Elias, ultra-realism and double-binds: Violence in the streets and the state

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Abstract
‘Ultra-realism’ has become an influential current in criminology, especially in the study of violence and explanations of trends in violent crime. Ultra-realist writers frequently make use of Norbert Elias’s theory of civilizing processes, while also often expressing reservations about his ideas. In this article, we argue that ultra-realists tend to make only partial and inaccurate use of Elias’s very extensive writings. Although he himself did not write very much about crime – and indeed was less concerned with violence per se than with the roots of aggressive impulses and their control – we place him in the context of the post-war sociology of deviance. We argue in particular that it is far from true that he was blind to political economy, since the state-formation processes are central to his theory. We relate our argument to double-bind processes, violent subcultures, moral panics, populism and recent political developments in Britain.

Keywords
State formation, double-binds, violence, Elias, ultra-realism

Introduction
Violence is becoming more visible within the habitus of many people in the UK. This is not as a result of rising crime statistics, although many criminologists have pointed to their shortcomings in capturing the actual dynamics of violent crime in all its aspects (Farrall, 2017; Walby, 2019). Violence’s rising visibility may be, at least in part, a product...
of the increasingly emotional, or affect-laden, nature of contemporary political discourse. Whether this emerges from party leaders in Brussels or Westminster, or within mainstream or social media, which are, of course, related and interdependent, few would dispute the increasingly fractious and frustrated tone adopted and the negative, decivilizing slogans and solutions advocated. This journal’s previous editor recently highlighted the importance of ‘Theory-driven research, properly situated in literature’ (Knepper, 2018: 655). Both of the present authors have analysed civilizing and decivilizing processes and their relation to phenomena such as knife crime (Clement, 2010) and hate crime (Mennell, 2018a). The history of state-formation processes and the role of agencies of social control have figured prominently in these accounts, drawing on the ideas of Norbert Elias, and the purpose of this article is to advocate a greater engagement by criminologists in their current research and teaching with those concepts that Elias championed. At the same time, we wish to challenge those misinterpretations of Elias’s thinking that have emerged over the past decade or so under the banner of ‘ultra-realist criminology’. We argue that their dismissal of his ideas and substitution of new tropes for that of the ‘civilizing process’ is to wilfully misunderstand his ideas; in particular, we reject their ‘proof’ that Elias believed society grew inevitably more peaceful over time. In the process, we also evaluate ultra-realists’ claims about the demise of political agency, and how they believe this has negated the prospects of meaningful social movements challenging the existing order. Elias was a great advocate of the importance of history to sociology, and the rapidly evolving political landscape has highlighted the salience of such an approach if we are better to explain the roots of our ‘new times’ in older ideologies such as, for example, nationalism, federalism and populism (Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Hett, 2019). By telling a little of the story of Elias’s own life and his development of ‘an understanding of social life as the unplanned and unintended outcome of the interweaving of intentional human actions . . . human beings as interdependent, forming figurations or networks . . . a focus on relations . . . dynamic processes of development’ (Van Krieken, 1998: 49), we hope to show how these ideas help us understand our violent world.

**Norbert Elias: The sociogenesis of a German sociologist**

Elias’s most influential work, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, was first published in 1939, six years after Elias himself had fled his native Germany following the Nazis’ rise to power. As Bryan Wilson wryly observed, 1939 was ‘not the most propitious year for the publication of a large, two volume work, in German, by a Jew, on, of all things, civilisation’ (Wilson, 1977: 15). Not only had he served in the German army on the Western Front in the First World War, but in the troubled early years of the Weimar period he had experienced the social disruption associated with runaway inflation, known a schoolfriend murdered by the right-wing Freikorps, and witnessed political conflicts in the streets and throughout German society (Elias, 2013b; Clement, 2009, 2014; Mennell, 1998)

In 1933, as an academic at the University of Frankfurt, Elias’s fear that the SS would collect information on his colleagues in the famous Institute for Social Research led him to let himself into the institute (he had been left with the keys when the others departed) and secretly gather up incriminating evidence before they could swoop (Elias, 2013b: 112). He failed to persuade his parents to join him as refugees in wartime England, and his
mother was to die in Treblinka in 1942 (Elias, 2013b). Interned for part of the war on the Isle of Man, since the 1950s this German Jewish exile from Hitler’s Germany had been teaching – in truth pioneering – the study of sociology at the University of Leicester (Mennell, 1998: 20–3). Because the subject was so new to British campuses, Elias had something of a blank canvas on which to develop his ideas. In 1965, he wrote The Established and the Outsiders, alongside post-graduate student John Scotson, a groundbreaking community study demonstrating the importance of understanding the sociology of both the outsider and the scapegoating established group (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]). Many criminologists, sociologists and other scholars of urban studies have repeatedly returned to this study of a Leicester suburb, fictionalized as ‘Winston Parva’, as a source of inspiration for contemporary analyses of social problems (Clement, 2015; Hughes and Goodwin, 2016; Lever and Milbourne, 2017; Powell and Lever, 2017; Swann and Hughes, 2016). Elias and Scotson’s key contention was that we cannot understand the life-world of outsiders without looking at the practices and thinking of established groupings – those who form the ‘we-groups’ that define the others’ status as ‘out-groups’ or ‘they-groups’, whose motivation to scapegoat he analyses: these feelings of superiority are validated by the superior position society accords to the ‘established’ group over the ‘outsider’ other. The price the former pay for this privilege is their conformity:

The self-enhancing quality of a high power ratio flatters the collective self-love which is also the reward for submission to group-specific norms, to patterns of affect restraint characteristic of that group and believed to be lacking in less powerful ‘inferior’ groups, outsiders and outcasts. (Elias, 2008a: 30)

Of course, if this superiority played out simply as a form of ‘self-love’ in the established group it would not necessarily be very damaging in its impact upon the group they excluded. But it tends to lead to what Ruth Wodak calls ‘victim–perpetrator reversal’ (Wodak, 2015: 67). The more powerful group claim that they are the victim of the malicious intent of those they are in fact marginalizing. Elias used the term ‘power ratio’ to emphasize the importance of looking at power as a figuration – a grouping involving the powerful and those they oppress – for a fuller understanding of both elements. In a later work, Involvement and Detachment (1983), he further developed his discussion of their relation to one another, although the example he has in mind is the relationship of one national grouping to another:

[T]hey all have a self-praising vocabulary and a corresponding denigrating vocabulary directed at other groups. . . [attracted by] the lure of the narcissistic gratification of victory and group superiority, the hegemonic ecstasy associated with the prospect of continental or even global leadership and supremacy. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 8)

Alongside some of the key sociologists of deviance in the 1960s and 1970s such as Becker, Goffman, Matza, Stan Cohen, Stuart Hall and Jock Young, Elias’s thinking helps to advance understanding in many areas of contemporary criminological focus such as victimology, labelling processes and hate crime. Like many of the great founders of social science, Elias was wedded to the importance of looking at a phenomenon from many sides in order to develop insightful thinking. He always stressed the importance of
the context of history; that is, the long-term aspects of issues that some overlooked through their infatuation with what he called ‘the retreat of sociologists into the present’ (Elias, 2009). Robert van Krieken summarizes his approach:

He drew on Marx’s materialism to explain the development of a particular personality structure, emphasising its ‘production’ by particular sets of social relations, and elaborated on Freud’s understanding of the effects of developing civilisation on psychic life in terms of Weber’s conception of the state as organised around a monopoly of the means of violence. Elias’s historicisation of human psychology provides empirical support for an understanding of the processes by which changes in social relations are interwoven with changes in psychic structure. (Van Krieken, 1998: 84)

The titles of later works reflect the importance of this duality or dialectic in Elias’s sociology, such as *Involvement and Detachment* (2007a [1983]) and *The Society of Individuals* (2010 [1987]). However, his reputation and relevance are still largely related to his most important work, *On the Process of Civilisation*. Unfortunately, when *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* was belatedly published in English translation, it appeared in two volumes four years apart: *The History of Manners* (1978) and *State Formation and Civilization* (1982). This seems to have led to a great deal of misunderstanding. The two volumes can appear at first glance to be about two entirely different topics – changing manners and the formation of states respectively – and even two somewhat different periods of history. But it is all one work: its intention is to establish the relationship between micro (individual) and macro (state) behaviour – implying that one cannot be understood without the other. Put simplistically, calculating how violently an individual may act was completely bound up with the degree of the state’s monopoly of violence. This ‘is a condition of what one calls today a “civilised” way of life . . . within its web of relationships, people are more or less effectively protected from each other’s physical violence’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 140).

**Elias and his ‘ultra-realist’ critics**

The motivation for producing this article was the appearance of several critiques of Elias emanating from the relatively new ‘ultra-realist’ school of thinkers, principally operating within criminology in the UK. A pioneer in this field is Steve Hall (Hall, 2012) and his frequent co-author Simon Winlow (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Hall et al., 2008). Both Winlow and Hall’s 2019 article in the US journal *Critical Criminology* (Winlow and Hall, 2019) and fellow ultra-realist Anthony Ellis’s article in the *British Journal of Criminology* (Ellis, 2019) raise important questions about the relationship between rising lethal violence in the UK and the economic austerity that has prevailed since 2010. These centre on an apparent denial of the capacity for cultural or political critique and agency within the figuration defined by Marx as the working class. We also have reservations about the ultra-realists’ use of Elias’s theory of civilizing processes. For example, Ellis sums up Elias’s work thus:

[T]he ‘civilising process’ – a series of macro-level social transformations across history that fostered greater interconnections between individuals and gradually truncated the human
Ellis appears to want to take exception to Elias’s theory, stating that ‘such an optimistic conclusion appears somewhat at odds with the more recent fallout from the 2008 financial crisis’ (Ellis, 2019: 863). Ellis’s interpretation of Elias reduces the power of his analysis by asserting something that is contradicted by Elias himself in many of his writings, and therefore tends to discount the value of ‘figurational sociology’ to contemporary criminology, at a time when an increasing number of writers are recognizing the value of Elias’s insights in seeking to explain all kinds of deviance by any number of actors, as we shall outline below.

Moreover, he cites Steve Hall’s critique of Elias’s theory in *Theorizing Crime* (Hall, 2012) – namely it ‘fails to recognise the decivilising forces that have been integral and functional in its dynamic structure all along’ (Ellis, 2019: 872). Our contention is that both of these statements represent a somewhat simplistic reading of what Elias had to say in 1939 about the process of civilization. This would have been a strange time to be drawing an ‘optimistic conclusion’ about the future of humanity. Clearly, on the brink of world war, continental Europe was far from ‘conditions of relative peace’, which implies that Ellis’s summary is at best rather superficial. He characterizes Elias as highlighting one aspect of social relations – increasing interdependency between different human groups – but goes on to assert that Elias neglected the violent and ‘decivilizing’ tendencies built into Weimar Germany. Far from it; as we have shown, Elias had first-hand experience of these violent and decivilizing tendencies. Such experiences were hardly compatible with a viewpoint that ‘fails to recognise the decivilising forces that have been integral and functional to its dynamic structure’ (Ellis, 2019: 872).

On Elias, both Ellis and Hall take their main bearings from Steven Pinker’s influential book *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence has Declined* (2011). Pinker is a great admirer of Elias and an advocate of his ideas, but he makes only rather partial use of them. In particular, from the beginning Elias stressed that, as a counterpart to the internal pacification within territory that is one of the key components of state-formation processes, there had been a long-term tendency towards violence on an increasing scale between states. Moreover, he was always conscious that civilizing processes were anything but irreversible. As he wrote in 1939:

> The armour of civilised conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today. (Elias, 2012 [1939]: 576)

Raw fear and insecurity amongst the mass of Germany’s population had broken the liberal ideology underpinning its interwar economy, and violence featured on the streets and in the machinery of state. The state’s monopoly of violence was broken and armed bands wrought havoc as a political strategy (Hett, 2019). In the last book published in his lifetime, *Studies on the Germans*, Elias returned very explicitly to the question of ‘decivilising processes’ (Elias, 2013a [1989]). In all, his writings fill 18 volumes of the Collected...
works came at the beginning of his career, not the end, so it is important not to dwell exclusively on the earlier book.

**Post-war criminology in the UK: Elias as sociologist of deviance**

After the war, outside the ‘administrative criminology’ that focused on social policy and shaping the expanded welfare state to better promote a retreat from poverty and more sensitive institutions for rehabilitating the criminal, criminology remained a marginal topic that was most likely to be taught as aspects of the new sociology courses emerging in Britain’s universities and polytechnics. Insofar as the development of a distinct set of ideas to analyse the phenomenon of crime within communities was expanding in the UK, it largely followed the trends set in the US by the ground-breaking Chicago School of sociology and those who followed in its wake, such as Robert Merton and the highly influential functionalism of Talcott Parsons. The particular sub-field of youth deviance saw British social scientists responding in the wake of the trail blazed in the US by the likes of Albert Cohen, Robert Miller and David Matza in the late 1950s (Carrabine, 2016; Hobbs, 2019: 29–30). Redefining deviance through a more rounded and appreciative contextualization of the acts themselves and the impact of social attitudes upon ‘those so labelled’ figured in many of these accounts – quintessentially Becker’s *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (1963). Clearly Elias and Scotson’s *The Established and the Outsiders* is part of this tradition, as is Elias’s collaboration with Eric Dunning in developing a sociology of the regulated forms of violence within sport, arguing that ‘they constitute a type of group dynamics which is produced by controlled tensions between at least two sub-groups . . . [T]ensions are not extraneous, but intrinsic to the figuration itself’ (Elias and Dunning, 2008 [1966]: 191–2). Evidently, post-war provincial Leicester was a far less violent society than Weimar Germany. This relative absence of violence on the streets at that time does not mean, however, that law and morality have expelled violence from states: it means that states control its use: ‘legal institutions, up until now, have only functioned effectively if their representatives have been able to rely, actually or potentially, on the use of physical violence to enforce their decisions’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 140). This is a reference to mechanisms of social control, which Elias calls ‘reinforcement through external restraints, by means of agencies which are specially licensed to threaten or to use physical violence’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 141), concluding that ‘the civilising of these monopolists of physical violence within a state is an unsolved problem’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 142). This was written in 1983, when many commentators were noting the recent trend to greater militarization of techniques of crowd control by British police in response to the anti-racist riots of 1980–1 (Kettle and Hodges, 1982), soon to become further institutionalized in the policing of the miners’ strike of 1984–5 (Scraton, 1987), although Elias may of course have been thinking of the terrifying Nazification of the entire German police machinery in 1933.

**Contemporary violence in the streets and in the state**

Today, for example, state violence exercised by the British police, with their institutionally racist ‘gang matrix’ and stop and search practices at its fulcrum, is obviously a factor
in accounting for the ‘street violence’ carried out within a grouping in the process of building a distribution network for illegal drugs (Williams, 2015). Those non-state actors using violence to advance their status in this context may have learnt their lessons from their ‘betters’ in government and the military; for, as Elias explains, ‘one determinant plays a key role in the ranking of states – their violence potential: the capacity of a state for using physical violence in its relationship with other states as a means of improving its position in the hierarchy’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 139). What happens between rival states can also apply within national borders. Moreover, considering the use of social control agencies such as the police and/or the army, Elias states: ‘Control of these agencies can be misused by the controllers themselves as a means of increasing their own power ratio’ (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 141). One contemporary scholar of organized crime, Svetlana Stephenson, has recently spelled this out – also choosing to cite Elias:

Agents of state and societal violence are often considered to be distinct from each other and even in competition. By bringing the state back into the study of societal violence, we can also investigate how it influences through its actions, as Elias proposed, ‘the patterning of the whole libidinal economy – drives, affects, emotions and all’ (Elias 1978: 239). The growth of state capacity, which is often seen as associated with the decline of personal violence (Pinker 2011), may not guarantee internal pacification and may be conducive to violence. Using a language of violence which appeals to a range of affective and moral emotions, the state may attempt to mask the hollowness of its political agenda and promote social cohesion by directing anger onto a range of scapegoats and enemies. (Stephenson, 2019: 123)

Stephenson’s research is based on Russia, but she maintains it can apply ‘in many areas across the world . . . where there is a fusion of economic and political power of state-based groups and organised crime’ (Stephenson, 2019: 124).

The ‘psychogenetic’ aspect of the process perhaps needs to be spelled out more exactly. Elias defines a civilizing process as involving a tilting of the balance in the steering of individual behaviour from external constraints (Fremdzwänge, constraints by other people) in favour of self-constraints (Selbstzwänge). But this change in habitus – usually gradually, from generation to generation – is not a simple movement towards ‘more’ self-control. It is not a movement towards the Parsonian (or Althusserian) model of zombie-like automatic reproduction of internalized ‘shared values’. Elias stresses that people living in small-scale societies (or in small self-contained communities such as monasteries) have often been capable of the most intense self-control (Elias, 2007b [1992]: 129–32). But that was self-control inculcated and enforced mainly by other people in close face-to-face encounters. His argument is that, as the chains of interdependence in which people are enmeshed become longer and more complex, people are constrained to look further ahead, to develop more habitual foresight about the consequences of their behaviour – more habitual control over immediate impulses – consequences stemming from interdependence with people at a distance, who they do not know and never meet. It is a ‘social constraint towards self-constraint’ (Elias, 2012 [1939]: 403–17). This ‘tilting of the balance in the steering of behaviour’ at the micro level of habitus is thus driven by macro-level processes of the internal pacification of territory, marketization, monetarization, urbanization, bureaucratization, the growth of taxation and military capabilities. All of these part-processes are underpinned by the
gradual monopolization of the means of violence by the state, but none of them is independent of the others – even though social scientists typically specialize in researching one or other of these aspects.

Moreover, even though the balance in what Elias calls the steering of behaviour is conceptualized as tilting towards self-constraints, both external constraints and self-constraints always continue to play a part. The Eleventh Commandment is said to be the injunction ‘Thou shalt not be found out’. If the structure and strength of external constraints declines, people’s behaviour will change: an element of calculation of risk remains. True, the response to rising danger and correspondingly rising fears may not be immediate: there may be ‘cultural lag’, ‘the drag effects of habitus’ (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 188–91), or ‘hysteresis’ (Bourdieu, 1990: 62). But civilizing processes are most definitely reversible; indeed, decivilizing processes appear often to work much more quickly than typically gradual and long-term civilizing processes (Mennell, 1990). A good example of this process can be found in Loïc Wacquant’s (2004) studies of the black ghettos of Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s, where he found evidence of a ‘true decivilising process’ in which less demanding standards of emotion management and impulse control can be observed in successive generations. There, the increasing division between the protected and the unprotected strata is seen in what Wacquant calls ‘social dedifferentiation’ – the withering away of the organizational fabric (civic, religious, welfare and commercial) of ghetto neighbourhoods and the disappearance of stable working-class black American households. It is seen too in the depacificiation of everyday life and in the ‘informalization’ of the ghetto economy; that is, the loss of conventional forms of employment and welfare and their replacement by drug dealing and other illegal activities on a large scale. Together, these processes probably produce a dual effect, increasing the propensity for both instrumental and impulsive violence. Recent research has shown how violent acts can contain elements of calculation and impulsivity (Braun, 2019). That is, in such a situation, people may resort to means such as armed robbery to obtain what they cannot gain by legal means; but at the same time an increased level of danger and insecurity in everyday life, such as contemporary austerity, is likely to be associated with more impulsive violence too, of the kind often labelled ‘hair-trigger’ alertness to danger (Wacquant, 2004).

State, capital and resistance

Another ultra-realist critique cited by Ellis is made by Mark Horsley et al., namely Elias’s ‘apparent reluctance to plumb the depths of political economy’ (Ellis, 2019: 870; Horsley et al., 2015: 19). This is contradicted by statements such as this from Involvement and Detachment.

The formation of state monopolies of physical force, in turn, is functionally interdependent with economic developments such as the formation of social capital and the increasing division of labour. State formation processes and economic processes, or, in other words, processes of social integration and social differentiation, are functionally interdependent, but not reducible one to another. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 142)

It appears here that Elias is actually embracing the importance of the Marxist concept of political economy, even defining social capital as the property of society as a whole and
in the hands of those who exercise social control, rather than the popular Bourdieusian notion of social capital as a tool for individuals to utilize. In his recent criminological overview of ‘visions of political violence’, Vincenzo Ruggiero contends:

The centralisation of the use of force and tax collection are equated by Elias to a form of protection racket . . . The state then incessantly seeks to expand consensus, thus displaying its core antinomy: the more it accumulates power the more it depends on those who depend on its power. (Ruggiero, 2019: 20)

In Ruggiero’s view, Elias’s stress on the interdependency between different classes or social groups demonstrates how – like Marx, Engels and many others – he believes this interdependency creates inescapable social bonds; this is an argument disputed by the ultra-realists, more by assertion than by evidence.

Within contemporary criminology there remains a degree of tension between those critical criminologists who prioritize an understanding of the state’s role in committing and facilitating crime and those who practise a more ‘neutral’ form of administrative criminology – one that is reluctant to highlight state complicity in global crime and injustice and wishes to collaborate with and be funded by their local state to advance their research. We would argue that many of Elias’s insights put him in the former camp and offer important insights into phenomena such as the rise of hate crime, state crimes of neglect and profit over welfare, and others. Now, ultra-realism is clearly also in the critical camp, and their frequent citations of the ideas of Žižek and others point in an anti-capitalist direction, but the difference with the likes of Elias and Marx is marked, as we explore below. Moreover, the theoretical improvement upon the civilizing process that Ellis advocates is Steve Hall’s ‘pseudo-pacification process’, which he describes as ‘one of ultra-realism’s founding concepts’ (Ellis, 2019: 870). For those of us interested in applying political economy – and/or the insights of Norbert Elias – to our understanding of criminology, this concept is somewhat of a departure from the ideas of Marx and Engels in that it rejects the idea of working-class agency and the importance of labour to capital. As Ellis summarizes:

Historically, capitalism in the West was dependent upon labour and regularly found itself in direct conflict with workers and their vocal representatives. Recently, however, the system has become increasingly less reliant upon physical labour. Today it is also less reliant on many mundane forms of mental labour, a situation likely to persist as new technologies and artificial intelligence are adopted in the production, distribution and administration processes. (Ellis, 2019: 872)

He appears to state that contemporary capitalism no longer needs to exploit workers – or ‘become[s] increasingly less reliant upon physical labour’ – implying that the working class has fundamentally changed its nature through the decline of the interdependency between capital and labour, and therefore has lost its potential to change itself and society in the process. Winlow and Hall make similar claims:

Throughout history, the master’s need for the slave’s labour and acquiescence forced the master to at least recognise the slave’s existence, functions, opinions and partial rights. In advanced
capitalism, however, where automation and outsourcing in a competitive global market are rendering so many types of labour functionally redundant, we are witnessing the end of such traditional socioeconomic obligations. (Winlow and Hall, 2019: 28)

This conclusion is hardly novel. It was a central tenet of post-modernism. Although some academic Marxists such as historian Eric Hobsbawm and sociologist Stuart Hall, linked to the evolution of ideas of ‘Eurocommunism’ (Balampanides, 2018; Hobsbawm, 1977), had actually been at the heart of post-modernism’s conception that by the mid-1970s we were witnessing The Forward March of Labour Halted (Hobsbawm et al., 1981), the idea that the process of employer/worker interdependence had been superseded has been extensively criticized by other ‘classical’ Marxists such as Mike Davis (1985) and Alex Callinicos (1990). As a classical sociologist, Elias shared their scepticism, declaring that it was ‘too early to say’ that we were post-modern, claiming that ‘late barbarian’ may be a better description (Elias, 2009, 2013b: 259–65). Rather than labour becoming ‘functionally redundant’, current labour market trends such as outsourcing surely replace one form of labour with another. The potential for the likes of the UK’s NHS workers or London’s university cleaners to take action to get their terms of employment back ‘in-house’ has been shown by dozens of strikes from Wigan in 2018 to St Georges in London in 2020. The precarious workers of today are frequently also trade union activists and militants, and their insecurity is often exaggerated and only partially understood; they are capable of winning more secure conditions precisely because their labour still fuels corporate profits (Choonara, 2019: 226). We would argue that if anyone is abandoning the importance of political economy it is not Elias but the ultra-realists themselves.

The ultra-realists have frequently proved adept ethnographers, collecting incisive and illuminating comments from society’s margins, but then utilizing them as ‘proof’ of assertions that are much more doubtful and do not necessarily flow from the evidence (Hall et al., 2008). How many now would agree with their conclusion regarding the 2011 English riots: ‘we are not yet convinced by initial empirical accounts of rioters’ motivations that centralise dissatisfaction with unequal opportunities, the erosion of welfare or antagonism towards police’ (Treadwell et al., 2013: 4)? This is not an isolated example. Elsewhere, they chose to interpret the widespread looting that took place during the riots as a sign that rioters were conforming to the rules of consumer society rather than breaking them; noting ‘the total absence of articulate political opposition . . . The rioters did not demand social justice’ (Winlow et al., 2015: 136). Clement has elsewhere traced the lineage of this debate within criminology and pointed out some of its shortcomings – one being that it concludes that events such as the English riots of 2011 were unpolitical (Clement, 2013, 2016, 2019). With other scholars who have applied Elias’s ideas to better understand English violence over the longue durée (Sharpe, 2016) or violence in international relations (Linklater, 2016), we would argue for ‘the potential “reconciliation” of process sociology and critical theory . . . about the emancipatory dimensions of Elias’s position’ (Linklater, 2019).

Like Elias, the ultra-realists are interested in analysing the impact of ‘the patterning of the whole libidinal economy – drives, affects, emotions and all’ (Elias, 1978: 239), but their conclusions differ:
This competitive subjectivity, driven by the libidinal energy of obscene enjoyment, is not unique to white upper-class males, whose wealth and power are the products of centuries of ruthless and successful accumulation. It is active throughout the social structure in a variety of pseudo-pacified micro-relations. Its ubiquitous, rhizomatic presence and enthusiastic adoption by too many opportunistic individuals permanently postpones the formation of the sort of long-term working-class solidarity that could restart genuine cultural and political opposition. (Winlow and Hall, 2019: 9)

For ultra-realists this is the barrier – we are trapped in the iron cage of consumerism for ever because ‘the people’ are dupes of capitalism; this is reminiscent of Parsonian or Althusserian zombies. The proliferation of social movements and mass protests across much of the globe during the past decade suggests that, when Ellis describes ‘the current era of largely unopposed neoliberal capitalism’ (Ellis, 2019: 873), he is being rather one-sided and neglecting the importance of movements such as #blacklivesmatter or the gilets jaunes (Bouharoun, 2019; Taylor, 2016). The continued proliferation of these insurgent movements of the dispossessed contradicts Ellis’s claim that ‘the system can afford to dispose of elements of the population, quietly confident that they are sufficiently de-politicised, lacking in effective representation and fully absorbed in consumer culture to pose no real political threat’ (Ellis, 2019: 873). In a similar vein, Simon Winlow and Steve Hall stated:

We retain a degree of agency with regard to an array of everyday choices, but, crucially, we simply do not have the capacity to enact our ‘freedom’ at a deeper level that shapes our experience of everyday reality. For example, we do not have the capacity to act at the level where deep-state politics and the intricacies of the global investment banking system are reproduced . . . Nor are we able to make decisions that affect whole communities, whole societies, our entire economic system or the natural environment. We have no access to these realms of concentrated power, and they remain, for the most part, beyond our immediate comprehension. (Winlow and Hall, 2019: 31–2)

Of course, the protestors cannot wield power within the state, but does that mean their acts of resistance are doomed to fail? The recent struggles of the mass of Hong Kong students and civil rights activists aim at winning concessions from the Chinese state – the state’s violent repression is real but its success is not guaranteed. The insurgents’ actions on the streets display their agency. Unless one possesses prior knowledge that all resistance to authority is useless, then events such as these contradict the ultra-realist perspective. Clearly, those labelled as ‘rioters’ by the authorities are very interested in social justice not only in the US or France, but also in Algeria, Egypt and Sudan, Lebanon, Chile and Belarus, to name a few contemporary examples.

Elias reminds us that, rather than seeing the glass as either half-full or half-empty, we benefit from a sociology that recognizes that both statements are true, but partial, descriptions. Nothing ‘permanently postpones’ humans’ agency or guarantees ‘progress’ or liberation. In UK criminology in the 1980s, in parallel with developments in the Labour Party and trade unions, the debate over which type of critical sensibility to adopt became a dispute over the merits of ‘left realism’ versus ‘left idealism’ (Lea and Young, 1984; Taylor, 1982). In hindsight, this simply replicated the separation of ‘macro’ and ‘micro’
that has misdirected social science over the decades. As one recent commentary pointed out, ‘the two are irrevocably intertwined in a dialectic of change, with realism continually altering what the future holds while idealism stands in the here-and-now as a benchmark for what can or might be’ (Madfis and Cohen, 2016: 9).

In a recent defence of resistance, Jeff Ferrell argues:

We might think historically about the claim that hegemonic systems of political-economic and cultural control preclude the possibility of effective resistance to them. Both conceptually and historically, it’s worth remembering that hegemony is less an accomplishment than a tendency; those who possess inordinate power may be able to deploy that power in ‘policing the crisis’, to invoke Hall and colleagues (1978), but they are never quite able to prevent the crisis nor to resolve it. Consequently, across all sorts of systems of domination, meaningful and effective resistance has flourished. Slavery in the United States was a ruthless system of human control, but it was undermined regularly by coded slave communications, runaway slaves, and the Underground Railroad.

He concludes ‘we can move beyond the sort of faux-radical pessimism that denies the potential of contemporary resistance, and embrace instead a multitude of resistant possibilities’ (Ferrell, 2019).

### Violent subcultures

The ultra-realists have made a substantial contribution to various criminological discourses on violence, demonstrating the violent and visceral habitus inhabited by various groups such as the unemployed, military veterans and others. Scholars in this journal have showcased the work of Winlow, Hall, Treadwell and Ellis in this regard (Banks and Albertson, 2018). In addition, Ellis is surely correct to describe gang and knife crime ‘as unrestrained and often quite extreme manifestations of neoliberal capitalism’s dark heart’ (Ellis, 2019: 874). But this does not justify his claim that these ‘latest examples in lethal and serious violence do not represent subcultural deviations amongst groups of “outsiders” from a “civilising” value system that restrains primal violent urges and maintains civilising sensibilities’ (Ellis, 2019: 874). It has been argued elsewhere that, for these ‘teenagers under the knife’, this is ‘a decivilising process’ (Clement, 2010). It is not clear from Ellis’s account why subcultural theories and related ideas such as societal moral panics and their consequences are to be rejected from the criminological tool kit. The proffered explanation seems to be that, when we are talking about members of criminal subcultures, the ultra-realists do not believe that the latter’s ideas and motivations are any different from those of the rest of us:

The supposed ‘outsiders’, who in traditional subcultural theory are assumed to be conforming to oppositional values (Cohen 1955, Hall and Jefferson 1976), are actually incorporated in capitalism’s libidinally driven competition. (Ellis, 2019: 873)

This is confusing, because, in fact, Albert Cohen’s *Delinquent Boys* (1955) argues that the ‘delinquents’ are frustrated conformists who share society’s dominant values and resent their exclusion from entitlement to the ‘American Dream’. It is Cohen’s
critic, Robert Miller (1958), who claims these youth possess their own oppositional subculture. Sykes and Matza (1957) famously debated these evolving ideas about deviance, pointing to the ‘techniques of neutralization’ adopted by many juveniles when caught out in crime. In other words, criminology has long recognized that there are elements of incorporation and opposition within motivations and justifications for crime. Do we really want to reject these fundamental ideas and concepts as no longer relevant to the 21st century (Blomberg et al., 2018)? Do we want to dismiss those important insights about the right to personal identity and group belonging that are so central to Hall and Jefferson’s *Resistance through Rituals* (1976)? Ellis claims that ‘the perspective of labelling and stigma . . . tell[s] us how specific groups are marginalised and demonised but very little about their initial motivations to act’ (Ellis, 2019: 867). We would argue that Hall and Jefferson tell us a lot about the motivations of deviant subcultures, from skinheads to punks. Of course, Stuart Hall et al. locate all these phenomena in the context of the social construction of crime in *Policing the Crisis* (1978), using the moral panic label, manufactured by ruling institutions to explain the emergence of young black men as folk devils – who they held responsible for a ‘general social crisis and “rising crime” first, a particular kind of robbery occurring in British streets second, and later’ (Hall et al., 1978: 23).

These issues have remained salient for the past 40 years, agonisingly so in the US especially (Butler, 2017), and are likely to become more prominent still in UK criminology when police stop and search powers are rebooted as the principal ‘solution’ to violent crime (Healy and Cole, 2019; Long, 2018). Rather than follow Horsley’s injunction to ‘Forget moral panics’ (2017), we believe that the amplification spirals that generate emotion-saturated media discourse are an increasingly important concept and are augmented by Elias’s comments on double-binds.5 Humans, he believed:

> are entangled with nature, with other people, with other groups or even with themselves in a way which makes it difficult to extract themselves . . . [T]he manner in which they are entangled . . . exert[s] constraints on them . . . this apparatus of constraints . . . involves a circular movement and indeed often an escalation. A high level of danger has its counterpart in a high level of affect in knowledge, and therefore thinking about this danger, . . . modes of thought governed more by fantasy than by reality. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 107)

Examples such as the fantastical invasion fears of Trump supporters or the more apocalyptic imaginings of either side of the Brexit debate, as well as elements of the ‘fear of crime’ agenda, are all illuminated by using Elias’s approach. Take the swing towards populism that began in the US with the rise of the Republican ‘Tea Party’ movement in the 2010s, before truly taking off with the accession of Trump to the presidency (Herman and Muldoon, 2019; Hochschild, 2016). This is especially dangerous because it is not a phenomenon that can be simply dismissed by demonizing this ‘populist figuration’. The now widespread supporters of nationalist and populist politicians ‘are not monsters devoid of sympathy with their fellow human-beings. In their relations within their local community, they are kind and well-meaning people, not conspicuously selfish. But their human sympathy, their “circle of mutual identification” (De Swaan, 1995) is of limited radius’ (Mennell, 2018a: 528).
The implication is that ‘nice people’ had previously been constrained from speaking their minds and exercising their prejudice in areas such as racism, gender politics and US nationalism. In reality, it was more the case that, before the advent of social media, these voices did speak – for example on talk-radio phone-in shows – but were generally marginalized in the public discourse. Now their easier access to the public forum of viewpoints – alongside the legitimating presence of a range of political leaders echoing their fears in office – has exacerbated tensions and social divisions. As Elias described the phenomenon:

> All over the world groups of people, great and small, huddle together as it were, with a gleam in their eye and a nod of intimate understanding, assure each other how much greater, better, stronger they themselves are, than some particular other groups. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 7–8)

Elias’s *The Society of Individuals* contains some important historical context, such as stating that ‘the insecurity and level of threat to which people are subject have diminished noticeably in the course of the last centuries’ (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 82). The ultrarealists agree with this claim, one pioneered by the Eliasian historian of violence Pieter Spierenburg (Spierenburg, 2008). This is certainly true relatively, but do we feel like that? In the UK, between 2016 and 2019, many people have experienced rising social tensions between the claims of one section of society (the ‘leavers’), who are heavily invested in the ideal of the sovereignty of an individual national state, as opposed to their opponents, who prefer the claims for the benefits of living in a society of states (the ‘remainers’). The ‘feedback’ Elias describes here could well be applied to Brexit:

> The mutual threats of people and particularly of states, and the resulting insecurity, are still very great, and the restraint of affects in thinking about this area is low . . . The intrusion of ideals and values arising from power struggles within society, and carrying a strong affective charge into apparently objective discussion on the relation of ‘individual’ and ‘society’ is one of many examples of this kind of feedback. This is a vicious circle, the trap in which we are caught. (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 83)

In fact, Elias made these references to ‘individual’ and ‘society’ in this quotation during the Cold War period, where he later claimed the two systems of states – the ‘free West’ and the so-called ‘communist East’ – were trapped in a double-bind (as explored in a related paper; Clement and Scalia, 2020):

> Explanations in the usual terms, according to which this drift is either the fault of the capitalists or the communists . . . obscure the double-bind character of the figuration and also makes the struggle more intractable. On each side, it gives the hegemonic struggle between the two superpowers the character of a crusade . . . In both cases, the social practice which they have created is so far removed from an ideal state that it is impossible . . . to see how, from that sad reality, an ideal social condition can emerge. Yet that is what each of the two antagonistic states claims for its own side; that is what fires the emotions. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 157)

It is not unreasonable to claim that some of the emotions expressed in violent words and actions about the future of the British state in relation to the lands that surround it create
the habitus – the mentality formed in a landscape of scapegoating, sexism, racism, class prejudice and nationalism. The 2016 UK referendum has only exacerbated tensions rising in many countries ever since the 2008 global recession posed fundamental questions about how well the planet is governed and managed. Elias explains that a double-bind describes how ‘the mentality of people trapped in a crisis situation can contribute to its inescapable character’. He continues:

[A] power conflict stands at the centre of any double-bind process. The dangers which it brings for the people involved are difficult for them to overcome precisely because their own mentality comes to bear the mark of the threat, and contributes to its recurring reproduction. (Elias, 2007a [1983]: 114)

Austerity forms the backdrop, and inequalities within and between states have been pushing people either towards processes of radicalization or across borders away from lands wrecked by wars, invasions and civil strife. Elias did not believe the problems he described were insoluble, but he did think that we need to recognize the scale of the double-bind:

The two constantly reinforce each other. And the tendency to perpetuate the form they have thus taken on makes it extraordinarily difficult to set one in motion without simultaneously pushing the other in the same direction.

‘All the same,’ he concludes, ‘thinking probably helps’ (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 84).

Conclusion
The purpose of this article has been two-fold. First, we wanted to advocate the benefits of incorporating some of the concepts employed by Norbert Elias into criminological teaching and research by illustrating how they can be applied to thinking about contemporary violence, stigmatization and the process by which states are formed and reconfigured. Secondly, in rescuing these ideas, we have found ourselves also questioning some of the interpretations of Elias’s critics, in particular the implications inherent in the discourse of ultra-realism as argued by various UK criminologists, such as that political resistance can no longer forge effective movements against contemporary social harms. In a world dominated by increasingly dysfunctional governments and collapsing economies, we believe the toolbox of classical sociology, containing the ideas of the likes of Elias, will have more to offer than the novelties of ultra-realism.

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Notes

1. Eventually, a more accurate scholarly edition with many corrections was published in one volume (volume 3 of the Collected Works) under the more literal title On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations (Elias, 2012).

2. To make matters worse, in North America the second volume was published under the unauthorized and misleading title of Power and Civility. To this day, American scholars universally use the concept of ‘civility’, which is a static, ‘native’ and ‘emic’ concept; its origins are as a concept developed by members of early modern elites as a badge of superiority for their own code of behaviour. ‘Civilizing process’, in contrast, is intended to be (to state the obvious) a process concept and to have a technical or ‘etic’ character. Elias (2008b) admitted that confusion had arisen because he had been unable to think of a word that would distinguish the technical sense of civilization (as in ‘the process of civilization’) from the everyday, popular uses of ‘civilization’, ‘civilized’ and so on. It has recently been suggested that he might have made more use than he did of the familiar idea of ‘deferred gratification’. That is, the ‘civilizing’ change in habitus involves a greater habitual capacity – at the individual, social and cultural levels – to postpone the pursuit of immediate gratification (Mennell, 2018b).

3. Elias’s Collected Works were published by University College Dublin [UCD] Press in 18 volumes, under the General Editorship of Stephen Mennell, between 2006 and 2014.

4. The idea of ‘shared values’ has, unfortunately, become a cliché beloved of politicians.

5. The close, and in some ways surprising, linkage between the theories of civilizing processes and of moral panics has recently been demonstrated by Rohloff (2018) in relation to climate change. Therefore it is not surprising that the last Moral Panics conference to host Stan Cohen and Jock Young was organized by two prominent supporters of the contribution of Elias’s sociology, Jason Hughes (Dunning and Hughes, 2012) and the late Amanda Rohloff at Brunel University in 2010.

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