, and also to support forms of international trusteeship that had the purpose of preparing the colonies for eventual self-government, albeit in imitation of the dominant Western powers (Bain, 2003; Crawford, 2001). We have evidence here of how the civilizing process influenced European attitudes and behaviour towards the rest of the world, how it was linked at certain times with efforts to promote sympathy for non-European powers in accordance with civilized sensitivities to violent and non-violent harm, and how it influenced the belief that the European society of states had obligations to other peoples which, for some, came to include the duty to 'prepare' them for eventual membership of the society of states (Crawford, 2001).

Despite its use in opposition to violent harm, enslavement, humiliation and so forth, the idea of civilization underpinned what Elias (2000, p.386) called the 'most recent phase' of the civilizing process in which the global establishment – the European colonial powers – attempted to persuade the outsiders – the colonised peoples – of their cultural inferiority and need to emulate the customs of the imperial overlords. As Bull (1984) argued in his comments on 'the revolt against the West,' non-European peoples rejected such Western assumptions which do not have much support in the West now that imperialism has been delegitimated. The upshot has been a general shift away from the conviction that the world is divided between the 'civilized' world and the outlying 'barbarian' regions to the belief that the world consists of numerous civilizations which exist on an equal plane, none more important than the others. Indeed, it might be argued that that 'the most recent phase' of the civilizing process is to be found in the idea that civilisation is not monopolised by any one people but exists in multiple forms that warrant equal respect. Or, the most recent phase is found in the uneasy compromise between that view and the belief that all peoples

possess universal human rights that should not be subordinated to the claims of culture, civilization and tradition. In any case, international relations no longer revolve around the question of how the civilized world should behave towards the uncivilized world, but involve questions about how different cultures (or civilizing processes) can co-exist as equals within the framework of the international society of states.

The political challenges are immense not because of any impending 'clash of civilizations' but because many cultures and civilizations have yet to shed assumptions about their superiority to outsiders, however that might be expressed. As Elias (2008) argued, most societies in human history seem to have felt the need to place themselves above others, and to find collective satisfaction in the belief that others are inferior to them. Such characteristics were fundamental features of the European civilizing process from the attempts by the early courtiers to distinguish themselves from members of the 'repugnant' lower strata, through the larger process of state-formation and 'internal colonialism,' to contemporary Western ideas about exporting free market liberalism and liberal democracy. Because of the nature of their civilizing processes, many other societies face similar challenges in acquiring detachment from parochial belief-systems, in understanding the world from the standpoint of others, and in appreciating how they are perceived by those who exist in the more distant areas of the web that binds different peoples together. Elias (2000, p.410) argued that if societies are to succeed in living together amicably in the context of rising levels of global interconnectedness, they will need to rise to the foreign policy challenge of devising suitable principles of co-existence between peoples who have been gone through very different civilizing processes and who have different conceptions of the level of self-restraint that is essential in their relations with other peoples.

From that vantage-point, the question is whether they can agree on similar standards of self-restraint – whether they can find common ground in harm conventions that rein in the capacity to damage the interests of others. Some have argued that there has been already been substantial progress in reaching

an agreement about ideas of civility – in global harm conventions – that span very different cultures. In *The Global Covenant*, Robert Jackson maintains that international society is the most successful form of world political organization to date in establishing principles that enable separate political communities to co-exist relatively amicably (it is worth adding that Jackson uses the concept of 'civility'; to describe that state of affairs; he regards it as preferable to the idea of civilization with its connotations of superiority over peoples; but it conveys many of the ideas that have been associated with a civilized way of life such as restraints on violent harm and compliance with the rule of law). Elias was rather less confident that societies have found ways of bridging their different conceptions of civilized conduct. In the course of being forced together, he maintained, people face new pressures to learn how to be better attuned to the needs and interests of other people over greater distances. But as noted earlier those are only pressures; they do not guarantee that societies will agree on the nature of the global civilizing process – on the harm conventions – that should bind them altogether. Indeed, the more people are pushed together by processes they do not understand and do not control – and the more they believe they are tied to others in relations that diminish their power, autonomy and prestige and promote significant advantages for others – the more likely they are to react against them, quite possibly by using force. Examples include the violent reactions to the encroachment of European power in many non-European societies in the age of imperialism and the contemporary revolt against the West that is evident in radical Islam. From Elias's perspective, the tensions between the forces of integration and disintegration seem likely to continue. Global civilizing offenses that seek to promote restraint in the acquisition of the most destructive forms of violence, or respect for human rights, may clash with counter-thrusts that reject such efforts to place such global restraints on sovereign power. 'The civilization of which I speak,' Elias (1996, p.31) maintained, is far from complete, and may never be completed. The same point applies to a global civilizing process in which the international society of states supports efforts on the part of groups to live together with the minimum of

violent and non-violent harm.

VI. Conclusion

Martin Wight maintained that all states-systems have developed within a common civilization that was aware of its differences from the rest of the world – the less 'civilized' world which authorized acts against 'barbarian' outsiders that were forbidden in relations between 'civilized' peoples. Where did that common civilization come from? What was its source? *In Court Society*, Elias maintained that court societies have had a crucial role in the development of civilizing processes. It is unclear whether or not the speculation sheds light on long-term patterns of development in different civilizations. But there is good reason to think that the European courts were instrumental not only in the formation of civilized restraints on conduct within society but also on conceptions of civilized statecraft in international society, and on a more relaxed conception of what was permissible in relations with the civilization. It is important to ask how far a comparative investigation of court societies can explain conceptions of international society, associated 'standards of civilization,' tensions between the arrogant and self-critical (or inclusionary and exclusionary) dimensions of civilizing processes, and potentials to support global civilizing processes that imposed collective restraints on the capacity to cause violent and non-violent harm.

The analysis of the civilizing role of court societies (whether European or non-European) is one possible route to higher levels of synthesis in the social sciences. With respect to the modern era, Elias's discussion of court society and civilization paid little attention to the formation of the society of states, whereas English School reflections on the evolution of that particular form of world political organization have mainly ignored its relationship with the larger process of social and political change that Elias examined. The result is that there has been little research on how the development of the society of states is part of the larger transformation of human society – more specifically, how the standard of civilization underpinned what were often successful efforts to transform outlying

societies, how that conception of civilization led to tensions over rights and duties to the less civilized world, and how different societies have been left with the question of how to organize their international relations so that they do not cause one another unnecessary violent and non-violent harm. Some fundamental questions suggest themselves. How far are different civilizing processes in the modern world converging on similar social standards of self-restraint? To what extent are they reaching an agreement that things that were once permitted are now forbidden?[2] How far are changes occurring in the organization of social and political life and in the individual habitus in response to revolutionary developments in the capacity to cause higher levels of violent and non-violent harm to more and more people over greater distances? How far are modern societies poised to undergo a civilizing process and to create demanding harm conventions that address the problem of harm in world politics? Closer links between English School approaches to international society and process sociology are essential to answer such questions.

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(2) The reference is to Caxton's saying in the early fifteenth century that things once permitted are now being forbidden, and to Elias's observation that the comment might stand as the 'motto' for the whole civilizing process that was to come (Elias, 2000, p.104).

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<Summary>

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This paper argues that there is nothing more fundamental in social life than organising the capacity to harm (whether to defend society from enemies or to punish offenders) and nothing more fundamental than controlling that power so that people are not free to injure, humiliate, exploit and in other ways harm others at will. No tradition of thought has analysed the problem of harm directly; however the sociological perspective that was developed by Norbert Elias provides unusual insight into how modern societies have reduced the dangers of physical violence. A weakness in Elias's position is the conviction that there is no equivalent to the civilizing process in the relations between states – a standpoint that is plainly contradicted by the English School analysis of international society. The English School has not explored connections between the development of modern international society and the civilizing process. It is therefore important to combine elements of the English School and Eliasian sociology to understand long-term patterns of change within and between modern societies, and specifically to consider how far there have been advances in reducing violent and non-violent harm in international relations.