



---

## Introduction

The central question in the following discussion is whether modern ethical attitudes to the use of force are significantly different from the prevalent assumptions about violence and suffering in the earlier Western states-systems. A few comments about specific writings on that subject will explain how that problem arises; they point the way towards a solution. Wight speculated that the ancient Greeks and Romans appear to have had little or no conception of ‘international ethics’ that restrained violent harm. He highlighted the differences between the states-systems of classical antiquity and the modern international order where moral sensitivities to the use of force appear to be more developed. In support of the conjecture, Wight (1966: 126) referred to the Allies’ rejection of Stalin’s suggestion that the German General Staff should be liquidated at the end of the Second World War. The implication was that peoples of classical antiquity were less troubled by the summary execution of enemy leaders. There is a striking parallel with Elias’s observation about the differences between ‘ancient’ and ‘modern’ responses to what has come to be known as genocide. Information about the Holocaust produced shock and revulsion amongst ‘civilized’ peoples, not least because of the realization that one of them – another advanced, technological society – had organized mass slaughter on an industrial scale. But, Elias argued, massacres were commonplace in classical antiquity, and usually passed without comment or condemnation.

Those comments are puzzling for these reasons. As will be discussed below, Wight maintained that international relations constitute ‘the realm of recurrence and repetition’, while Elias stated in one place that little seems to change in world politics apart from the methods of killing and the number of people involved. Modern ‘civilized’ peoples, the latter added, are still living much as our ancestors did ‘in the period of their so-called “barbarism”’ (Elias 2013: 190). The level of domestic pacification had increased in European societies over recent centuries, but the tolerance of force in relations with enemies had not been significantly reduced. The presumption was that a global equivalent to the European civilizing process that had forbidden many practices that had once been permitted is unlikely to occur in the

## 2 VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

absence of a higher monopoly of coercive power that can provide levels of security that are comparable to the peaceful conditions that are largely taken for granted in 'civilized' societies.

Similar tensions are evident in more recent writings on international relations. Many authors have maintained that liberal societies have eradicated force from their relations with each other. The global spread of liberal democratic values, it is contended, can be expected to lead to the gradual pacification of international society as a whole, assuming that non-liberal societies can undergo a successful transition to liberalism. However, such restraints on using force in relations with other liberals have not been observed assiduously in conflicts with illiberal regimes that are presumed to lack political legitimacy (Doyle 1983). Liberal governments have been criticised by groups that are alarmed by basic contradictions between liberal values and the continuing tolerance of force, particularly where it leads to what the relevant publics regard as unnecessary suffering. For some analysts, liberal experiments have demonstrated how the international system can be pacified; for realist critics, such images have not substantially altered the basic dynamics of world politics.

Arguably, most scholars occupy a mid-position between those standpoints. Few would claim that international relations have barely changed across the centuries apart from successive revolutions in the instruments of warfare; few would contend that the relationship between morality and politics is the same today as it was in earlier phases in the history of the modern states-system, or in the earlier systems of states in the West. On the other hand, few scholars have maintained that international society has changed so profoundly that one can point to a complete and perhaps irreversible break with the past. In the main, such orientations are largely impressionistic and do not rest on systematic comparisons between states-systems; indeed, there has been little empirical research that sheds light on, *inter alia*, what is, and what is not, distinctive about 'international ethics' in the modern period. This work aims to fill that curious gap in the literature by trying to answer three questions: first, whether the most recent phase of the modern states-system is different from classical antiquity (and from the earlier states-systems in the West); second, how far conceptions of civilization, and related ideas about self-restraint in preceding eras, explain basic differences between those states-systems; and, third, what the analysis of the states-systems in the West suggests are the social and political preconditions of ethical restraints on violence that mark the rise of a more 'advanced' civilization.

Those introductory remarks therefore raise important questions about whether the similarities between the Western states-systems are greater than the differences, and about how any fundamental differences are best explained. The revival of interest in the 'English School' since the early 1990s has not been accompanied by efforts to build on Wight's vision of a sociology of states-

systems which is the obvious starting point for the quest to understand shifts in what is and is not permissible in international politics across long time intervals. The work that comes closest in general orientation was less engaged with perspectives on ethics and world politics than with shifts in the distribution of military power over the last five millennia (Watson 1992). The argument is that an examination of the relationship between violence and civilization can clarify whether and how far social attitudes to force have changed in the history of the Western states-systems.

The importance of that relationship is suggested by Elias and Wight's references to attitudes to force during and after the Second World War. As will be explained later, Elias referred to growing external compulsions on modern states to exercise greater self-restraint and foresight than their predecessors did. The upshot of the analysis is that there are interesting parallels between the 'civilizing process' in early modern Europe, when people were forced together in longer webs of interconnectedness, and the related challenges of contemporary globalization. Elias did not contend that pressures to restrain violence will lead inexorably to the pacification of relations between the great powers. The future remained open. But his comments about the dominant responses to the Nazi genocides clearly implied that the civilizing process had transformed attitudes to the use of force in the modern states-system. Indeed, it would be peculiar if modern 'civilized' standpoints on violence and suffering had made no impression on foreign policy behaviour whatsoever.

As for Wight's example from the Second World War, the implication appeared to be that the Western allies could not endorse a course of action that so obviously clashed with cherished civilized self-images. Such links between violence and civilization are implied by his conjecture that all societies of states appear to have emerged in regions where the governing elites believed that they were part of a cultural zone that was superior to neighbouring 'backward' societies (Wight 1977: 33–5). Shared beliefs about society and politics ensured levels of mutual comprehension that might not have existed otherwise; they made it easier to reach lasting diplomatic agreements. In relations with 'barbarians', those societies did not feel compelled to observe the ethical restraints on violence that they generally upheld in their own international relations (Wight 1977: *ibid.*). The 'double standard of morality' was especially evident in the age of European conquest. The gulf between the principles that were valued in relations between members of the same state-organized society and the 'ethic' that governed relations with other 'civilized' groups was even greater in the relations between self-defining civilized, colonizing peoples and subject populations. The latter were conquered by force, liquidated, or enslaved, exploited and harmed in other ways that were largely prohibited in 'civilized' enclaves.

4 VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

Wight and Elias identified crucial links between violence and civilization but each focused on one dimension of a broader pattern of social and political change, and their respective positions need to be brought together in a more synoptic approach to long-term processes of development. For example, Wight argued that a pre-existing sense of belonging to a shared culture or civilization smoothed the way to creating an international society, but he did not analyse civilization in processual terms: he did not discuss how societies came to have specific values in common or explain how shared ‘civilized’ beliefs influenced – and were shaped by – the ways in which states were bound together in an international society. No account of how the society of states gave shape to, and was part of, a larger process of civilization was provided.

Elias’s remarks about modern attitudes to genocide indicated how the civilizing process has influenced attitudes to violent harm in relations between societies. His comments are part of a broader argument that all societies that have made the transition from autocratic to democratic rule have had to wrestle with the question of how universalistic and egalitarian moral principles should guide the conduct of foreign policy. Such societies have confronted tensions that did not arise for preceding social groups (Elias 2013: 175–6). Those comments resonate with Wight’s discussion of how the moral foundations of domestic legitimacy changed over the last few centuries as states went through the transition from dynastic to democratic and nationalist principles of government (Wight 1977: ch. 6). Those observations are the counterpart to the claim that principles of legitimacy that specify which political units have the right to belong to the society of states, and dictate how they should behave, are an obvious point of intersection between domestic and international politics (Wight 1977: *ibid.*).

The process-sociological analysis of how actions that were once permitted came to be forbidden shows how that discussion can be extended, and how the comparative study of states-systems can be taken forward. But its investigation of violence and civilization can be developed by incorporating key insights from English School analyses of international society. It is necessary to add that Elias did not make the mistake of thinking that the development of European conceptions of civilization was a wholly endogenous process that took place within separate or autonomous societies. He stated that the ruling elites in early modern Europe belonged to a ‘supra-national court society’ (Elias 2010: 3–4), but he did not regard that figuration as a crucial precursor of the modern society of states. One problem was that Elias did not regard modern conceptions of diplomacy as part of a larger European civilizing process that spread from the French absolutist court to other European societies and then to other parts of the world. He analysed the impact of earlier notions of courtesy and civility on the rise and development of European notions of civilization, but neglected how specific conceptions of self-restraint in the earlier Western states-

systems left a cultural inheritance that included modern conceptions of 'civilized' statecraft. In short, process sociology is incomplete without considering what the comparative sociology of state-systems can contribute to understanding modern images of civilization.

The upshot is that an inquiry into modern conceptions of violence and civilization must analyse the ways in which societies have been tied together in long-term processes in which, for example, classical Greek and Roman ideals of self-restraint influenced Renaissance and early European ideas of civility and later conceptions of civilization. What has not been documented in detail are the ways in which later states-systems were shaped by reflections on the political experience of earlier examples – not just by efforts to emulate their military achievements but also by endeavours to learn from their conceptions of restraint. What the English School adds to comprehending the relationship between violence and civilization is the recognition that international society is a crucial realm in which different societies discover the extent to which they can agree on what Elias called 'social standards of self-restraint'. The very fact that genocide is now forbidden by international law is an illustration of powerful normative shifts within the contemporary society of states. It is an important example of a Western-inspired global 'civilizing process' that was obscured by the corollary of Elias's contention that the rise of state monopolies of power over force and taxation was crucial for the whole European process of civilization, namely that a global equivalent is improbable in the absence of a higher monopoly of power that can compel states to comply with specific standards of restraint. What several members of the English School have called the 'civilizing' effect of international society and its core institutions such as diplomacy and international law was missing from the analysis.

As already noted, Elias stated that sociologists could not regard societies as separate entities that had been shaped by entirely endogenous patterns of development. European societies, for example, did not first reach their independent positions on their 'civilized' condition, and only then ask how they were set apart from, and should behave towards, less 'civilized' peoples and towards each other. Although Elias devoted little attention to this point, their interactions with subject peoples were critical in forming 'civilized' identities and in constructing the society of states. The nineteenth-century European 'standard of civilization' is evidence of how 'civilized' sensibilities were embedded in international society. It shows how Elias's explanation of the civilizing process and the English School analysis of international society can be combined in a 'higher level synthesis' that strengthens the former's account of how specific patterns of social and political change between the fifteenth and twentieth centuries transformed not just the European continent but the entire world.

In this discussion, the comparative analysis of states-systems considers the issue of how far their constitutive civilizing processes were expressed in the

6 VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

dominant international or cosmopolitan harm conventions – in the prevalent beliefs about permissible and forbidden forms of violence. The English School approach contains a battery of concepts that can be employed to comprehend those dimensions of world politics. The analysis of the Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian tradition of international thought described competing approaches to the level of restraint in foreign policy and their different levels of optimism or pessimism about future possibilities (Wight 1991). Distinctions between the pluralist and solidarist images of international society have been used to draw attention to diverse philosophical, legal and diplomatic assumptions about the extent to which sympathy for, and solidarity with, vulnerable peoples can drive the states-system beyond the quest for order and stability between the major powers towards collective action to alleviate human suffering (Bull 1966). Those concepts were developed to characterize and classify types of international society. They are useful for describing different approaches to the relationship between violence and civilization, but they do not explain the crucial differences. Process sociology, on the other, possesses a range of concepts with precisely that explanatory ambition. It is important to stress that the central categories were not designed to explain the core features of world politics but were deemed to be invaluable for understanding social figurations of any kind, whether local, national or global (Elias 2009). Three concepts will guide the following discussion. They are ‘we feeling’ or ‘the scope of emotional identification’, the ‘we–I balance’, and ‘social constraints towards self-restraint’. Those ideas which were central to the comparative study of civilizing processes can contribute to an analysis of harm conventions in different international states-systems that extends the preceding investigation of the problem of harm in world politics. They can support the endeavour to ascertain whether the relationship between violence and civilization in the contemporary world is testimony to distinctive accomplishments in restraining the power to cause violent harm.

The concept of ‘we-feeling’ – an alternative term is ‘we-identity’ – refers to solidarity between people that is most apparent in collective attachments to ‘survival units’ such as kin-based associations, city states, universal empires or nation-states (Kaspersen and Gabriel 2008). It highlights the role of emotions in binding people together in such entities. Examples are the extent to which shame or guilt can be aroused by violating – or contemplating the transgression of – social norms, by the degree to which pity or compassion develops by witnessing others’ suffering and pain, and the extent to which collective fear, hatred, anger or indignation can be provoked by perceived threats to security or by assaults on ‘group pride’. The idea of ‘scope’ captures the reality that the ties that bind are invariably connected with morally significant dichotomies between ‘social superiors’ and ‘social inferiors’ within the relevant groups as well as stark contrasts between the society as a whole and other peoples. In a parallel discussion, Deutsch (1970) argued that, in international security

## INTRODUCTION

7

communities, the level of we-feeling and the associated desire to resolve differences peacefully reflect a weakening of such pernicious distinctions in the relations between the peoples involved. The same is true of international societies and their core understandings about who enjoys the right of membership (and who can be excluded); the same is true of related beliefs about who should be protected by the dominant harm conventions (and who is denied the associated rights).

The second concept enlarges on the idea of 'we-feeling' by recognizing that a 'we-identity' is compatible with very different understandings of the relationship between the individual and society. Elias coined the expression, the 'we-I balance', to analyse the relationship between 'we' and 'I' in different figurations and, more specifically, to establish how far human groups have recognized and respected individual demands for free expression or privacy, or for maximizing personal wealth and promoting material self-interest. The contention was that most societies in human history have been very different from the highly-individuated societies that developed in Europe from the Renaissance. The sense of 'we' was predicated on radically different assumptions about the power balance between the collectivity and its individual members. The idea that the latter have 'natural rights' that cannot be overridden for the sake of the larger community was foreign to societies where rights and responsibilities were attached to specific social roles. The conviction that the individual could have rights that existed independently of society was entirely alien.

The notion of the we-I balance is relevant to the analysis of international societies and specifically to understanding the relationship between 'we' (where 'we' refers to international society or to some conception of humanity, and 'I' (where 'I' refers to the separate state). There are sharp differences between the pluralist conception of international society in which the we-I balance involved certain restrictions on national sovereignty for the sake of maintaining international order, and the solidarist alternative in which restraints on sovereign power are derived from ethical commitments to universal human rights. In general, the sense of 'we-feeling' in societies of states has usually been low relative to the claims that have been asserted in defence of the 'I' (the independent political community). For that reason, a central issue is how far the dominant understandings of the we-I balance in the most recent phase of international society represent a significant break with earlier arrangements.

The third concept, social standards of self-restraint, is best considered by recalling that in every society, infants have to learn how to control the 'animalic' impulses that govern their behaviour. In the course of routine patterns of socialization, children learn to internalize the standards of self-restraint in their society; in the course of 'conscience formation', they learn



## 8 VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

how to attune their emotional dispositions and behaviour to others in the same group. Elias mainly concentrated on explaining the European idea of civilization but he observed that all societies have civilizing processes whether or not they not they possessed the idea of civilization (that only came to the forefront of political theory and practice in Western Europe in the last quarter of the eighteenth century). All societies have civilizing processes, Elias maintained, in the technical, non-evaluative use of the concept because their members are required to observe particular standards of self-control and to tame violent and aggressive behaviour – though clearly not in the same way or to the same degree – if they are to live together in the same society. The idea of a socialization process might appear to be perfectly adequate for explaining those features of human existence; the seemingly more neutral idea of collective learning processes may be a preferable term (Linklater 2011: 244ff.). But neither concept quite captures the reality that dichotomies between the ‘responsible’ or ‘deviant’ or ‘dangerous’ members of the societies are core features of the ways in which people are bound together in the same society and central elements of the socialization processes they go through in early life. Those oppositions are invariably interwoven with distinctions between ‘advanced’ and ‘backward’ societies that construct individual and collective identities. The idea of a civilizing process is preferred because it captures those elementary, universal normative realities that are integral to ‘conscience formation’ in all ways of life.<sup>1</sup>

That broader concept was also used in connection with changes that affected the species as a whole as cultural development gradually took over from biological evolution as the main determinant of human history. That orientation to the past highlighted social transformations that occurred over many hundreds of thousands of years as early humans or proto-humans were freed from the instinctual drives that governed the behaviour of the ‘animalic’ species from which they emerged. It drew attention to the process of ‘symbol emancipation’ from the domination of nature that was evident in the early phases of human evolution when peoples made the first advances in restraining ‘animal’ aggression (Elias 2011). That process continues. Societies no longer face the problem of taming the aggressive impulses that were part of the ‘animal’ nature of early humans, although the potential for violence remains a fundamental part of their biological inheritance. They confront instead the greater challenge of restraining violent dispositions that are the product of increased social complexity in human history.

<sup>1</sup> In the following pages, the civilizing process will therefore be used to refer to two different phenomena – to the development of European images of cultural superiority, and to conceptions of self-restraint that exist in all human societies. How the term is used will be evident from the specific context. In neither case is the term used to express approval of the arrangements under discussion. Where necessary, the term has been placed in quotation marks to make that point clear.



The problem of controlling violence is not the same for modern humans as it was for their distant ancestors, but their respective challenges are part of one interconnected chain of events. Early humans were steadily freed from the genetic constraints on aggression and compelled to develop substitutes in the form of internal and external restraints on violent and aggressive impulses. They protected themselves from some forms of violent harm in the process, but many became exposed to new dangers as a result of success in creating strong intra-societal restraints on violence. The greater collective power that those agreements made possible could be turned against opponents in the same society and used against external enemies. Societies have not succeeded in solving the problem of violent harm that emerged as early humans became emancipated from the genetic constraints on violence that determine the behaviour of other species. Perhaps they never will. However, the idea of a global civilizing process in the technical sense of the term can be used to describe the extent to which there have been such achievements in relations between the societies into which the species is divided. The concept does not refer to some normative vision of ‘civilized’ existence but to shifts in the standards of self-restraint that people have imposed on themselves and on each other in the course of responding to the new potentials for organizing harm that occurred as cultural development replaced biological evolution as the principal influence on the history of the species. Important questions arise about the part that different forms of world political organization such as empires have played in shaping global civilizing processes. They include the place of international societies in the development of social standards of self-restraint that have addressed the recurrent problem of harm in world politics.

As with the level of ‘we-feeling’ and the ‘we-I balance’, the standards of self-restraint vary enormously from society to society, and shift over time in the history of every human group. In the explanation of the European civilizing process, Elias drew various contrasts between the medieval and modern periods that will be considered in the later discussion of the differences between the international relations of Latin Christendom and the ensuing European states-system. The argument was that medieval knights were free to carry and to use weapons more or less as they pleased; restraints on violent and aggressive behaviour were not as strong as those that regulate the behaviour of the members of modern highly pacified, ‘civilized’ societies. Over several centuries, it was argued, the influence of external constraints and the fear of state coercion on human action declined relative to the power of inner restraints and the dictates of ‘conscience’. Coercion did not disappear from the most stable, pacified societies, but was stored ‘in the barracks’ from which it re-emerged to deal with significant threats to public order (Elias 2012: 411). It could not be assumed that the internalized sources of individual restraint would survive in any future crisis where people fear for their security or

## 10 VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

survival – where, for example, they believe that public institutions cannot or will not protect them. Similar anxieties have often appeared in the relations between societies where self-reliance is the norm and where the dominant standards of self-restraint that are associated with international society or with the idea of humanity have been less demanding than in the domestic domain. Social attitudes to what is permissible and what is forbidden in the relations between members of the same society have not been thought to apply directly to foreign policy as a matter of principle. Weaker restrictions on force have characterized that sphere.

Elias observed that it is possible to imagine a future condition where people trust each other to observe very high levels of self-restraint, and where they are confident that they can coexist non-violently without the need for external coercion. Such a state of affairs, he argued, would be a ‘very advanced form of civilization’ indeed; that form of life seems unattainable at present, and may never be realized, but it is important to try to achieve it (Elias 2007: 141). The contention was linked with a rare open display of a normative commitment in Elias’s sociological writings that stated that humanity is at present undergoing ‘a great collective learning process’, and that ‘the task that lies before us is to work towards the pacification and organized unification of humankind’ in the face of the reality that, for the most part, people’s ‘self-regulation is ... geared to the identification with small sub-units of humankind’ (Elias 2008: 89ff.). That formulation is an example of a recurrent theme in Elias’s writings, which is that ruling elites have long acted on the principle that they must have the freedom which citizens do not ordinarily have in their relations with each other to depart from the dominant intra-societal restraints on force. Acts of violence that are often prohibited or strictly regulated within social groups have been deemed necessary to conquer or defeat external foes. Violations of the usual taboos against force have been actively encouraged and have brought social rewards to the warriors involved.

Those points provide a reminder that throughout human history, ‘survival units’ have rarely been bound together by a powerful sense of we-feeling (Elias 2010a: 194ff.). Where some degree of solidarity has existed – as in the case of the Hellenic and modern states-systems where there was a strong sense of belonging to the same civilization or international society – the we-I balance strongly favoured the individual survival units. Such conceptions of their place in the world have usually failed to restrain states that faced major external threats to security or survival. In those circumstances, societies insisted that it is entirely legitimate, if not absolutely necessary, to use forms of violence that had been eliminated from relations within the relevant ‘survival unit’ where a high level of control of violent tendencies had developed. Internalized ethical restraints on using force against enemies – as opposed to restraints that are based entirely on the fear of external sanctions – were weaker.