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The individualization process – constructive or destructive for communal ties? Deliberations on Norbert Elias’s ideas

In this article I consider whether the process of individualization inescapably disturbs communal ties. This is an especially important question when we consider social changes in Central Europe 25 years after the political transformation. My deliberation follows the main ideas of Norbert Elias, presented in The society of individuals. He argued that the development of human communities is heading towards integration on a human-wide level community. The question is, how do communal ties change during this process in Central Europe.

Key words: Norbert Elias, individualization process, civic community, civic participation, communal ties

Introduction

Elias describes the process of civilizing as the shifting of social control from community to individuals. This internal control, as Elias has shown, led the West to economic success and building democracy, thanks to great openness for people from abroad. Nonetheless, modern societies (like USA and old Europe) suffer from the erosion of communal life. One can ask, what happens to an individual, if that individual cannot be a permanent member of one established local (regional) community?

For the purpose of this article I will use the concept of community in a wide sense – as every social grouping, of which members are aware of being a part. The disquisition will be based on Norbert Elias’s essay ‘Changes in the We-I Balance’.

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the last part of the book *The society of individuals* which, in my opinion, is Elias's most important book. It serves a role in his scientific testament. My considerations are linked with other Elias's writings as well.

**Protestant ethic and beyond**

Elias is primarily known as the author of *The civilizing process* (Elias 1982). In this book he describes his concept of the civilizing process as a way by which people struggle with their natural impulses. These natural impulses seem to be a limitation of rational planning and acting with other rational actors. Therefore, natural impulses had to be excluded from the planned activity of every individual. These impulses are sublimated into acts of art, products of culture, religious enthusiasm, economic activity, etc.

Economic activity as a consequence of human restraint, based on religious discipline, had been described by Max Weber in his widely known book, *Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (Weber 1996). As a result of the civilizing process, a specific ethos of capitalism has been developed in a few countries of Western Europe, in early Modernity. Recognition of this ethos would not be possible without the development a class of people who became to be perceived as trustworthy. Simultaneously with this new ethos, a new kind of community has arisen: merchants and other ‘men of business’, a community which has no territorial boundaries boards and no support by state power, but in mutual trust.

In both *The civilizing process* and *The court society* (Elias 1986), Elias described the growth of another kind of community – the court society. Although it seems to be another world completely, an outcome was similar to Weberian capitalist ethos – the ethos of the courtesy has grown up. Birth of this ethos was possible because of establishing a class of people who were ready to recognize it – the class of people of the court. In both cases – early merchants and ‘people of the court’ – each individual perceived others as competitors. On the other hand, they recognized the same rules in their relationships (different in these two worlds) and they found each other as members of the same community. They named themselves noblemen, gentlemen, honourable men, etc. It was visible when two merchants or courtiers met each other among masses of the lower classes or during a journey. An honourable man was always ready to help other man of this ‘community’, without expectation of any profit. So protestant ethic as same as the court society were not only factors of individualization, but also factors of establishing communities in wider, cross-regional or cross-local meaning.
Individualization as a social process

What is no less important, Elias describes also the development of the concept of ‘individual’. The sociological concepts of ‘individual’ are for Elias a great misunderstanding. Generally, he consequently attends to abolish a theoretical opposition between ‘individual’ and ‘society’ (Elias 1991: 156). According to him, this opposition came from the relatively late usage of these concepts in language. This usage led sociologists in the wrong direction. They presumed that an explanation of the relationship between ‘individual’ and ‘society’ is the first task of sociology. Elias consequently protested against this presumption (Elias 1991; 1994: 167–170).

Also interesting for us is the development of the concept of ‘individual’ in language as such. Changing the usage of the concepts is, for sociologists, also a way of describing the social process (Elias 1991: 158). What Elias shows in his article, is the absence of concept of ‘individual’ during many centuries of European history. In ancient languages there was no equivalent to this concept (Elias 1991: 157). A separate human being was being characterized by his/her relation to the community: merchant, soldier, nobleman, etc. The Greek term *idiotes* shows a negative thought of someone who prefers to live in separation from the public affairs of his state. The Latin term *persona* was related to the masks of actors, through which they spoke their words. It also referred to somebody specific, important, characteristic, like Julius Cesar, Brutus, but not any theoretical, anonymous person (Elias 1991: 158). Also in the Middle Ages, there was no concept of separate individual. However, scholastic philosophy, with its logical concept of *individuum* gives a new ground for establishing the concept of individual in the next centuries (Elias 1991: 160). Times of the Renaissance gave separate human beings a possibility to gain an enormous social prestige and power, which, in opposition to the Middle Ages, was not a consequence of the place in traditional social network, but primarily – individual courage and genius (Elias 1991: 161). Nevertheless, Elias writes, that first distinction between individual and collective actions was visible among English Puritans in the seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, the concept of ‘individual’ began its enormous career, because it was needed for the language of many theoretical ideas, as well as of political and social movements (Elias 1991: 162).

Undoubtedly, the concept of ‘individual’ developed simultaneously with Modernity in Western societies. Modernity brought a rapid growth of possibilities to contact people from separate communities. Firstly, this became possible due to the development of trade and colonialism; secondly – because of technological innovations enabling people to contact others beyond the same place and time. European modern history is a history of individualization of separate human beings.

Individualizing process is nothing else but relocating social control from the community into the human being itself. This internal control acquired by human beings caused increasing development of rational calculation skills connected with one’s own actions. The rationalising attitude of human beings must have
caused the state, feature and general norms and ties from Medieval times to cease to be treated without reflection and gave way to rational, consciously calculated behaviours. As a result, capitalism was born, as described in Max Weber’s book *Protestant Ethics and the spirit of capitalism*. For similar reason, court society, as described by Elias (Elias 1983), developed. However, not everybody agrees that progressing individualisation of human beings was an inevitable process in Europe. Modern society has such a character only because new relations between people were imposed by the free trade and the division of labour (Durkheim 1997). For Durkheim all organic communities are not an anachronism but rather a preferred by human beings form of social ties, namely organic solidarity. Paradoxically, it was capitalism and free market of commodities and services, which has brought it to existence.

Nonetheless, Elias seems not to be fully aware of the fact that the process of individualization brought not only internal personal conflicts and social disintegration, but also enabled to build social structures of a higher level. Creation of individuals enabled a development of social competence to contact people from other cultures. Individual personality, in this sense, was possible because of individual reflexivity, which were developing since Renaissance. Elias did not take into consideration how this process is continued in modern society. The most adequate description of this process has been made by one of the Elias’s followers – Anthony Giddens. His concept of reflexive identity gives us theoretical explanations, why individualisation could be linked with a tendency to development of social movements on the global scale (Giddens 1991). In short, reaching an ability to reflexive creation of self, takes us away from our relatives, neighbours, local community, and leads us to meet people, who are doing similar personal choices, who are creating a similar self-indentity-package. People, who have chosen similar values and ways of lives.

**Community, or society of individuals?**

We can define community after Ferdinand Tönnies. Community (*Gemeinschaft*) as such is based on emotional bonds, and a feeling of belonging. In contrast, association (*Gesellschaft*) is based on formalised bonds with fairly weak emotions, where these bonds are created due to contract stipulations (Tönnies 1988).

When we think about a community, what comes to our mind is the notion of local community in a specific place on earth. It is no news that auto-identity of an individual primarily as a representative of a specific local community (village, town, wide-family, tribe, etc.) loses its relevance nowadays. Elias presents this issue as a gradual change in the ‘We-I’ relation. According to him, at present, the ‘We-I’ relation is occurring on many layers. As Elias puts it, we can talk about ‘plurality of interlocking integration planes characteristic of human society at its present stage of development’ (Elias 1991: 202). One hundred years ago, the word ‘We’ meant
the inhabitants of the same village or town, while now ‘We’ is used referring to the whole city, region, country, or, as we have already observed, to the union of states. We come across such utterances where ‘We’ is used in relation to the whole Europe.

Elias puts a strong emphasis on state’s role as an association which can replace the lower level of grouping – communities of any kinds. States, as he puts it, ‘have emerged all over the world as the highest ranking survival units’ (Elias 1991: 206).

Elias claims that identification of the inhabitants with their state as ‘We’ was possible due to the fact that all social classes could be represented in government (the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries) and also due to both world wars (Elias 1991: 208). He argues that ‘nation states, one can say, are born in wars and for wars’. As a result of such historical circumstances, a state for a Central-European inhabitant is the main survival unit, safety support in conflicts with others and in case of natural disasters. The floods striking Poland and Czech Republic during the last 2 decades also show that the addressee of claims from aggrieved parties is the state rather than any local or regional authority.

Nevertheless, before the states were created, people formed into various local communities. Elias writes quite extensively about specific human predispositions in creating relation but I would like to focus on an observation that human being, before becoming an individual (to himself and to others) had to function as a part of a whole. Human being perceived himself only as belonging to some ‘We’.

Robert Putnam, in his book *Making democracy work*, indicates that democracy works better in such a place where well-rooted, based on shaped historical ethos communities function (Putnam 1993). Francis Fukuyama reaches similar conclusions (Fukuyama 1995), as well as Alexis de Tocqueville (Tocqueville 1954). In his book *Bowling alone*, Putnam shows his deep disappointment towards the decline of American community life. In 1975, almost three-quarters of American association members attended their community meetings at least once a year, while in 1999 the number of attendants dropped to one-third (Putnam 2000: 56–57). Towards the end of the 20th century, the number of active members of various associations fell to the level present before World War II in United States.

In the late 1970s, the term ‘civil society’ arose, which originally was used to describe independent social movements in Central Europe. Nevertheless, after communism collapsed in these countries, ‘civil society’ did not develop in such a way as its activists had predicted. Today the idea of civil society, or similar, Amitai Etzioni’s idea of active society, stay in the sphere of ideas rather than as a characteristics of a typical society in Central Europe (Etzioni 1968). Examples are visible in present researches. In 2015 in Poland 19.4% inhabitants took part in any public meeting in last year, but in that year we had 2 elections. People grew in this activity in years of elections, but generally this form of communal activity decreases at least since 2003 (Czapiński, Panek 2015: 346). According to *European Social Survey*, in 2014 only 13% among Poles generally believes that most of people are worth of trust (see also Czapiński, Panek 2015: 352). Inhabitants of Central-Easter Europe generally are still on the latest stages of this comparison (except of Estonia).
Active membership in communal bodies in Poland is also on low level. An experience of taking part in any representative body during the whole life has 6.1% polish inhabitants (Czapiński, Panek 2015: 341). According to other research, 5.3% inhabitants have candidated at least once (in the whole life) in any elections to local authority (Peisert, Matczak 2012: 111).

The family as the smallest community

Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński divided the world of ordinary Pole to a public sphere and a private sphere. In the public sphere he is passive, amoral and withdrawn, when in the private he is active, vital, morally oriented and opened, helpful (Wnuk-Lipiński 1995). This corresponds with a known, typical strong position of family ties in East-Central Europe, in relation to the external, formal ties. It is obvious that the strongest emotional bonds are created on the basic level of human relations. ‘The strength of the family ties had much to do with the very extensive function of the family or, as the case may be, clan, as a survival unit’ (Elias 1991: 203). However, the nature of these bonds undergoes significant changes with time. Increasing position of a separate individual in relation to communities of every kind is visible also here. Changes which have taken place in the modern society have created a situation where family ceased to be an act of accepting certain responsibilities for the whole life, and rather has become a form of ‘voluntary, revocable union’ (Elias 1991: 204). As a result, families transformed from stable human communities into changeable with time formation. The internal norms of a traditional family have lost their power of contemporary principles and have started to be formed by partners according to their liking. Treating family as something permanent, given once for a lifetime and unchangeable, is giving place to treating it as a certain element of life, very serious, but competing with work, education, social life, passions, peers, etc. Also relations with children and their upbringing become an object of deeper reflection – more and more extended upbringing models are being sought. Traditional patriarchal model where the head of the family (most often the father) was the only breadwinner is replaced with democratization of family life and individualising family members. Home life, where the whole family spends afternoons, evenings and weekends on housework or just enjoys free time together, is becoming marginalised. After work life, social life, and leisure time happen outside home, without family. In this process, the ‘I’ acquires a bigger role, as Elias arguments ‘the only person with whom one must live one’s whole life’ (Elias 1991: 204). This process speeded up in the countries of Central-Eastern Europe during the social transformation after 1989, what I can show in the example of Poland.

As the family ties are weakening in Poland, there are fewer people living in families. During the period 1970–2002, the number of marriages with children decreased, while the number of marriages without children and single-parent
families increased (Jóźwiak 2006: 61–62). In 1970, marriages with children constituted 66.8% of families, while in 2002 it was just 56%. The amount of one-man households rose at that time from 16.1% to 24.8%. In the 1988–2002 period, the average amount of children in a household fell from 1.87% to 1.78%.

As the family ties are weakening and the norms of family life are worsening there appears a threat of forming pathological ties. To prevent this from happening the governments are trying to regulate family relations. Children rights are protected more and more as constitutional laws, and legislation of some European countries create strong protection of a child against a parent, including a possibility of child’s resignation from being brought up in their own family.

Weakening of family ties in Poland caused by the growing migration process is partially compensated thanks to new technologies, what is shown by the Polish research agency 'Pentor' (see Czarnota, Rudak 2007). The Internet and universality of multimedia phones allow communication to spread beyond 'here and now' in a much broader sense than earlier.

A dusk of *gemeinschaft*’s?

Individualization in Elias theory does not mean that a human being today needs communities less than in earlier centuries. In fact, Elias sees every individual in the context of community, group and society in which it exist. For Elias, sociology could not be possible if we agreed, that in some moment in the future a description of the society could be reduced to separate individuals. ‘Individuals always come in configurations and configurations of individuals are irreducible’ writes Elias (Elias 1965: 170).

Elias writes “communities and neighbourhoods are a specific type of configuration” (Elias 1965: 171). This figurational theory presumes a historical character of every configuration. It means that traditional, local community of neighbours was accurate in some time and place, and it could also be removed by some other kind of community (in a wider sense) as more appropriate to basic conditions of live.

Communities in the ‘Network Society’

Parallel to the decline of traditional communities and the crisis of modern civil society, the Internet role is growing. Various studies conducted in Poland (e.g. Batorski, Marody and Nowak 2006) indicate more or less stronger communities which, using the Internet, are sometimes becoming a platform of strong group identification. Is this a beginning of a ‘new civil society’? The activity of people who do not know each other in real world but meet on the websites dedicated to local community life is increasing. This Internet service shows that online meetings can lead to discussion about local community problems. Anna Przybylska,
who described some projects of increasing civil activity, transparency and accessibility of local authorities in Finland, argues that internet enabled reasonable change in the quality of the life of citizens (Przybylska 2006: 263).

The concept of ‘network society’ proposed by Castells is very often perceived as description of the society in the Internet era. However the nature of ties in this network still remains unclear. On the one hand, people sharing ideas like human rights, animals’ rights, can gather together and act more effectively than earlier. On the other hand, the Internet is full of traps and the trust to people met via Internet still decreases. Systems of protecting privacy are rapidly developing. Policy of facebook and other network administrators tend to help users to exclude people unknown in real life. One can say, that people mostly use the Internet rather to maintain social ties than they look for new contacts.

I share Elias’s opinion that “the emotional tinge of «We-identity» grows noticeably fainter in relation to post-national forms of integration (…). The function of the highest plane of integration, humanity, as a focus of human we-identity may be growing. But it is probably not an exaggeration to say that most people mankind as a frame of reference for we-identity is a blank area on their emotional maps” (Elias 1991: 203). Elias names this problem ‘drag effect’. It means that throughout generations human communities got used to and felt loyal towards their lower level community. When lower level human communities become a part of another community due to impetuous social processes (e.g. transition from tribal integration into national integration) then they function in such a way (Elias refers to it as ‘social habitus’) as if the main point of reference was We-identity of lower level (in this case, a tribe). This is even more visible in case of international relations. Meanwhile, the world’s history during the last several dozen years has introduced more and more examples where, as Elias puts it “nation state units have in reality already relinquished their function as guarantors of the physical security of their citizens, and thus as survival units, to supra-state units” (Elias 1991: 218).

Elias describes the transition of identification from lower level communities to higher level communities as a linear process. However, it seems to be a simplification. New technologies can revive local communities functioning (Kajdanek 2014). New communication technologies are used not only by those individuals whose objective is to broaden their contacts, but also by those who want to strengthen the ties inside their group. Good evidence of this thesis is given by Marta Olcoń-Kubicka (Olcoń-Kubicka 2006), who describes polish blogs. There is no reason to limit her outcomes to the Poles. According to her, bloggers form groups which in most cases can be considered as Tönniesian Gemeinschaft’s. Referring to a book of Maffesoli La temps des tribes she argues, that bloggers can be considered as members of postmodern tribes. Thanks to the internet, they form relationships covering trust, feelings and honesty. Olcoń-Kubicka assumes, that these individualized persons who make (in some extend) real communities, and, finally, can join the modern independence with emotional engagement and mutual trust (Olcoń-Kubicka 2006: 159). The Internet can also enable some people to form active groups of extremists
of every kinds who would be only interested in supporting their own communities to realize their own particular goals and to exclude others.

Conclusions

My criticism also targets Elias’s exaggerated emphasis on identification with national state which might be caused by his own painful experiences (Elias 1978, 13–16). Such identification is characteristic for these countries which have had their own, native, modern absolute monarchy, like France, Sweden, and Prussia. The development process of this identification is described by Elias in his book. We can, however, distinguish quite a big group of European societies whose representatives identify with national state no more than these smaller communities. Going further, it seems that Polish society see the state as external oppressive force rather than main survival unit.

Traditional Polish culture is deeply connected with land and locality. In general, late-industrialized Polish society could be still considered as an unconnected aggregate of local communities (Gellner 2006: 10). Consequently, Polish culture contains numerous elements typical for agrarian cultures, present until today in many poor regions of the world (Scott 1976). Their typical moral values and the most important factors affects duration of their social networks. Another factor of the social structure is amoral familism (Banfiled 1958).

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find arguments which will reject Elias’s hypothesis which states that the development of human communities is heading towards integration on human-wide level community. The idea of such community appeared in the Enlightenment as the world superpower organization or world government whose institutional remains we can observe in the form of UN. Many times, however, this idea was thwarted due to various crises (wars, totalitarian ideologies, etc.) but always was rebirthing again. This perspective – considering every social formation as a historical, never ending process rather than stable structure – was one of the main postulates of Elias.

Bibliography