

# IS HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY STATE- AND EUROCENTRIC? NORMATIVE AND CRITICAL VISIONS ON STATE AND NATION-BUILDING

## INTRODUCTION

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A rather simple but looming question is at the origins of the present issue of *Cambio*: How does historical sociology see the state and see Europe? Or, put otherwise: Is historical sociology necessarily Eurocentric and/or (nation-)state centred or does it also develop specific critical visions about (nation-)state-building and European integration?

It cannot be denied that sociology in general like all kinds of scientific discourses always contains more or less strong normative elements. For its part, historical sociology of the modern political has always and inevitably had much to do with the model of the nation state born in Europe. Sociologists, be they comparativist or not, have been searching for ways to get rid of the evolutionism legated by the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' social theorists Marx and Comte as well as Spencer or Durkheim. However, historical approaches, even when closer to idiographic approaches than to nomothetic sociology, are often suspected, rightly or wrongly, of Eurocentrism. From precursors Marx and Tocqueville up to contemporaries like Stefano Bartolini (2005) *via* classics (Weber, Geertz and Elias, Tilly, Wallerstein or Anderson), historical sociology has at least been imbued with a certain state-centrism.

In this respect, the last lectures from Bourdieu entitled *Sur l'État* and published in 2012 ten years after his death acknowledges the intellectual debt his own work owes to most of these classics, but also embodies the centrality and unavoidability of this topic in sociology, which coming from Bourdieu constitutes a kind of self-confession. Isn't sociology by definition a contemporary discipline, which was born in the frame of the industrial state? To put it otherwise, we can stress that, on the one hand, sociology strives to achieve, according to a division of labour between sociology and political theory that have become established from the emancipation of social sciences from philosophy, a dispassionate and non-normative approach to the state (this is not least, ironically, attested by the title of the famous collective book and program *Bringing the*

*State back in* by Evans, Rueschemeyer and Skocpol in 1985). On the other hand, it still falls short of its own historicization, which should begin with tackling what it owes, on a normative level, to the grandeur and misery of its main theoretical topic (Majastre, Delmotte 2017).

The present issue is born out of a willingness to take this criticism seriously. We invited contributors to test it by questioning the visions of nation-state-building and post-national integration that stems both from classic and from current socio-historical analyses in sociology and political science. From there stems the core question that we aim at tackling in this issue: To what extent and under which conditions may historical sociology develop critical innovative and stimulating perspectives regarding nation-building, European integration or cosmopolitanism? In other words: What means developed in the frame of historical sociology could foster a greater (self-)detachment from our beloved and hated (and more usually taken for granted) models of political integration and enable us to see and think them differently?

We claim that the best way to answer this question is to abstain from imposing a single definition of what historical sociology means. Indeed, a variety of approaches can legitimately claim to be both historical and sociological. Among these, the processes sociology developed by Norbert Elias provides a paradigmatic example of what the conjunction of the two adjectives can bring about in terms of taking-of-distance from the nationalist frames associated with classical sociology. The first reason why Elias's sociology stands out is precisely that he considered that *any* sociology was inevitably interested in long-term social human, and therefore, historical, processes; the expression "historical sociology" being thus somewhat pleonastic in his perspective. Consequently, sociology of the civilizing and decivilizing processes, as far as it is centrally concerned with the state and the political, is not only centred on the genesis and development of the modern state in Europe and beyond (Elias 2012): its own internal logic (and especially the reality-congruence principle it professes, which commands to take history seriously) also drives it towards addressing the issue of the possible end and futures of the state (Elias 2010; Delmotte 2012; Delmotte, Majastre 2017). Briefly, if the state, and *a fortiori* the nation state, has not existed in all time, it may disappear. This relativisation is readily illustrated by Elias's diagnosis that the state-as-a-survival-unit has already been overtaken - at least in its national form - in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century two world wars.

Here is a first, striking and quite simple example of the critical distance brought by Elias's sociology, thanks to its "historical" tenet - namely long-term and comprehensive approach - to a theory whose focus on the Western state appears, at first glance, rather narrow. However, there is no reason to think that this kind of achievement is the preserve of a single author or of a specific school. Therefore, we contend that understanding historical approaches in plural may help devising a plurality of ways to consider "critically" state- and nation-building, the building of Europe and other postnational forms of political integration.

Accordingly, we chose to leave open the question as to what, whether in terms of a specific tradition, results, theories, perspectives or methods, deserves to be considered "critical". Of course the work of Pierre Bourdieu and the sociological research he and

his followers undertook played an important role during the last decades in defining the meaning of critical and continues to do so. For instance, this legacy has been put to use in recent years to contribute to a broader “normalising” trend in the study of the European union, which questions the supposed originality and *sui generis* character of European integration as a social phenomenon (Favell, Guiraudon 2011: 160ff). Accordingly, in comparison to the mainstream that previously dominated EU studies, contemporary sociological studies of the EU are now more and more interested in *how* EU works - and less in *why* it exists, less in its *telos* or in the ideal political form it *should* adopt at the end (Saurugger 2009; 2013). This process of “trivialisation” of the EU topics through sociology consists first of all in expanding empirical research on the different categories of actors, often from below, be they Brussels’ elites (Georgakakis, de Lassalle 2007) or more ordinary citizens (Gaxie *et al.* 2011; Favell 2008). It led for instance to point the changing balance of power between groups and elites and the reproduction of power monopolizing processes at work, showing both continuity and discontinuity with state-building process. In that, this field of research presents more or less explicit reference to the Elias’s work we already mentioned (see for instance Cohen 2006).

These are a few examples that, put together, start forming a broader picture of what we mean when we refer to the critical potential of historical approaches. Maybe what gives it a distinctive pattern is the self-detachment defined by Elias as a condition to achieve both a better understanding and a greater objectivity in social representations (Elias 2007). Uncovering the long-term interdependence paths that constrain human action have never been a self-justifying endeavour, but rather a step towards the construction of a critical standpoint and a mean to achieve what Elias considered to be the sociologist’s mission of unveiling, as a “myth hunter”, the false consciousness that impedes the realistic apprehension of social phenomena (Elias 2012a). But once again, the gamble was to open the door to other traditions and questions of methods. The purpose was to build, inductively in a sense, through the papers themselves, other interpretations of what could be developing critical and inspiring perspectives regarding nation, state, Europe or cosmopolitanism in the frame of approaches than can be called historical in a way or in another. The papers collected, despite but also *through* their very diversity finally, perfectly met such expectations.

The first article by Nicolas Arens on Alexis de Tocqueville is a good demonstration of both the relevance of classics and the taking-into-account of long-term perspective to think with distance about Europe and democracy. It illustrates how the rediscovery of one classic in particular - *The Old Regime and the Revolution, L’Ancien Régime et la Révolution* (1856), much less known than *Democracy in America* - can be highly relevant to foster a decentred approach to the study of the trans-nationalisation processes at work in Europe and beyond since 1945 in matter of democracy. As a major stance of his paper, let’s remember with Nicolas Arens that Tocqueville argued that at the end the 1789 French Revolution was not French, and that it was not a revolution. Such a sentence can be transposed, according to a long-term historical approach such as Norbert Elias’s, and allows to think that nation-state-building stems from a blind and unplanned process much broader than each particular national narrative claims, and that equally European integration since 1945 or 1957 is not particularly European nor

a *sui generis* phenomenon, for it takes roots in a broader and more ancient trend, and that it is still not an integration process neither, since national habitus are obviously still alive and the EU impotent to integrate concretely the people that it is supposed to bring together. Both Elias and Tocqueville question in their ways the “nation state bias” evoked by Saskia Sassen (2006), from the very origins of this bias at the 19<sup>th</sup> century up to its European version, its transposition to Europe or its persistence in some European discourses.

Crossing generations of thinkers, de-compartmentalizing disciplines (sociology and philosophy), reconciling idiographic and model-based approaches that are most of the time presented as opposed: these are all ways to promote critical heterodox visions and ways of thinking that are combined in the second paper. In this one, Florence Di Bonaventura puts the Gramscian tradition into dialogue with the most recent views in historical sociology of the political on the question of state and (r)evolution. Such a crossed reading reveals according to Florence Di Bonaventura the full potential of an emancipating scientific and political discourse, emancipating and even “revolutionary” in several meanings. It demonstrates that historical sociology is not only irreducible to Eurocentric and statist positions. Historical sociology does not only recuse static visions by nature. It’s also profoundly anti-determinist up to the very heart of an exigent Marxian tradition that can teach the study of events, turning points, diversity of historical (for instance national) trajectories and considers centrally the people, the societies of individuals and their struggles.

The third paper offers at first glance a classical case study, dealing with the case of Scottish nationalism. But following principles founded on Elias’s historical sociology it reverses the methodological individualism most often spontaneously applied to the social history of nationalisms. The sub-state nature of Scottish nationalism is not (only or mainly) to be questioned from inside, on the basis of a “supposedly internal challenge”, referring to the Brexit crisis in this case. We must at the same time recognize, following Alex Law, the relative particularity, or uniqueness, of any and all nationalism(s) and yet consider all and each one as taking part in a “shifting long-term, inter-state balance of power” that contributes much to producing, or at least to shaping nationalism in general and each particular nationalism. Here again, the (historical) case is not to be “deduced” from a theory that is supposed to basically “explain” it; the historical case is not only a pure and only illustration. Taking the history of Scottish nationalism seriously, such as its most recent dilemma concerning the future of Scotland’s adhesion to the EU, led to interact with the theoretical frame itself and to redefine it partly. At the end, that’s a multi-levelled analysis – sub-state nationalism, UK state and European integration through Brexit crisis – which is upgraded by a historical comprehensive approach refusing firmly to separate internal from interstate analysis.

The fourth and last paper also combines different ways of developing critical approaches at the edge of EU studies. Oriane Calligaro questions indeed the grand narrative of culture(s) supposedly fostered by the EU institutions and its alleged unity itself, in a critical way inspired by anthropologists (like Chris Shore, about EU), sociologists (like Bourdieu, about culture), political scientists and philosophers. Her study deconstructs the monolith Europe by interesting itself in an organisation, the Council of Europe, which have been so far much less studied than dominant EU

institutions such as the European Commission, the European Parliament or the European Council. She highlights the evolutions in time inside the first from 1949 and rather hard divergences that may occur between different institutions about “culture”, around for instance the notions of “patrimony” and “diversity”.

To conclude, this paper opens two additional perspectives. First it gives an insight of what has been recently developing through the study of the Archive (in the meaning of an archeology of knowledge developed by Michel Foucault) of Europe, as the (hi) story of the building of legitimate knowledge on Europe, opening a new dialogue between philosophy, sociology and history in a critical constructivist perspective. Finally, Calligaro’s article brings into light empirically rich and very interesting initiatives and moments in the history of European integration, like the organisation of the 9<sup>th</sup> exhibition of art by the Council of Europe on the Byzantine Art *as a European Art* (in 1964), that breaks with the idea of a high culture founded on the Roman or Christian tradition, or the renaming of these exhibitions of art by *Nous, les Autres*. Although such an alternative definition of culture also derives from a political purpose – in this case an attempt at promoting democracy and social cohesion instead of nationalism or patriotism - it indicates a certain capacity for the political system to develop a “poly-centred” discourse that is concerned with integrating popular cultures, margins and peripheries.

In the end, socio-historical perspectives may legitimately style themselves (auto-) reflexive, (self-)detached and radically critical on the condition that they accept to call into question the political discourses they study as well as their own. To be consistent, historical sociologists also have to recognize that the second may share with the first the same ambitions and limits regarding their capacity to decentre themselves and adopt the standpoint of the other. This is one possible application of the “symmetry requirement” once famously professed by David Bloor in the sociology of knowledge (Lemieux 2007: 210), whose critical potential remains too often overlooked.

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