

The Formation of We-Images: A Process Theory

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The problem of identity formation in sociology is a paradigmatic example of what Craig Calhoun (1991) has called the "entirely abstract macro-micro divide." I agree that the divide is, in a sense, entirely abstract; but so long as sociologists use concepts which make it seem real, it is real in its consequences for the discipline. The fact is that there is a division between two bodies of theory about identity formation.

On the one hand, we have a familiar set of ideas about how the self is constructed. Self-identity is seen as a universal human property, and its acquisition a social process through which all normal human beings must pass. The writings of George Herbert Mead, as transmitted and developed through the work of symbolic interactionist sociologists and the psychoanalytic theory of identification,¹ are central here. Common to this body of thought is the assumption that every person in his or her lifetime passes through a sequential process in which various stages of development can be picked out in the ongoing flow.

On the other hand, we have a diverse body of ideas about how various categories of people – communities, classes, elites, ethnicities, genders – come to share a sense of collective identity and, through perceptions of interests common to individual members of their

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category, begin to tackle problems of collective action. This problematic runs from the Enlightenment period through Marx and the other principal occupants of the sociological pantheon to contemporary feminism; and from Marx via economics and economists like Kenneth Arrow to present-day rational choice theory. Although particular theories – again, most obviously Marxism – embody predictions of the development of particular kinds of collective consciousness, there is less consensus among sociologists about any overall model of the sequential development of we-identities in the course of the growth of human society: such models smack of ideas of “progress,” and “progress” is (rightly) suspect. One thing that most of these diverse sociological notions about collective identity do have in common, however, stems perhaps from the division between these theories and those others dealing with self-identity. That is, they tend implicitly to picture the construction of we-identities as taking place through some sort of psychological or conceptual coming together of individuals, each of whom is pre-equipped with a personal self-identity. In other words, there is often an implicit social contract – or even Robinson Crusoe – element in the theories.² We all know how misleading that is. Human beings have never, even before the emergence of the species in its present form, been solitary animals: their self-images and we-images have always – since the acquisition of the uniquely human capacity for self-reflection – been formed over time within groups of interdependent people, groups that have on the whole steadily increased in size.

THE FILO PASTRY OF IDENTITY

Many years ago (before sexist phraseology was frowned upon), Kluckhohn and Murray (1948: 35) wrote that:

Every man is in certain respects

- (a) like all other men
- (b) like some other men
- (c) like no other man

This neat dictum is useful in thinking about social habitus and identity. It recognizes (level (a)) that there are many characteristics that human beings share in common with all other members of the species, and (level (c)) that there are also ways in which every individual human personality is unique – if only because, as Alfred

Schutz was to contend, each of us has a unique biographical situation and a unique permutation of experience sedimented into a unique stock of knowledge. But more important, Kluckhohn and Murray's level (b) draws attention to the characteristics which all human beings share in common with *certain* other human beings in the particular groups to which they belong. In recent years, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) has popularized the term “habitus” for dealing with this level.³

Habitus is a useful word in referring to the modes of conduct, taste, and feeling which predominate among members of particular groups. It can refer to shared traits of which the people who share them may be largely unconscious; for the meaning of the technical term “habitus” is, as Norbert Elias used to remark, captured exactly in the everyday English expression *second nature* – an expression defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as “an acquired tendency that has become instinctive.” The very *taken-for-granted* quality of habitus in this sense makes it particularly potent in conflicts between groups, for the components of the habitus of one's own group seem to be inherent, innate, “natural,” and their absence or difference in the habitus of other groups seems correspondingly “unnatural” and reprehensible.

Habitus is closely related to the notion of *identity*. The difference is perhaps that “identity” implies a higher level of conscious awareness by members of a group, some degree of reflection and articulation, some positive or negative emotional feelings towards the characteristics which members of a group perceive themselves as sharing and in which they perceive themselves as differing from other groups. But there is no great value in drawing fine distinctions here. The more important, and immediately obvious, point is that habitus and identification, being related to group membership, are always – in the modern world where people belong to groups within groups within groups – multi-layered. It is possible that in the very early stages of human social development, when all people lived in very small and isolated hunter-gatherer bands, social habitus and identification had only a single layer: when people said “we,” it always referred to the same specific group of people (Elias 1991: 182–3, 202). In more complex societies there are always many layers, according to the number of interlocking layers in a society that are woven into a person's habitus: one is a Yorkshire-born English European who is also entwined in a worldwide network of academics.

One does not have to be an uncritical believer in “progress” to recognize that the very long-term trend-line in the development of human society has been towards larger and larger networks of

interdependent people organized in more and more interlocking layers. Already in the eighteenth century, when a sense of membership of a nation-state was not yet strongly established in the habitus of a large proportion of Europeans, intellectuals like Kant (1970 [1784]: 521–53) were already perceiving humanity as a whole as an all-embracing unity. Now, through world systems theory and the globalization debate, sociologists have begun to recognize that all human beings in the world are interdependent with each other to an extent that, until quite recently, they were not. Perhaps for many people – especially intellectuals – the sense of identification with common humanity is growing, but it would be unrealistic to say that that was the most important, the most affectively charged, component of habitus and identity helping to steer the conduct of the overwhelming majority of the world's population.

In this light, it can be seen that various layers of habitus simultaneously present in people today may be of many different vintages. Strong identification with kinship groups and local communities historically preceded that with state-societies, while at the present day for most people the sense of national or ethnic identity is much stronger (emotionally and in its consequences for actual conduct) than any that they feel for supranational groupings, as Europeans for example or simply as citizens of the world. Earlier and later layers of identity may conflict with one another:

The change in we-identity that takes place in the course of the transition from one stage of development to another can be elucidated in terms of a conflict of loyalties. The traditional conscience-formation, the traditional ethos of attachment to the old survival unit of family or clan – in short, the narrower or broader kin-group – dictates that a more well-off member should not deny even distant relations a degree of help if they ask for it. High officials in a newly independent state thus find it difficult to refuse their kinsmen their support if they try to obtain one of the coveted state posts, even a lowly one. Considered in terms of the ethos and conscience of more developed states, the preferment of relations in filling state posts is a form of corruption. In terms of the pre-state conscience it is a duty and, as long as everyone does it in the traditional tribal struggle for power and status, a necessity. In the transition to a new level of integration therefore, there are conflicts of loyalty and conscience which are at the same time conflicts of personal identity.

(Elias 1991: 178–9)

That there was a sequentially ordered process of development through history does not mean, of course, that the same sequence

is replicated in each individual's lifetime development, though it is worth recalling that sociologists have studied the sequence of identity acquisition in the course of the political socialization of children (Greenstein 1965). Nor, even more emphatically, does a long-term trend-line mean that there is always and inevitably a progressive shift in the direction of more inclusive layers of identity. Events in the former Yugoslavia can serve to remind us that less inclusive layers of identity – especially “ethnic” ones – can be socially constructed and become affectively more charged than formerly were identifications with a nation-state. The matter can perhaps be best conceptualized in terms of changing balances between different layers of habitus and identity, tilting first one way and then the other in the context of historical events, even if over the longer term – in the *histoire des conjonctures* or still more the *longue durée* – the trend has been towards the formation of more inclusive layers of identity.

This multi-layered conception of habitus and identity may convey an image of some sort of egocentric planetary system, with the individual self-conception at the centre, various levels of group identity in orbits ranging outwards to the distant Pluto of humanity as a whole. But when we remember how James, Cooley, Mead, and the whole symbolic interactionist tradition have stressed the way in which each person's self is formed by a reflexive process, in which our perception of how others see us plays a paramount part, it is easy to see that individual self-images and group we-images are not separate things. Elias uses a different (mixed, but vivid) metaphor which makes that clear:

the social habitus of individuals forms, as it were, the soil from which grow the personal characteristics through which an individual differs from other members of his society. In this way something grows out of the common language which the individual shares with others and which is certainly a component of the social habitus – a more or less individual style, what might be called an unmistakable individual handwriting that grows out of the social script ... the individual bears in himself or herself the habitus of the group, and ... it is this habitus that he or she individualises to a greater or lesser extent.

(Elias 1991: 182–3)

One reason why the gap between micro-level and macro-level theories of identity has persisted is, I believe, that symbolic interactionist and similar traditions have continued to work with egocentric models of the “individual” and “society,” and “society” beyond the face-

to-face group or community has remained undifferentiated. These implicit assumptions can be seen in such key notions as "taking the role of the other" and "the generalized other" (both in the singular). "The other" is little more than Alter in Parsons's and Shils's (1951) famous dyadic model. On the other hand, macro-level theories have generally taken no cognizance of the fact that every process of socialization is also a process of individualization, and have thus veered towards excessive determinisms. What are needed, given the multi-layered character of habitus in complex societies, are propositions about *general processes*, about the dynamics of we-images and their connection with personal self-images in unequal and fluctuating power balances between groups of many kinds: men and women, rich and poor, blacks and whites, gays and straights, colonized and colonizers, First and Third World countries. Elias's model of established-outsiders relations is a promising start in this direction.

ESTABLISHED—OUTSIDERS RELATIONS

The mutual conditioning of processes of meaning and power was central to Elias's thinking. In inventing the concept of established-outsiders relations, he was seeking categories which, though simpler in themselves than the familiar terms of Marxist and Weberian debates, would yet enable him to grapple better with the complexities of identity and inequality actually observed within the flux of social interdependencies.

The concept was first developed in the limited context of a fairly conventional study of a small community in the English Midlands (Elias and Scotson 1965), focusing especially on relations between two neighborhoods, both occupied mainly by outwardly similar working-class families. But in later work by Elias and others, the ideas have been extended in their application to class relations in cities, to "race" and "ethnic" relations, to the power balances between men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, and many other contexts (Elias 1976; Mennell 1989: 115–39).

Looked at singly, the people of the two different neighborhoods in the community Elias studied differed very little from each other: they had similar occupations, similar houses, and most lived similarly respectable lives. The principal difference between them as groups was that the houses in one neighborhood (the "Village") were several decades older than those in the other (the "Estate") and a number of key families in the former were long established and formed a closely-knit network. They monopolized the key positions in local

churches, associations, and other focuses of community life, in which the residents of the Estate played little part. This had happened in an unplanned way over the years. But the established group developed an ideology which represented the outsiders as rough, uncouth, dirty, and delinquent – although in fact only a very small minority of the Estate families were other than thoroughly respectable! In this process, gossip played a vital part. (Gossip) is highly selective and distorting. Through it people compete in demonstrating their fervent adherence to their own group norms by expressing their shock and horror at the behavior of those who do not conform. Only the items of news least flattering to the outsider group ("blame gossip") were relayed – the perfectly acceptable behavior of the great majority was not news. Blame gossip conveyed a highly simplified presentation of social realities, based on a "*minority of the worst*." The established group also gossiped about themselves, which in itself was a powerful source of social control restraining potential infringements of their own norms of respectability. But, in this gossip about themselves, selectivity tended to operate in the opposite direction: it tended to be "praise gossip," based on a "*minority of the best*."⁴

A general conclusion from this case study, of wider relevance to theories of identity, is that,

By and large ... the more secure the members of a group feel in their own superiority and their pride, the less great is the distortion, the gap between image and reality, likely to be; and the more threatened and insecure they feel, the more likely is it that internal pressure, and as part of it, internal competition, will drive common beliefs towards extremes of illusion and rigidity.

– (Elias and Scotson 1965: 95)

Why the people of the Estate did not retaliate is also of general relevance. They did not retaliate, in brief, because they did not have the power, being excluded from key positions in community associations and being members of only a much looser-knit and less effective communications network. In addition, there was a personal or psychological component,

because, to some extent, their own conscience was on the side of the detractors. They themselves agreed with the "village" people that it was bad not to be able to control one's children or to get drunk and noisy and violent. Even if none of these reproaches could be applied to themselves personally, they knew only too well that they

did apply to some of their neighbours. They could be shamed by allusion to this bad behaviour of their neighbours because by living in the same neighbourhood the blame, the bad name attached to it, according to the rules of affective thinking, was automatically applied to them too. (1965: 101-2)

To put it another way, an unfavorable collective "we-image" was incorporated into the individual self-image of the people living on the Estate. In describing the social process by which that we-image was created – along with the correspondingly favorable we-image and we-ideal enjoyed by the "villagers" – Elias also used the twin terms *group charisma* and *group disgrace*: the creation of group charisma by and for a more powerful, established group is inseparable from the imposition on and internalization of group disgrace by members of an outsider group.⁵ Note, however, that Elias specifically argues against the idea that status hierarchies are based on consensus: he points out that there are always tensions and conflicts and feelings of resentment between established and outsiders.

How this ambivalence and resentment finds expression, however, varies according to circumstances. In the case of the Estate, it was most obviously seen in the behavior of a minority of children, whose rowdiness and petty delinquency was only encouraged by the disapproval of the "villagers." Again, Elias's thinking went beyond a small case study to some general propositions about the connection between the formation of group identities and the predominant power balances between groups.

When the power ratios between established and outsiders is very unequal, the oppressed and exploited cannot escape from their position. This is one of the conditions which makes it most likely that they will take into their own we-image what the established say about them. This process of stigmatization is a very common element in domination within such highly unequal power balances, and it is remarkable how across many varied cases the content of the stigmatization remains the same. The outsiders are always dirty, morally unreliable, and lazy, among other things. That was how in the nineteenth-century industrial workers were frequently seen: they were often spoken of as the "Great Unwashed." That was how whites often perceived blacks. In an extreme case, such as the Burakumin in Japan, the opprobrium heaped on them by the established may enter deep into the consciousness of members of the outcaste.

Unchanging power ratios, however, are very much the exception. It often happens that the tensions created when groups are forced

together into (interdependence) result in a shift – either slow and oscillating or sudden and dramatic – toward a more even power ratio. When power ratios become less uneven, the imposed sense of inferiority is weakened. Inequalities previously taken for granted are challenged. The problem of inequalities between social groups has occupied the mind and conscience in the twentieth century perhaps more than ever before. It has seen an astonishing sequence of emancipation struggles: of workers, of colonial peoples, of blacks, of women, of homosexuals. In each case, the tension-balance of power between these outsider groups and their established counterparts has changed, not to equality certainly, but toward a somewhat less uneven balance. Even the balance of power between children and adults has become noticeably less unequal.⁶ Why have these changes come about?

In part it is the continuing process of what Elias called *functional democratization*. Longer and more differentiated chains of interdependence mean that power differentials diminish within and among groups because incumbents of specialized roles are more interdependent and can thus exert reciprocal control over each other. The power chances of specialized groups are further increased if they manage to organize themselves in a cohesive way, since they are then able to act collectively to disrupt the wider mesh of interdependencies – in effect withholding things that the other groups need. In ways such as these, the increasing division of social functions and lengthening chains of interdependence lead to greater reciprocal dependency and thus to patterns of more multi-polar control within and among groups. Yet that is only one side of the story. These same processes of differentiation create problems of coordination and are thus accompanied – with leads and lags – by processes of integration. That is to say, larger-scale organization in state and economy forces groups of people together in closer interdependencies than formerly; and these new patterns create (new concentrations of power resources, new inequalities. For all the diminution of inequalities, for instance between employers and employees, or between men and women, new inequalities constantly emerge. For example, large organizations present a paradox. On the one hand, rectilinear chains of command are no longer adequate, and management style shifts to one of negotiation and "team-work." At the same time, the number of tiers in organizational hierarchies increases and creates the possibility of new monopolizations of power. In consequence informalization of relations with immediate superiors can go hand in hand with increasing alienation from remote authorities. Moreover, in the twentieth century, cheap transport and increased mobility

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over long distances have made it still more common throughout the world for displaced groups to impinge on older-established groups. Wars, too, have played their part on an increasing scale. Groups of people whose skins are of different colors or who have been brought up in different ways of life are increasingly thrust together, and established-outsiders patterns are a characteristic result.

One example from the field of race relations will have to suffice as an illustration of how shifts in the power ratio at the center of an established-outsiders relationship is characteristically reflected in the construction of identity or we-images. In the ante-bellum South, the "Negro" was represented as lazy, feckless, lacking any foresight, and having a happy-go-lucky, child-like, and essentially inept nature. This image of "Black Sambo" was used in resisting the case for emancipation. Yet it probably appeared to have some basis in fact too, for extremely unequal power ratios have profound psychological effects on the outsiders:

some blacks may have deliberately played the "Sambo" role because they perceived it as what their masters wanted and because it enabled them, on the one hand, to gain limited privileges and, on the other, to avoid punishment. But probably as important was the fact that slaves had few opportunities to develop modes of behaviour thought appropriate by adult whites. Like children, they had only limited possibilities for initiating independent action. However, unlike children that dependence was permanent and maintained by powerful sanctions.

(Dunning 1986: 113, cf. Elkins 1959 and Abrams 1982: 241-50)

The abolition of slavery changed little immediately in this nexus of power and identity. Only with the movement of blacks to the northern cities of the USA on a large scale from the 1920s did the power ratio between American blacks and whites slowly begin to shift. In the towns it was possible to organize and for social cohesion to develop. Particularly important has been the growth of a black bourgeoisie: the differentiation within the black population of a stratum rising in status and in economic power has constituted a strand of functional democratization, and helped to blur the formerly rigid and caste-like boundary between black and white. As is usually the case when highly unequal power differentials begin to shift in favor of outsiders, in the 1960s and 1970s the inherent group tensions – hitherto quiescent or evident only sporadically – exploded openly. These were also the years of the "black power" movements promoting black pride ("black is beautiful") and even,

for a time, separatism to repair the we-image damaged by decades of oppression. These are typical manifestations when differentials between established and outsiders are diminishing. Despite the Los Angeles riots in 1992, a time of very bad economic conditions, tensions appeared to have become manifested less dramatically in recent years. This characteristic trajectory of the power-identity nexus seems also to have been followed over the last couple of decades by the women's movement.⁷

INCREASING MUTUAL IDENTIFICATION?

Does the process of functional democratization therefore also involve a long-term trend towards increasing mutual identification? The answer seems to be yes, *ceteris paribus* – that is, subject to the reservations already mentioned, including the creation of new inequalities of power by the same process of the division of social functions which is at the same time diminishing earlier inequalities, and subject to some other reservations that we have yet to discuss.

Alexis de Tocqueville (1961 [1840]: vol. II, pp. 195-200; cf. Stone and Mennell 1980: 1-46) pointed out "that manners are softened as social conditions become more equal," citing the attitude of Mme de Sévigné in the late seventeenth century towards the executions of peasants after a local rising, an attitude which from a later standpoint seems strikingly callous. In more equal societies, he suggests, people more readily identify with the sufferings of others. Much more recently, of course, Foucault (1977) pointed to a similar change in attitudes towards suffering, though without offering as much in the way of sociological explanation as did Tocqueville. Elias, on the other hand, offers an account that links micro- and macro-level theorizing about identification processes, and relates them to historical evidence.

The division of social functions under the pressure of competition means, *ceteris paribus*, that individuals have constantly to attune their actions to those of more and more others. The habit of foresight over longer chains grows. In Goudsblom's neat phrase, 'more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people' (1989: 722). With this comes a change in the way of considering others. The individual's image of other people becomes "psychologized": it becomes more permeated by observation and experience. Perception of others becomes richer in nuances, and freer from the instant response of spontaneous emotions (Elias 1978-82: vol. II, pp. 272-4).

Thus, the internalization of "we-identities"

What this means is seen more clearly in relation to historical evidence. In a society with a lower division of social functions, where chains of interdependence were short and life was more insecure and unpredictable, other people were perceived in a simpler way. Elias argued that in warrior societies other people and their actions were perceived in more unqualified terms as friend or foe, good or bad; and the responses were correspondingly unrestrained and undifferentiated. With the greater complexity of society which gradually develops, however, people become accustomed to looking further down a human chain and reacting more dispassionately.

Only then is the veil which the passions draw in front of their eyes slowly lifted, and a new world comes into view – a world whose course is friendly or hostile to the individual person without being *intended* to be so, a chain of events that need to be contemplated dispassionately over long stretches if their connections are to be uncovered.
(Elias 1978–82: vol. II, p. 273)

The greater permeation of conduct by observation is seen clearly in the transition of manners in sixteenth-century Europe. In the manners books of Erasmus and Della Casa, Elias argued, psychological insights and personal observation play a larger part than in their medieval precursors, and the reader is urged to take more conscious account of how his or her own behavior will be interpreted by others. This he interpreted as one effect of the emergence then in process of a new courtly upper class drawn from fragments both of the old warrior class and the mercantile class, within a relatively open but highly competitive society, in which the various strata were generally becoming more closely integrated. Later, when court society reached its zenith, the art of human observation was refined still further. As Elias demonstrated at length especially in *The Court Society* (1983), preservation of one's social position under severe competitive pressure necessitated a more "psychological" view of people, involving precise observation of oneself and others in terms of longer series of motives and causal connections. Yet this was not quite the same as what is today called psychology. In a sense, the courtly art of observation remained far closer to reality: it was never concerned with the individual in isolation, but always with individual people in relation to others in a social context. Only later – under the influence of the solipsistic strain in western philosophy increasingly prominent from the Renaissance onwards, and also colored by the still greater constraints and inhibitions of classic bourgeois society – did "psychology" take on its more modern guise.

One of the principal faults of that, maintains Elias, is that too often it implicitly assumes that the essential determinants of a person's behavior come from "inside," independent of his or her relation to others, and are related to others almost as an afterthought. What Elias provided here was in effect an historicization of Goffman *avant la lettre*. Goffman, of course, stressed the effect of social settings on self-identity: total institutions were natural experiments on what could be done to the self (Goffman 1968). On the other hand, Elias more than Goffman shows how "the presentation of self in everyday life" (Goffman 1971) is itself shaped and changed through historical process.⁸

The social process of "psychologization," linked to the division of labor and functional democratization at the "macro-" or structural level, is a process of transition in mutual identification. Taking more conscious account of how one's behavior will be interpreted by others can also be described as a higher level of identification with others. Of course in the court society described by Elias, the boundaries within which identification was felt were quite narrow. That is the significance of Mme de Sévigné's jocular attitude to the punishment of peasants, or of Voltaire's being horsewhipped by an aristocrat's servants. There remained great scope for expansion of identification in subsequent stages of social development. The growing sense of identification with the nation-state, quite recent for most people in most countries, is the aspect of this expansion which has attracted most attention. Eugen Weber, in his classic *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), shows how late was any marked sense of Frenchness in the minds of people in the remoter areas of the territory long within the boundaries of the French state. He shows how, partly through the intentional use of the expanding educational system but mainly through the unplanned consequences of processes like improved communications, urbanization, industrialization, migration and military conscription, the peasantry was integrated into the French state and simultaneously civilized in manners, customs, and beliefs. Weber's emphasis on denser networks and improved communications in the growth of national identity parallels that of Benedict Anderson in *Imagined Communities* (1983), who especially uses the notion of "print capitalism" in his account of the origin and spread of nationalism. Both books, concerned with developments on broader canvases, seem to bear out the value of Elias's stress on social networks and gossip in we-image formation in the microcosm of a local community.

The other side of the coin from nationalism is the issue of the development of "citizenship" (Marshall 1950; Bendix 1969; Turner

1986) and welfare state institutions in capitalist countries. A particularly interesting contribution in this area is Abram de Swaan's *In Care of the State* (1988), which employs an unusual mixture of rational choice theory and Eliasian historical sociology in accounting for similarities and differences in the rise of social welfare, public health, and educational provision in the USA, Britain, France, Germany, and the Netherlands. De Swaan provides an antidote to any suspicion that the rise of the welfare state involves a spontaneous movement of the *Zeitgeist* or an instant outbreak of enlightened altruism. He stresses rather how functional democratization works: only when dependency relations are more stable and symmetrical does a mutual sense of identification develop. And collective action usually proceeded through the conflict of groups pursuing their own interests but adapting slowly to the recognition that, willy-nilly, they were reciprocally dependent on each other.

This emphasis on integration processes and the formation of more inclusive we-images within a spreading web of interdependence may seem at odds with interpretations of nationalism which stress its emergence in the context of *breaking* structures and disintegration (see for instance Hobsbawm 1990, 1992). The Austro-Hungarian empire and its various successor nation-states is the classic case; and, topically and traumatically, in the former Yugoslavia, we are currently witnessing the further disintegration of one of those successor states. Are the two interpretations incompatible? Possibly not, if Norbert Elias was right in his hypothesis that people generally feel the greatest emotional identification, have the most emotionally charged we-images, in relation to their survival units. This is the intentionally quite general term that Elias uses to designate the level of social organization which for the time being meets the most significant proportion of its members' needs for survival – food, shelter, clothing, protection, and meaning among them. In the industrial world, though not everywhere or for everyone, nor for as long as people sometimes imagine, the survival unit has typically been the nation-state, which for a long time sociologists unthinkingly made synonymous with a "society." For a relatively short time the nation-state constituted "a territorially-bounded 'national economy' which formed a building block in the larger 'world economy,' at least in the developed regions of the globe" (Hobsbawm 1990: 173–4). At least as important, it was a unit often in competition with others not just economically but politically and militarily; where competition with outsiders is enough to pose a threat to the security of people's way of life, emotional identification with one's own unit is likely to be strong. But in earlier times and in other contexts the survival unit was the

tribe, the lineage, or the local community. And today we are seeing signs of the nation-state being superseded as the effective survival unit by supra-state levels of organization. By the 1990s, "all small and practically all medium-sized states ... had plainly ceased to be autonomous, in so far as they had once been so" (Hobsbawm 1990: 175), and even the USA's economic autonomy was greatly diminished. The development of political institutions typically lags behind the unplanned process of economic integration. The United Nations is not very far down the track of representing global society as a survival unit, but in western Europe the EC is acquiring real functions that affect member individuals in their everyday lives. This is emotionally very difficult for many Europeans, who feel powerful identification with their own nations: for them, the most inclusive "we" refers to fellow citizens of their own country, and the citizens of other member countries of the EC still remain, to varying degrees, "they." Elias (1991: 211) speaks of this as a "drag effect," but expects the sense of European identity gradually to increase (and indeed there is empirical survey evidence of this beginning to happen).

None of this involves dewy-eyed optimism or faith in the inevitability of "progress." Stinchcombe has observed that "It is the great tragedy of social life that every extension of solidarity, from family to village, village to nation, presents also the opportunity of organising hatred on a larger scale" (1975: 601).¹⁰ This is very much in the spirit of Elias, who always stressed that however much the civilizing process might be associated with the internal pacification of territory within the process of state-formation, it did not affect the use of violence in war between states; and in his later years he was centrally concerned with the threat of mass destruction (see Haferkamp 1987; Mennell 1987). (Who, after the euphoria of 1989–91 has dissipated, is yet to say his fears were misplaced?)¹¹

Obviously it is all a good deal more complicated than a steady climb up a ladder toward more all-embracing we-identities. Three specific examples will serve to illustrate this. First, within the EC there is the interesting case of the Scottish National Party, which, in the 1992 UK election, campaigned (with quite indifferent popular success, as it happened) not for Scottish independence from Britain *tout court*, but for a "Scotland within Europe." That is, the party simultaneously sought to appeal to the emotionally charged we-image of Scots as Scots and, recognizing that the old-fashioned view of the sovereignty of a Scottish nation is nowadays much compromised by the chains of interdependence which bind Scots to the UK and

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units

to the EC, also to promote a positive we-image with the wider European grouping.¹²

The second exemplar is the recent history of Australia. From the first European settlement in the continent in 1788 and through to the Second World War, the effective survival unit for Australians was in a real sense the British Empire. Not only was Australian trade overwhelmingly with Britain, but the military defense of the empire was a collective enterprise to which Australia contributed but on which it was also clearly dependent. The defense and foreign policy link began to be reoriented toward the USA in the exigencies of the Second World War, and trade began to shift toward Asia in the 1950s and decisively in the 1970s, following Britain's entry into the EC. Here too, however, there was a drag effect, with a large proportion of Australians continuing into the 1950s and 1960s to think of themselves as British-overseas. Since the 1970s that has markedly declined, but Australia, as a small nation (in terms of population) closely entangled in a world economy and global society, is still looking for a wider we-identity. Politically (or economically) motivated exhortations to Australians to identify with Asia seem as yet unconvincing, given that the cultural and institutional roots of Australia are still preponderantly European (see Mennell 1992).

Third, Yugoslavia. It is easy to think, in light of recent events, that emotional identification with the Yugoslavian state as a survival unit was never strong or widespread, that people did not feel strongly about themselves as "we Yugoslavs." "In melancholy retrospect," writes Hobsbawm (1990: 173), "... the Yugoslav revolution succeeded in preventing the nationalists within its state frontiers from massacring each other almost certainly for longer than ever before in their history." Under Tito, Yugoslavia seemed stable, therefore it may be inferred that there was a strong sense of national identity; since the advent of Milosevic, the country has disintegrated, therefore it is tempting to conclude that people's identity as Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, and Bosnians was always stronger than their identity as Yugoslavs. And indeed in discussions of identity there is always a risk of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*. Unless we have reliable empirical evidence of how people felt before as well as after, there is a risk of circularity. As Hobsbawm points out (in criticism of Gellner 1983), the necessary "view from below, i.e. the nation as seen not by governments and the spokesmen and activists of nationalist (or non-nationalist) movements, but by the ordinary persons who are objects of their action and propaganda, is exceedingly difficult to discover" (Hobsbawm 1990: 10-11). Furthermore, the "view from

below" and the "view from above" interact with each other. Abram de Swaan has commented:

What explains the resurgence of nationalist identifications in formerly communist countries is not their inherent unavailability but the disintegration of the communist state apparatus and the resulting chaos, which prompts people to find new forms of organisation to help them compete for the open positions of power and profit. Thus, activists seek in a process of trial and error to kindle those identifications that will evoke the greatest response, i.e. the strongest popular support. Such experiments in finding the most effective common denominator will occur most intensively during times of transition and upheaval, when struggles for position are intensified and the lines of competition are being redrawn. (de Swaan 1992: 12)

Thus, a couple of points need to be made before we abandon too easily the idea that there is, *ceteris paribus*, a long-term trend from less inclusive to more inclusive we-images, and that that is associated with a broad trend towards larger-scale survival groups. To begin with, it has to be remembered that it needs only a small minority who think of themselves more strongly as Serbs or Croats than as Yugoslavians to set in train the mayhem we are witnessing. And, more important, that mayhem has in effect suddenly reduced the scale of the survival units actually functioning within the former territory of Yugoslavia; that fact, plus the impact of the mayhem itself, would surely be enough to precipitate an emotional reordering of we-images. We-images are formed in *histoire événementielle* as well as in the *longue durée*; local and short-term reversals are certainly to be expected in response to events such as we have witnessed. Wider levels of identification often remain very tenuous and tentative: "they may be undone by more pressing concerns manifesting themselves in the inner circles of identification" (de Swaan 1992: 18-19).

Perhaps the greatest lacuna in theories of identity is in the area of our understanding of the emotional dynamics of we-images among large and complex groups of interdependent people, and particularly the connection between long-term processes of state formation on the one hand and the constructed memory of specific events on the other. But even here, the gap between theories of identity formation in individuals and in groups may not be as wide as it sometimes seems. Freud noted a parallel:

... in the so-called earliest childhood memories we possess not the genuine memory-trace but a later revision of it, a revision which may have been subjected to the influences of a variety of later psychological

forces. Thus the "childhood memories" of individuals come in general to acquire the significance of "screen memories" and in doing so offer a remarkable analogy with the childhood memories that a nation preserves in its store of legends and myths. (1975 [1901]: 88)

Elias picks up the point in his *Studien über die Deutschen* (1989), which is concerned with how events, power struggles, national achievements and national failures have become sedimented in the collective makeup of a whole nation.

Sociologists face a task here which distantly recalls the task that Freud began. He sought to show the connection between the outcome of the conflictual channeling of drives in a person's development and their resulting personality habitus. But there are also analogous connections between a people's long-term fortunes and experience and their social habitus at any time in the future. At this stratum of personality structure too – let us provisionally call it the "we-stratum" – there are often complex symptoms of disturbance at work, which are scarcely less than the individual neuroses in strength and in capacity to cause suffering. (1989: 27, my translation)

In talking about the national habitus of the Germans, Elias acknowledged that he was transgressing onto what was, in the Federal Republic of Germany, an area of taboo (1989: 7–8). After all, any idea of "national character" is unfortunately – if unnecessarily – redolent of the Nazis' racial stereotypes. Of course, what Elias is concerned with has nothing whatsoever to do with notions of biological "Aryans." The "Aryan" physical types favoured by the National Socialist regime can plainly be found in Denmark, the Netherlands and elsewhere, but the Danes and the Dutch are vastly different in national habitus from the Germans. To hammer the obvious point home, Elias discusses at some length (1989: 17–20) how Dutch history – the experiences of an erstwhile maritime power long dominated more by a class of rich merchants than by its traditional nobility – is reflected today in Dutch outlook and ways of behaving. He further extends the three-way comparison between Germany, England, and France that he had begun in *The Civilising Process*. Compared with England and – in spite of the Revolution – even with France, German social development was marked by very great discontinuities. Unlike the French, today Germans do not carry in their habitus very many marks of the ways of courtiers. Among the few, Elias remarks in passing, are the typical German customs surrounding beer drinking (often to inebriation, yet within the framework of a certain habituated discipline even in drunkenness?),

which he traces back to the economically and culturally impoverished German courts after the disaster of the Thirty Years War (1989: 12–13, 131–2). The taming of warriors took a different course in Prussia: they were turned less into courtiers on the French model than bureaucratized as administrators and professional soldiers. That helps explain the military inheritance in the national habitus: Elias writes at length (1989: 61–158) about the long persistence in Germany of the practice of dueling, the great social importance attached to it, and its spread from the officer corps to the middle classes in the universities. The definition of "good society" in terms of the idea of social worthiness to give satisfaction in a duel imparted a very different character from that prevalent by the late nineteenth century in Parisian or London society. Later, moreover, "If one asks how Hitler was possible, then with the benefit of hindsight the spread of these socially sanctioned models of violent action and of social inequality belong among the prerequisites" (1989: 27, my translation).

The contradictory traits of diverse origins and the tensions between them, which Elias depicts in his collection of essays on the Germans, can serve to remind us of the contradictory trends evident in western Europe more generally at the present day. Although it is by no means yet as strong for most people as the we-image associated with the nation-state, the sense of identity as "we Europeans" is growing. Yet that is happening at the same time as a resurgence of neo-Nazism and hostility of many Europeans toward new waves of outsider migrants. This hostility may now be less often expressed in the vocabulary of biological racism, and more frequently as a feared threat to the cultural heritage of established residents. That at least has the merit of making more manifest and less latent the connection of these fears with questions of habitus and identity.

CONCLUSION: CHANGES IN THE WE–I BALANCE

The argument of this chapter tends to lend support to Craig Calhoun's assertion that the macro–micro divide is entirely abstract. The gap between bodies of theory dealing with identity formation in individuals and groups may be more apparent than real, an artifact of our customary modes of concept formation. The argument has drawn principally on the writings of Norbert Elias, who campaigned for a "process sociology" that did not treat "individual" and "society" as separate entities. His ideas seem, however, to be compatible with those of the many writers who have more recently

contributed to the debate about nationalism. Elias stressed the need, when looking at processes of habitus- and identity-formation over long periods, to think in terms of "changes in the We-I balance" (1991: 155-237). He contended, on the one hand, that long-term increases in the scale and complexity of social interdependence produced more and more complex layers of we-image in people's habitus and sense of identity. On the other hand, he argued that the individual person's mode of self-experience had itself changed in the course of social development, and that the preoccupation of much of modern western philosophy and sociology with the experience of the single isolated adult individual is itself the product of the European civilizing process from the Renaissance onwards. Resisting this image of the human being as *homo clausus* and attempting to think in terms of pluralities of *homines aperti* is one way of improving our grasp of processes of identity formation.

NOTES

- 1 See de Swaan (1992) for a discussion of the Freudian theory of identification from a viewpoint similar to my own. Abram de Swaan and I are old friends, and on arrival in Pittsburgh discovered we had both written from an Eliasian perspective on the topic of identification.
- 2 This is evident in the (rather catchy) title of the Pittsburgh mini-conference: "From Persons to Nations."
- 3 This was also the word that Elias used in German when his study of civilizing processes was published in 1939, though the English translation (1978-82) usually renders this as "personality makeup." In his later works, Elias began to use "habitus" in English too.
- 4 Note that these ideas could equally be expressed in the fashionable jargon of "discourse" and "narrative"; but I am allergic to fashions in jargon, and prefer not to do so.
- 5 Elias first used these terms in an unpublished paper presented at the Max Weber Centenary Conference in Heidelberg, 1964. Some sociologists have found it hard to accept the group reference of the term "charisma," in contrast to its individual reference in Weber's usage. Note the connection, not spelled out very much by Elias, between this discussion and that concerning the advance of thresholds of shame and embarrassment, and of standards of self-constraint, in *The Civilising Process*.
- 6 On changes in the power ratio between children or young people and their elders, see Elias (1989: 37ff) and Kapteyn (1985). This issue is bound up with the question of the trend towards "informalization" in contemporary societies, or more exactly a diminution in the formality/informality span or gradient; again, see Elias (1989: 33-60).
- 7 Two or more outsider identities can of course intersect. Patricia Hill Collins's study of *Black Feminist Thought* (1990) is a useful example. She shows, among other things, how American black women's typical his-

torical experience of being "outsiders within" white homes as domestic servants was distinct from that of male blacks, and how "Mammy" and "Jezebel" stereotypes played a part in their oppression analogous to, but different from, that of "Black Sambo."

- 8 For a comparison of Elias and Goffman, see Kuzmics (1986). Interestingly, Goffman cited the original 1939 German edition of *The Civilising Process*; Leonard Broom tells me that Goffman would have known of Elias's work through Edward Shils in a seminar at Chicago in the late 1940s.
- 9 The principle of 'subsidiarity', now much bandied about within the EC, is a response in part to these feelings. The notion embodies a recognition that, on the one hand, the interdependence of the EC member countries is now so great that there are decisions which unavoidably have to be taken at the level of Brussels, and on the other hand that other decisions (such as famously the contents of the British sausage) ought to be taken at the lowest possible level, close to the smaller categories of people they actually affect.
- 10 I am grateful to Arthur Stinchcombe, who was present when the original version of this chapter was presented in Pittsburgh, for drawing my attention to his essay "that bears on many of the same topics from a different point of view, which is I think compatible" (personal communication).
- 11 This ambivalence about the process of "civilization" was not peculiar to Elias's late works, but was present from the beginning. English-speaking readers have always failed to perceive, and German-speaking readers have failed to draw attention to, the ambiguity in the very title of Elias's 1939: *magnum opus*, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*: the word *Prozess* in German means both "process" and "trial" (in the legal sense of trial).
- 12 For an earlier Scottish nationalist view by a distinguished Marxist, see Tom Nairn, *The Break-up of Britain* (1977).

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