VIOLENCE AND CIVILIZATION IN THE WESTERN STATES-SYSTEMS

Andrew Linklater's *The Problem of Harm in World Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2011) created a new agenda for the sociology of states-systems. *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems* builds on the author's attempts to combine the process-sociological investigation of civilizing processes and the English School analysis of international society in a higher synthesis. Adopting Martin Wight's comparative approach to states-systems and drawing on the sociological work of Norbert Elias, Linklater asks how modern Europeans came to believe themselves more 'civilized' than their medieval forebears. He investigates novel combinations of violence and civilization through a broad historical scope from classical antiquity, Latin Christendom and Renaissance Italy to the post-Second World War era. This book will interest all students with an interdisciplinary commitment to investigating long-term patterns of change in world politics.

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India

103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

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www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781316608333

First published 2016

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-107-15473-5 Hardback
ISBN 978-1-316-60833-3 Paperback

And now for lords who understand, I'll tell
A Fable; once a hawk, high in the clouds
Clutched in his claws a specked nightingale.
She, pierced by those hooked claws, cried, 'Pity me'.
But he made scornful answer: 'Silly thing,
Why do you cry? Your master holds you fast,
You'll go where I decide, although you have
A minstrel's lovely voice, and if I choose,
I'll have you for a meal or let you go.
Only a fool will match himself against a
Stronger party, for he'll only lose
And be disgraced as well as beaten'

Hesiod, *Works and Days*, II 202–211

Two principles in human nature reign:
Self-love, to urge, and Reason, to restrain

Pope, *An Essay on Man*, Epistle II-II

CONTENTS

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following investigation extends the argument for a comparative sociology of states-systems that was developed in the final chapter of *The Problem of Harm in World Politics: Theoretical Investigations* (Cambridge 2011). A central aim is to analyse the extent to which agreed standards of self-restraint that were linked with shared conceptions of civility or civilization have shaped the development of Western states-systems. A related objective is to determine whether the dominant patterns of self-restraint in the contemporary international system are radically different from those that existed in the preceding arrangements. It is to show what modern standards of restraint owe to their predecessors and to begin to explain the key differences.

The inquiry is designed to advance Martin Wight's comparative approach to states-systems by drawing on the considerable resources of Eliasian or process sociology. The latter provided a provisional explanation of how modern Europeans came to regard themselves as more 'civilized' than their medieval forebears and more 'advanced' than surrounding 'barbarians'. The general pattern of social development was said to be evident in an overall decline in the level of interpersonal violence over approximately five centuries, and in an attendant growing aversion to pain and suffering. It identified changes in what is permissible and what is forbidden within state-organized societies. The argument was that continuity rather than change has been the norm in the relations between political communities. In several publications, Elias referred to mounting pressures on societies to resolve their differences peacefully and to collaborate to deal with the problems of interconnectedness that faced them all. He described the ways in which the idea of civilization had shaped modern Western attitudes to violence including genocide. What was missing, however, and is still in need of elaboration, is an account of how far changing conceptions of permissible and impermissible violence are evident not only within modern nation-states but in the relations between them.

Elias wrote extensively about civilizing processes but paid little attention to international societies of states including the modern one. He did not see them as particular forms of social and political integration with distinctive civilizing processes and standards of restraint. It is nevertheless essential to understand

his analysis of the process of civilization in order to explain the Western-initiated global 'civilizing process' that has shaped the modern states-system over the last few decades and centuries. For his part, Wight suggested that international societies have only emerged in regions where the constituent parts thought they belonged to a cultural zone that was clearly distinguished from the world of the 'barbarians'. That sense of civilization, the argument was, made it easier for states to reach common understandings about, *inter alia,* diplomatic procedures and rules of war that should be upheld in the relations between 'advanced' peoples, but could be placed to one side in conflicts with 'inferiors'. Wight noted how the idea of civilization had influenced common understandings of the permissible and the forbidden in world politics. But his works do not contain a systematic analysis of the impact of ideas of civilization on international societies. Shared cultures or civilizations were described as background conditions that facilitated the development of societies of states rather than as processes – of which those forms of world political organization were an important part – that unfolded over many centuries. There was no discussion then of how the modern society of states was not simply embedded in, but an important feature of, the longer civilizing process that Elias attempted to explain.

Wight's vision of a comparative study of states-systems and Elias's analysis of the European civilizing process are magisterial contributions to the social sciences. But they are limited achievements because they did not explore the connections between civilizing processes and societies of states. Elias's investigation of how the dominant beliefs about what is permissible and what is forbidden changed in the modern period suggests specific avenues of research. To use a term that was introduced in *The Problem of Harm in World Politics,* the sociological challenge is to understand the dominant harm conventions in different states-systems. That inquiry drew attention to certain universals of social life, including the reality that all societies have harm conventions that distinguish between harmful and harmless acts, and between justifiable and unjustifiable harm. The same is true of international societies. They possess harm conventions that can be divided into those that are designed to preserve order between separate states (international harm conventions) and those that have been created to protect individuals and non-state groups (cosmopolitan harm conventions) in their own right. A central question in the chapters below is how far shared conceptions of civilized conduct shaped, and were influenced by, the dominant harm conventions in world politics. Such an investigation must examine the complex interconnections between domestic and international patterns of change. Ideas about civilization, their relationship with harm conventions that embody general understandings about civilized behaviour, and their impact on the prevalent ideas about the permissible and the forbidden within and between state-organized societies belong to one overall pattern of social and political development. But inquiries into those

interrelationships barely exist, and this is also true of explorations of the basic social-scientific concepts that can be used to compare civilizing processes in international societies.

One of the functions of the comparative sociology of states-systems therefore is to ascertain how far societies have agreed that certain harm conventions should be upheld everywhere because of shared understandings of civility or civilization, or because of equivalent social ideas that expressed their conviction in having progressed beyond a 'barbarous' past and neighbouring 'savages'. The argument is that process sociology has a crucial part to play in that analysis, despite the limitations noted earlier. The details will be discussed in the introduction. Suffice it to note that Elias did not develop a conceptual system that was confined to investigations of the relations between members of the same society – which was the customary object of analysis in sociological inquiry. His writings were critical of sociological orthodoxy that presumed that changes within societies could be understood without investigating their interdependencies with the domain of inter-societal relations. He developed certain concepts in order to cast light on the ways in which people are bound together in diverse social 'figurations', including families and primary associations, local communities, nation-states and international organizations. The chapters in this work employ that mode of analysis in order to understand the relationship between violence and civilization in different international societies.

The inquiry draws heavily on Elias's writings but is critical of their claims about the differences between ancient and modern attitudes to violence and suffering. It provides a detailed discussion of core features of Elias's study of the civilizing process with the aim of establishing as precisely as possible what it contributes to the sociology of states-systems but also to show how its approach to long-term patterns of development can be taken further by engaging with the analysis of states-systems. The intended readership includes process and historical sociologists, students of international relations, historians with an interest in the analysis of long-term social and political patterns of development, and scholars who are engaged in building connections between those fields of investigation. Process sociologists will find much that is familiar in the sections that draw on Elias's writings, but hopefully they will discover much that is new in the attempt to extend his examination of the civilizing process. Students of international relations will have encountered many of the themes that are considered in the sections on the modern states-system, but they should also find much that is novel in the attempt to take forward the comparative analysis of societies of states through an engagement with process sociology. Specialist historians will not discover much that is novel in the chapters that rely heavily on scholarly works in their fields. But few will be familiar with the intellectual synthesis that is developed in a preliminary fashion in this work. It is important to

stress that the following discussion shares a central ambition of process sociology which is promoting higher levels of synthesis in social-scientific inquiry at a time when increasing specialization and the fragmentation of knowledge are prevalent. The exploration of linkages between process sociology, international relations and specialist historical narratives is undertaken in that spirit.

There is one further point to make in concluding this preface. The contention has been that Wight and Elias had different intellectual preoccupations, the former focussing on international societies, the latter analysing processes of civilization with only passing references to the relationship between violence and civilization in world politics. But in one fundamental respect, Wight and Elias were broadly agreed about the nature of international relations. That convergence of opinion is evident in certain contrasts they drew between international relations in the Graeco-Roman world and in the modern period. Each provided examples of attitudes to violence at the end of the Second World War and in the post-war era that suggested that the modern society of states is fundamentally different from the states-systems of antiquity. They maintained that modern assumptions about the need for restraints on violence revealed important changes of normative orientation. Wight was explicit that such differences were linked with more 'civilized' standpoints on violent harm; Elias did not express the point in exactly the same manner but, as will be shown later, a similar standpoint runs through his writings.

Such comments are perplexing – and raise interesting questions for the sociology of states-systems – when considered in conjunction with other features of their general reflections on international relations. In some of their writings, they suggest that the similarities between different phases in the history of international relations are greater than the differences. Both emphasized long-term trends in different eras towards the concentration of military strength in the hands of a diminishing number of great powers that drifted into the final conflict that destroyed earlier states-systems and culminated in empire. From that perspective, all past advances in restraining the behaviour of the great powers turned out to be fragile and short-lived. The same may be true of the modern states-system, notwithstanding the ways in which ideas about civilization have fostered the belief that societies should cooperate to ensure that behaviour that was once permitted – including conduct that has come to be known as war crimes or human rights violations – is forbidden. The references in Wight's and Elias's writings to supposedly modern sensibilities about violence reveal that there is a great deal of unfinished business to undertake to ascertain what is distinctive about the contemporary society of states and what may be unique about the relationship between violence and civilization in the most recent phase of its development.

Elias and Wight may not have been entirely consistent on whether there have been limited progressions in particular domains of world politics. They did not answer questions that were posed in the final chapter of *The Problem of Harm in World Politics*, which outlined an empirical research programme for the sociology of states-systems. They included the extent to which great powers assumed that they could behave more or less as they pleased under conditions of insecurity, thought that everything is permissible or that nothing should ever be ruled out under conditions of military necessity, or believed that cosmopolitan moral commitments demanded collective efforts to spare enemy combatants and civilian groups needless suffering. Related questions considered how far racist, xenophobic and similar representations of outsiders legitimated acts of violence that were largely forbidden within the societies involved, and whether solidarity with other peoples restrained foreign policy behaviour. Those questions can be rephrased to highlight the issue of how far notions of civility or civilization constrained violent harm or were tied to conceptions of social superiority that justified unlimited violence against 'barbarians'.

It has been noted that Wight and Elias were not optimistic that the modern states-system will avoid the destructive fate of its predecessors. But some of Elias's remarks about powerful tendencies in the modern world invite discussion of whether societies today confront some parallels to the challenges that faced peoples in early modern Europe and resulted in an unplanned civilizing process. It may be that such parallels distinguish the modern states-system from its predecessors and inspire cautious optimism that cosmopolitan standards of self-restraint are now part of a tenuous global 'civilizing process' that may make it possible for the modern states-system to escape the violent end of its predecessors. In the course of human history the standards of self-restraint that have applied in relations between societies have invariably been less demanding than the principles that governed relations between members of the same society. Perhaps that has changed in fundamental respects. One of the functions of the comparative sociology of states-systems is to shed light on what has altered and to endeavour to understand the basic reasons.

Numerous debts have been incurred in the process of writing this book. Several colleagues at Aberystwyth read draft chapters or an earlier version of the volume as a whole. I thank Ken Booth, Ian Clark, Andre Saramago and Kamila Stullerova for their expert advice and comments. Further afield, Josuke Ikeda, Makoto Sato and Giorgio Shani provided the opportunity to deliver work-in-progress papers at symposia held at Ritsumaiken University in Kyoto and the International Christian University in Tokyo in 2012 and 2014. Thanks to Giorgio, an earlier version of Chapter 11 was published in the *Journal of Social Science* in April 2015. I am also deeply grateful to Chris Reus-Smit for organizing a two-day workshop on the problem of harm in world politics at the European University Institute in Florence in April 2012. I thank members of

the vibrant doctoral community for engaging sympathetically and critically with drafts of Chapters 5, 6 and 7, and Dirk Moses for his guidance on Chapter 9. Also invaluable was the opportunity to present the penultimate version of the last chapter at the Middle Eastern Technical University in Ankara. I thank Nuri Yurdesev for the invitation to present the keynote lecture at the Conference on *Multiple Paradigms/Multiple Worlds* that was held there in June 2014.

I have profited from seminar discussions in many centres – in my own Department in Aberystwyth, the University of Copenhagen (thanks to Norman Gabriel and Lars Bo Kaspersen), the University of Glasgow (thanks to Maurizio Carbone), Leicester University (thanks to Jason Hughes), Lisbon University (thanks to Isabel David and Andre Saramago), Sheffield University (thanks to Jonathan Joseph) and Xiamen University (thanks to Biwu Zhang).

At a critical point in the project, Barry Buzan and John Hobson provided indispensable feedback on the penultimate draft of the manuscript. John in particular has been a source of wise counsel, inspiration and encouragement. Stephen Mennell read the entire manuscript and offered profound insights on the conversation with Elias that runs through the following pages. Two anonymous referees skilfully advised on how to improve the penultimate draft. I thank John Haslam at Cambridge University Press for his faith in the project as well as for his guidance and patience.

I am grateful to my own university for the gift of time in the shape of research leave that made it possible for me to work on the manuscript. Finally, I thank Jane for her constant love and support, and tolerance and understanding – in the hope they will survive just one more volume.