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The revolt of the established: Elias, ressentiment, and authoritarian populism

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Abstract

Recent scholarship on authoritarian populism draws on the concept of *ressentiment* in order to encompass the dynamics of 'power devaluation' and the dethronement of previously established groups. This paper develops those arguments by outlining the ways in which our understanding of the dynamics of 'dethronement' and 'power devaluation' can usefully be enhanced by reflecting on the interaction between two aspects of Elias's thought: first, his conception of the 'drag effect' in the relationship between social habitus and shifts in social structure, alongside Bourdieu's related concept of the hysteresis effect; and, second, Elias's analysis of the dynamics of established–outsider relations, at both an intra-nation and an inter-nation level—with a particular focus on the turn to National Socialism in 1930s Germany. The central argument will be that the interaction of these dynamics underpins the various forms of authoritarian populism, taking the form of a 'revolt of the established', creating the conditions for a destabilisation of the norms of civilised conduct and interaction for the sake of the protection of existing relations of power and status.

Keywords: authoritarian populism, ressentiment, Elias, Bourdieu, nationalism, habitus

Introduction

A consistent theme running through the literature on the developments characterising the tendencies towards authoritarian populism around the world over recent years is an engagement with their emotional logic, their underlying structure of feeling. In this context, many observers will emphasise, in addition to anger, fear, anxiety and resentment, also the more deeply anchored emotional disposition of *ressentiment*, as introduced by Nietzsche and developed sociologically by Max Scheler (1961 [1915]). The various forms of populist politics are all characterised by a political orientation driven by anger and rancour directed at perceived elites as well as

outsiders and groups formerly regarded as inferior in power and status. In developing his analysis of this understanding of what he terms 'the age of anger', Pankaj Mishra regards *ressentiment* as the concept that captures the 'whole tremulous realm of subterranean revenge, inexhaustible and insatiable in outbursts' (Mishra, 2017: 9) underpinning the various forms of populist politics (Mishra, 2017: 31).[1]

Wendy Brown also regards *ressentiment* as the affective route that any experience of insult or humiliation tends to follow (2018: 69), constituting a key 'symptom of our age— suffering experienced as wrongful victimization' (2019: 174). She highlights the ways in which neo-liberalism salts the wounds of powerlessness with fear and shame, generating a combination of accountability and impotence that makes up fertile ground for *ressentiment*. From this perspective, she argues that authoritarian populism should be understood as the inflammation and channelling of *ressentiment*, resulting in the construction of an anti-democratic table of values (Brown, 2019: 179).[2]

Ressentiment is best understood as 'a pattern of feeling in which a subject continually re-experiences a memory of a past or imagined sentiment, an injury or open psychic wound' (Kelly, 2020: 8), in which the rumination on past injuries becomes 'constitutive of the group and of its identity' (Illouz, 2023: 105). *Ressentiment*, then, is resentment that has taken on a life of its own, one's master instead of one's servant. Robert Merton (1957 [1949]: 155–6) summed up the Nietzsche–Schelerian conception of *ressentiment* by highlighting its three interlocking elements: diffuse feelings of hatred, hostility and envy; powerlessness; and continual re-experiencing of this hostility. If one includes the sense of injustice underpinning the hostile feeling, then the three elements are: (a) a sense of injury (actual, imagined or just envy); (b) being powerless to do anything adequate about it; and (c) constant remembrance. Importantly, it then also results in what Nietzsche and Scheler termed 'transvaluation', the rejection of the value system that has denied the just correction of the past injury, in favour of a value system that recognises the terrible injustice that has been inflicted on the subject (see also Ure, 2015 and van Krieken, 2019).

This temporal dimension is what is important in distinguishing *ressentiment* from resentment. Max Scheler, in explaining why he worked with the French word, noted the emphasis on memory, 'the *repeated* experiencing and *reliving* of a particular emotional response reaction against someone else… a re-*experiencing* of the emotion itself, a *renewal* of the original feeling' (Scheler, 1961 [1915]: 39, emphasis added). This

[1] See also Demertzis, 2020; Capelos & Demertzis, 2021; Capelos, Salmela, & Krisciunaite, 2022; Salmela & von Scheve, 2017; Koppetsch, 2023; Remley, 2019.

[2] Adorno saw the problem as lying, in part at least, in democracy failing to deliver on its promises, framing fascist movements as 'the wounds, the scars of a democracy that, to this day, has not yet lived up to its own concept' (2020 [1967]: 7).

temporal dimension can also not be captured by the English word 'resentment', unless it is accompanied by an adjective like 'lingering' or 'simmering', making it a mistake to equate the two words.

However, while subordinate groups might have a ressentimental attitude 'upwards', towards dominant groups—and this is generally what the standard definition refers to—it is equally true that dominant groups experience *ressentiment* 'downwards' towards subordinate groups driving any sort of decline in their own relative status and power (Olschanski, 2015: 9). While *ressentiment* might indeed characterise those in subordinate positions seeking greater equality—Nietzsche's 'slave revolt'—it also features in the emotional disposition of those in advantaged positions seeking to protect their status *against* the pursuit of greater equality (Ansart, 2002: 15–16). This is especially true for the times and situations where *ressentiment* in fact becomes active rather than passive, as the standard model would have it. It is not only those seeking equality driving the various forms of *ressentiment,* but also those defending existing *inequalities.*

More recent discussions of *ressentiment* have started, then, to expand the application of the concept—to emphasise its ubiquity and its multidirectionality (Illouz, 2023: 94). Brown develops the understanding of *ressentiment* by arguing that the ever-shifting configurations of contemporary power relations 'thwart the mighty and well-placed, along with the downtrodden'. This makes it important to move beyond the Nietzschean account by understanding *ressentiment* in terms of 'waning entitlement, aggrieved supremacism, and not merely the frustrations of what he called "weakness"' (Brown, 2019: 162–3, 174). As Pierre Ansart argues, Nietzsche really outlines two opposing types of *ressentiment,* that of the weak and the dominated, but also that of the dominant towards the dominated, embodying:

> ...another ressentiment, possibly just as destructive as the first: the pent-up hatred of the dominant when faced with the revolt of those they considered inferior. This ressentiment is reinforced by the desire to regain lost authority and to avenge the humiliation suffered. This hatred is no less "withdrawn" and contained than that of the slave: it is part of the practice of the dominant to contain the manifestations of their hatred and desire for revenge. (Ansart, 2002: 15-16, my translation)

Brown also speaks of the 'dethronement' of established social groups profoundly unsettled by their waning entitlement and declining cultural and economic supremacy (Brown, 2019: 162–3, 175, 177; see also Nachtwey, 2017: 137–8; Kelly, 2020: 6). As Eva Illouz explains along similar lines, *ressentiment* has become 'a key emotional idiom of capitalist democracies because it is provoked by loss of power, real or imagined - a loss of power that is all the more unacceptable because it coexists

with norms of equality' (Illouz, 2023: 93). In this sense, Cornelia Koppetsch suggests that a great deal of political *ressentiment* arises not so much from the discontent of the obvious losers of globalisation, but from 'the revolt of the established' (Koppetsch, 2017b).[3] As Illouz similarly puts it, in this form *ressentiment* 'does not derive from a sense of injustice that flows from the bottom to the top but, rather, is an affect of 'aggrieved entitlement' - that is, the wound felt by groups who claim lost privilege or denounce the privilege held by others' (Illouz, 2023: 119). In their discussion of the rise of Donald Trump and its historical roots in the responsiveness to the Ku Klux Klan, for example, Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep refer to the politics of 'power devaluation' (McVeigh and Estep, 2019: 7, 19, 56–9; McVeigh, 1999).

In many respects *ressentiment* constitutes the emotional push-back against the various workings of the civilising process as Norbert Elias understood it (Elias, 2013 [1989]; Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]; Nachtwey, 2017; van Krieken, 2024), including the shifts in status and power balances characterising all social change, but driven in particular by the dynamics of neoliberal globalisation. It is a key emotional reaction to losses or denials of power or status perceived as unjust, especially but not only if they have a long history.

One important type of victimhood for the analysis of the role of *ressentiment* in authoritarian populism, then, is that which attaches to declines in *relative* power and status. I emphasise the word 'relative' because the sense of loss can attach to a sense of decline in an absolute sense, compared to earlier levels of power and status, but it can also attach to the perception that the social situation of a formerly inferior and stigmatised social group is improving. This is what the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan refers to as 'downward jealousy', defined as 'the 'downward' emotion about others obtaining or achieving what one already has or is' (de Swaan, 1989: 260). Diana Mutz notes along similar lines for the US that there appears to be a zero-sum relationship between anti-black and anti-white bias: that is, a reduction in anti-black bias is experienced by white Americans as an increase in anti-white bias (Mutz, 2018: E4332). The proposition that 'black lives matter', for example, has been framed as equivalent to asserting that white lives do not.

The issue can also be the *possibility* of an ongoing process of a loss of status and power: in relation to the result of the 2016 US election, for example, Mutz argues that it should be interpreted not as an outcome of *actual* changes in status among formerly privileged groups, but in terms of anxiety about their *future* status (Mutz, 2018: E4338). The election of Donald Trump, writes Mutz, 'was an effort by members of

[3] I am aware of the concerns that have been expressed in relation to academic honesty issues surrounding aspects of Koppetsch's work, but I do not regard them as relevant for the validity of her arguments in this context.

already dominant groups to assure their continued dominance and by those in an already powerful and wealthy country to assure its continued dominance' (Mutz, 2018: E4338; see also Remley, 2019).

The argument I will be developing in this paper is that our understanding of the dynamics of 'dethronement' and 'power devaluation' can usefully be enhanced by reflecting on the interaction between two aspects of Elias's thought: first, his conception of the 'drag effect' in the relationship between social habitus and shifts in social structure, alongside Bourdieu's related concept of the hysteresis effect; and, second, Elias's analysis of the dynamics of established–outsider relations, at both an intra-nation and an inter-nation level—with a particular focus on the turn to National Socialism in 1930s Germany. The fact that changes in habitus lag behind changes in social conditions constitutes an ever-present structural driver of social discontent and a constant source of *ressentiment* in relation to ongoing social change, especially among those who feel they have some power or status to lose, making authoritarian populism a manifestation of long-term structural changes and their related implications for everyday habitus, emotional disposition and mentality (Rommel, 2017).

Hysteresis/drag effect

Before discussing Elias's concept of 'drag' in the relationship between habitus and social conditions, it will be helpful to outline briefly, by way of background, Pierre Bourdieu's earlier discussion of the hysteresis or 'Don Quixote' effect. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu notes that 'necessarily implied in the logic of the constitution of habitus' (1977: 78) there is a *hysteresis* effect, by which he means the imperfect match between a particular habitus constituted originally under one set of field conditions and the field conditions prevailing at a later point in time. The term hysteresis is a scientific term referring to the mismatch that can emerge between elements that have been coordinated, which Bourdieu applies to the relationship between habitus and field, and how it changes over time (Hardy, 2013). Habitus and field are certainly mutually constitutive, but habitus 'is not necessarily adapted to its situation nor necessarily coherent' (Bourdieu, 2000 [1997]: 160). Although he does not say this in so many words, his underlying conception is clearly that the fields within which any habitus exists necessarily change a great deal faster than habitus. He notes 'the frequently observed incapacity to think historical crises in categories of perception and thought other than those of the past' (1977: 83), and highlights the tendency for individuals to be animated by 'durable dispositions that can outlive the economic and social conditions in which they were produced' (1990 [1980]: 62).
The fit between habitus and field is especially difficult during times of crisis or especially rapid social change, especially, writes Bourdieu, 'those seen at the time of abrupt encounters between civilizations linked to the colonial situation or too-rapid

movements in social space' (2000 [1997]: 161), in which the tendency to attempt to maintain the dispositions that served well previously renders them dysfunctional in the new established order. However, given the ubiquity of change, hysteresis is in fact a necessary aspect of the ageing process. It characterises, Bourdieu observes, the conflictual relationship between generations, in that the differing 'modes of generation' of habitus from one generation to the next, which, 'in imposing different definitions of the impossible, the possible, and the probable, cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa' (1977: 78). He also terms it the 'Don Quixote effect' (2000 [1997]: 160), to capture those situations where 'dispositions are out of line with the field and with the 'collective expectations' which are constitutive of its normality' (2000 [1997]: 160).[4]

Apart from generational conflict, Bourdieu's examples include—following the Don Quixote example—the 'countless examples of aristocracies, unwilling or unable to derogate *(noblesse oblige),* who allowed their privilege to turn into a handicap in the competition with less advantaged groups' (2000 [1997]: 162), and also the migrant experience of retaining childhood modes of family life and social interaction ill-suited to the new cultural context. His ethnographic work in Algeria also illustrated the operation of the hysteresis effect, with the profound changes brought about by both French colonial rule and its removal also requiring equally significant changes in habitus that would take much longer to be realised. The transformation of the French academic field after 1968 was another important example, where the rapid increase in student enrolments generated a concerted defence among senior university staff of established behavioural codes, norms and habitus that had previously been simply taken for granted (Bourdieu, 1988 [1984]). Indeed, Bourdieu frames his move from philosophy to social science—a move that he thought was made possible by Lévi-Strauss's 'rehabilitation of ethnology', 'without stooping too low'—in terms of his own particular mode of countering the hysteresis effect. He saw it as his attempt 'to gain rational control over the disappointment felt by an "oblate" faced with the annihilation of the truths and values to which he was destined and dedicated, rather than take refuge in feelings of self-destructive resentment' (1988 [1984]: xxvi). As Cheryl Hardy points out, most of the many and varied examples of social suffering examined in Bourdieu's *The Weight of the World* (1999 [1993])—differing generations of Algerian families in Paris, ageing working-class couples experiencing double hysteresis (in relation both to the cultural changes surrounding them and the changes

[4] Bourdieu refers here to Marx, who uses Cervantes's portrayal of Don Quixote as an example of figures who have to learn that behavioural codes need to change along with surrounding social and economic conditions: Capital Vol. 1, 'Then there is Don Quixote, who long ago paid a high price for making the mistake of believing knight errantry to be equally compatible with all economic forms of society' (Marx, 2024 [1867]: 58).

in the economic field), younger individuals finding that their educational choices are not keeping up with changes in the occupational field—can be understood as underpinned by hysteresis effects. Even those individuals who manage to keep their habitus in synch with their surrounding field experience another kind of hysteresis, a dislocation from their originating community and kinship network. The hysteresis effect is structural, driven by the differing time frames of changes in social and economic structure and in habitus. We are all, it seems, with only the occasional exception, Don Quixote in one way or another.[5]

Elias – the drag effect

Throughout most of Elias's work, one gets the impression that he saw the developmental processes at the level of the state and society (sociogenesis) and the form taken by individual behavioural codes and norms, or human habitus (psychogenesis), as mutually constitutive and closely interwoven with each other. In other words, he saw *habitus* as changing more or less in step with changes in the structuring of social relations; in his words, 'the psychological habitus of individuals and the structure of a society at a given time correspond to each other and change with each other' (Elias, 2010 [1939]: 39). Historical changes in *habitus* are to be explained in terms of changes in social structure, and conversely changes in social structure are assumed to generate more or less 'corresponding changes in the structure of the psychological habitus' (Elias, 2012 [1939]: 405).[6]

In his 1987 essay, 'Changes in the We-I balance' (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 137-208), however, Elias introduces a very different conception of the relationship between habitus and social change, highlighting, along similar lines to Bourdieu's account, the lag between individual and social change, in which human emotional disposition and habitus are much slower to change than broader structural social changes. As Elias puts it:

[5] For a very important discussion of Bourdieu's hysteresis/Don Quixote effect in relation to nationalism, see Sieczka, 2025. Sieczka's argument runs along slightly different tracks to mine here, examining the dynamics of a 'cleft' national habitus, in which populist politics can be understood as the pursuit of a 'purification' of national habitus, as well as discussing the connections with Elias's conception of national habitus. There is significant potential to connect Sieczka's discussion with the culture/civilisation distinction, but there is not the space to do that here.

[6] 'If relatively independent social functions are increasingly replaced by dependent ones in society — for example, free knights by courtly knights and finally courtiers, or relatively independent merchants by dependent merchants and employees — the moulding of affects, the structure of drives and thinking, in short the whole sociogenetic habitus structure and the social attitudes of people are necessarily changed at the same time.' (Elias 2012 [1939]: 304)

> ...the dynamic of unplanned social processes tends to advance beyond a given stage towards another, which may be higher or lower, while the people affected by this change cling to the earlier stage in their personality structure, their social habitus. It depends entirely on the relative strength of the social shift and the deep-rootedness and therefore the resistance of the social habitus whether – and how quickly – the dynamic of the unplanned social process brings about a more or less radical restructuring of this habitus, or whether the social habitus of individuals successfully opposes the social dynamic, either by slowing it down or blocking it entirely. (p. 189)

Referring in particular to the processes of state formation and globalisation by which smaller survival units gradually become absorbed into larger units as 'integration processes', he suggests that those processes develop at a 'relatively rapid' rate, compared to which 'the pace of the corresponding change in the social habitus of the individuals concerned is extraordinarily slow', since '[t]he social personality structures of individuals, including I- and we-images, are relatively durable' (2010 [1987]: 191), and 'the we-identity of most people lags behind the reality of the integration actually achieved' (p. 203). He argues that it takes around three generations for habitus properly to catch up with more significant shifts in social structure, especially the shift in the balance between we- and I-identity towards the latter.

He suggests that there are three possible modes of working through the drag effect in relation to ever-advancing state formation: (a) preserving the older habitus isolated from radically altered social conditions; (b) renouncing it altogether; or (c) what he terms 'the encapsulation of an older, pre-state society within a large state society which is so powerful and self-confident that it can tolerate such encapsulated earlier societies in its midst' (p. 192). He gives as an example of encapsulation the North American Christian sects like the Hutterites in Canada and the northern United States.[7] Another striking example Elias gives is the American Mafia, in which the kin group continues to function as the primary survival unit. In the Mafia, the kinship network retains its survival function in comparison to the state, countering the latter's claim to the monopoly on violence and taxation (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 193). In the Mafia, the originally feudal forms of extended familial sociability had a 'higher survival value' in Sicily, its country of origin, and this continued to be true in the United States, where they 'reappear in a less structured form in keeping with the

[7] One can assume that Elias would here also include the Amish and the Mennonites, with the divisions in each community driven by the extent to which the older habitus is seen as capable of adjustment to new social conditions, especially those related to technology, such as electricity, the motor car, telephones, radios or new agricultural tools and methods.

urban and state conditions and as a result of being forced into criminality' (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 193).[8]

Against this background, Elias notes that an 'impressive' example of the drag effect is nationalism in Western Europe, where a gradual loss of functions for the nation-state within the formation of supranational and transnational structures has not been accompanied by a corresponding change in the attachment to national identity at the level of social habitus. As he explains, 'the social habitus pertaining to the nation state and the we-image and we-ideal associated with it have a meaning of their own.' He sees the form taken by national character as 'an ossifying of human attitudes that remains initially quite unmoved by changes in social reality' (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 197). The social habitus, 'we-image' and 'we-ideal' associated with the nation-state have, he observes, 'a durability which can prevent them from continuing to develop in step with social development towards a higher level of integration' (Elias, 2010 [1987]: 197).

At times he suggests that these integration conflicts will eventually die down, taking at least three, and sometimes more, generations, 'before the image of the greater past, as something to which one ought to live up, ceases to bother the living generations' (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 294). However, there is no necessary reason why they should die down, as demonstrated by his Christian sects and Mafia examples. One reason why they are less likely simply to dissipate can be found in another part of his work, his theory of established–outsider relations, when the 'established' group is the entire nation. If a drag effect is also perceived and experienced as a disruption of established–outsider power relations between nations, this makes it more persistent and gives it a very particular quality which can be seen as underpinning the development of authoritarian populist politics.

Established–outsider relations and their vicissitudes

[8] Elias also mentions the example of the North American Indians, whose habitus he describes as having outlived the disappearance of '[a]lmost all the natural and social conditions that had shaped their social structure', resulting in 'the fossilisation of the social habitus of these people within their island-like reservations' (p. 190). He also refers to the transition from tribes to states as survival units in contexts like Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania and Uganda, with 'the attunement of social habitus to the traditional tribal plane' constituting the primary source of resistance to 'the social process urging people towards integration on the state plane' (p. 191). We should note here that this formulation is at odds with Elias's argument elsewhere against the use of the concept 'tribe' and his stated preference for seeing the salient survival unit as the 'village state' (Reicher et al., 2022; van Krieken, 2026: 8-9). There are also too many questions that this understanding of colonial relationships raises to be addressed adequately in the space available here, but we can note that they point to limitations of the concept of 'drag' that do deserve considered attention.

The concept of the drag, hysteresis or Don Quixote effect becomes particularly significant when placed in the context of Norbert Elias and John Scotson's conception of the structuring of all human groups into an 'established–outsider' figuration (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]), where inclusion in a social group that sees itself as established and superior is defined in terms of the exclusion and stigmatisation of some other group represented by the established as inferior outsiders, a figuration characterised by particular types of power dynamics. The established–outsider figuration is based on 'the inherently double-edged character of social norms, to the fact that they bind people to each other and at the same time turn people so bound against others' (Elias, 2012 [1939]: 174).[9]

Elias and Scotson's analysis outlines the various ways in which this power dynamic operates, through the disparity in assets and resources and gossip structured in terms of praise (for the established) and blame (for the outsiders). The representations of the established are configured around group charisma, in which the group's characteristics are defined in terms of foregrounding the 'best' members of the group, whereas the representations of the outsiders are configured around foregrounding their 'worst' members. Although their analysis proceeds in terms of established/outsiders, it applies equally to superior/inferior dynamics of power and status; as Elias explains, the regularity in established–outsider relations is that 'the more powerful of the established read off the we-image of their own group from the minority of the best, and the they-image of the despised outsiders from the minority of the worst' (Elias, 2013 [1984]: 45).

There are various reasons why shifts in the power and status relations between the established and outsiders are an ever-present feature of social life. First, Elias points out that integration/civilising processes are always accompanied by disintegration/decivilising processes. There are, then, always significant social, political and economic structural factors which provide fertile ground for authoritarian populism. Theodor Adorno, for example, referred in 1967 to the constant threat, if not the reality, of downward social mobility, especially among the middle class, who 'want to cling to, and possibly reinforce, their privileges and social status' (Adorno, 2020 [1967]: 4), and the precarity of national identity in a globalised world divided into hegemonic blocs. He gave particular attention to the position of European national agricultural communities within the then-EEC, noting that farmers were in a constant state of crisis, and that 'until the agricultural problem is solved in a radical way, one that is not artificial and based on subsidy and problematic in itself, until a sensible and rational collectivization of agriculture is achieved, this virulent breeding-ground will remain fertile' (Adorno, 2020 [1967]: 6). The forces underpinning the feeling of individual powerlessness and the need to defend against

[9] See also Robert Goodin's (1996) discussion of the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion.

the shame that produces are constantly shifting and renewing themselves—old economic forms thought to have been left behind reappear in new guises; tourism, migration, demographic shifts and voracious real estate developers are constantly changing the urban landscape, and the technological environment one has to learn how to master is increasingly complex, transforming what it means to be a functioning human being at ever-increasing rates of change (Rosa, 2013).

Central to the internalised perceptions of superiority and inferiority driving human conduct and relationships is a powerful moral, value dimension, so that any shift in relative power and status is experienced by the established/superior group as an insult to their self-worth and a gross injustice, 'humiliating and intolerable', especially, notes Elias, while it is still widely known what the relations of superiority and inferiority looked like in the past (Elias, 2013 [1984]: 43). The key to whether we're talking about an established group rancorous about an actual, imagined or anticipated decline in status is the degree of nostalgia and a concern for restoration of past social forms. Upwardly mobile groups, by definition, do not look to the past; they look to a future where their status is better than it is today—it is groups in decline who look to the past. This makes any improvement in the status of an outsider group a harm inflicted on the established group, generating a feeling of moral decline, slipping standards, the decline of civilisation, a lack of sufficient recognition and respect, of being 'unheard', making them victims in search of perpetrators, requiring rectification.

In her analysis of the AfD (Alternative für Deutschland) party in Germany, Cornelia Koppetsch notes that right-wing populism is underpinned by both the 'drag' effect in relation to structural change more broadly and the reaction among established groups against shifts in relative power and status balances, involving either a decline in status for an established/dominant group or an improvement in the status of outsider/subordinate groups. As she puts it, 'the neuralgic point at which right-wing anger ignites is the fact that the social position previously guaranteed by specific affiliations has begun to falter in relation to rising outsider groups' (Koppetsch, 2017b: 12, my translation). The protests characterising authoritarian populism can thus be understood, as Koppetsch observes, as 'coping strategies for social loss of status and experiences of devaluation' (Koppetsch, 2017a: 209, my translation). The rhetoric of the AfD also displays, as Inken Rommel points out, the logic of established–outsider relations outlined by Elias and Scotson, 'emphasising coherence on the inside and insuperable differences to the outside of their alleged group' (Rommel, 2017: 138).

Koppetsch goes on to emphasise that also important here, in addition to the dual power relationship between the established and outsiders, is the role of a third actor: the political elite and the state. Established social groups see the role of the political

establishment as maintaining existing power and status relations and feel intensely aggrieved—indeed, betrayed—when they appear to be encouraging the process of social, economic and cultural change underpinning changes in those relations, disadvantaging the established, and appear to give preference to the outsiders (Koppetsch, 2017a: 224). As Sophie Kaldor has observed in her study of three major far-right manifestos—Anders Behring Breivik's *2083: A Declaration of European Independence*, Brenton Tarrant's *The Great Replacement* and Patrick Crusius' *The Inconvenient Truth*—although these authors frame immigration as a central aspect of their actual or threatened status decline, their anger is directed primarily at the political elites whom they perceive as orchestrating a deliberate plan to bring about that decline in their power and status (Kaldor, 2021). The tendency towards authoritarian populism that Adorno highlighted in the 1950s and 1960s continues to follow a similar logic of displacement, in that the group's feeling that their status and privilege is or might be declining leads them to 'lay the blame for their own potential downgrading not on the apparatus that causes it, but on those who were critical towards the system in which they once had a status, at least in a traditional sense' (Adorno, 2020 [1967]: 4).

Intra-nation established–outsider relations

An important dimension of Elias's account is that the perception and experience of being 'established' operates both *within* the nation to encompass all the various groupings within it, including classes, educational levels, geographic location, religion, gender, ethnicity, and 'race', and at the level of *the nation as a whole* in relation to other nations.[10] As Oliver Nachtwey puts it, 'Elias had two dimensions in mind: first, the rise and fall of groups within a state; second, the position of countries in the global system' (2017: 137). A useful example of the dynamics of 'revolts of the established' within a nation is that of the three periods of Ku Klux Klan (KKK) activity – the 1870s Reconstruction Klan, the 1920s post-women's-suffrage Klan, and the 1960s anti-Civil Rights Klan. For Elias, the KKK was an important illustration of the response of established groups to a decline in their relative power and status:

> The American Ku Klux Klan demonstrates the deep resentment that can arise in members of a majority, especially those who feel threatened in their own status, injured and insecure in their feelings of self- worth. They are particularly threatened when a socially inferior, despised and stigmatized outsider group is in the process of demanding not only legal but social equality, when its members

[10] So far there is no 'outsider' group to 'humanity', with the possible exception of the natural environment, suggesting that the response to the challenges posed by global warming can also be understood in terms of a shift in the relative power and status of human beings and their natural environment, towards the latter.

> begin to take up positions in the majority society that were previously closed to them, and thus come into direct competition with members of the majority, and when they perhaps even move into positions which give the despised people higher status and greater power opportunities than those of the insecure lower-status groups of the established. (Elias, 2013 [1984]: 42)

As McVeigh and Estep observe along similar lines, all three Klans 'were rebellions carried out by those in danger of losing privileges they enjoyed at the expense of others in American society' (McVeigh and Estep, 2019: 44), examples of what they term 'power devaluation' among established social groups (McVeigh and Estep, 2019: 19).

The 1870s Reconstruction Klan (formed in 1865) was driven by anxiety about Black emancipation, an anxiety that was systematically translated into various forms of violence drawing on the skills they had acquired as soldiers during the Civil War, directed at any and all Black Americans who failed to retain the deference of slaves, and any White Americans who dared to speak of equal rights. As Elaine Parsons emphasises, the various smaller groups that coalesced as the Ku-Klux Klan became 'the most widely proliferated and deadly domestic terrorist movement in the history of the United States'. Between 1866 and 1871:

> ….men calling themselves 'Ku-klux' killed hundreds of black Southerners and their white supporters, sexually molested hundreds of black women and men, drove thousands of black families from their homes and thousands of black men and women from their employment, and appropriated land, crops, guns, livestock and food from black Southerners on a massive scale. (Parsons, 2015: 6)

It had collapsed by the late 1870s, but only because the newly-introduced Jim Crow laws in the Southern States achieved most of its aims in any case (Parsons, 2015: 24-5).

The resurgence of the KKK in the 1920s was connected with a number of structural shifts taking place in the US economy, polity and society, including women's suffrage (1920, 19th Amendment) and women entering the workforce, the expansion and consolidation of industrial capitalism, agricultural decline, and the level of immigration, especially of Catholics and Jews from southern and eastern Europe. As McVeigh and Estep note, in this period 'the Klan capitalized on the anger and frustration of the middle-class when significant changes in American society undermined their economic power, political influence, and social status,' leading millions to turn to the Klan to attempt to reverse their decline (McVeigh and Estep, 2019: 7). Again, the Klan declined at the point of the 1924 election of Calvin Coolidge, when its members felt they had achieved victory; McVeigh cites a Klan leader

declaring in 1925: 'From Maine to California, from Kentucky to Minnesota, native-born Americans who have high standards of Americanism and personal rectitude of life were swept into office' (McVeigh, 1999: 1492).

The 1960s Klan consisted of white Americans responding to the improving position of African Americans through the gradual weakening of Jim Crow laws, the expansion of civil rights (Voting Rights Act 1965), and the legal enforcement of school desegregation following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision, constructed as yet another devious Communist plot to undermine American society. The tactics pursued were a return to organised violence and intimidation. McVeigh and Estep suggest that currently the dynamics of Trump's appeal to sections of the US population are analogous to those of extensive support for the KKK in these three periods (McVeigh and Estep, 2019: 13), and the same point would apply for right-wing populist movements more broadly.

An important characteristic of this period was Richard Nixon's introduction of the now-pervasive rhetoric of 'the silent majority' or its equivalent, which functions to render a sense of ressentimental victimhood at the hands of liberals and the highly educated a central element of the identity of large sections of the US population, who see and experience themselves as oppressed by the tyranny of the (liberal) minority (Engels, 2010, 2015; Perlstein, 2008). Similar challenges to the dominance of established social groups are constantly recurring, revolving around varying aspects of ongoing processes of social, demographic and technological change, globalisation, neoliberalisation, and functional democratisation, or what Elias would term the civilising process. The threats to those groups who see themselves as 'winners' in relation to inequality are never-ending, and thus function as an infinite source of possible forms of ressentiment. Oliver Nachtwey (2017) frames, then, the global development of capitalism since the 1970s as 'regressive modernisation', characterised by an ever-increasing precarity in multiple forms of status relationships.

Inter-nation established–outsider relations

With respect to national identity and inter-nation relations, it is worth noting here the extent to which the idea, mythology and imagery characterising the 'we-identity' of 'the nation' is organised around a ressentimental sense of victimhood. Nationalism is by definition underpinned by the concern to establish or re-establish power, status and honour relative to other nations, and thus is both a driver of, and driven by, ressentiment. As Liah Greenfeld (1992) argues, central to English, French, Russian, German and American nationalism has been ressentiment directed towards other nations about some past military or strategic defeat (or the repeated celebration of a

victory), political humiliation, or dependency.[11] Greenfeld observes, for example, that support for the American revolution among volunteers like Lafayette and Ségur was animated by 'a desire to repair the affronts of the last wars' (1992: 181).

Ernest Renan is possibly best known for his remark that for the purposes of nation formation, 'it is good for everyone to know how to forget' (1990 [1882]: 16), but he also thought that a particular kind of memory was equally important. Rather than mere common customs and shared borders, more significant was 'the fact of sharing, in the past, a glorious heritage and regrets, and of having, in the future, [a shared] programme to put into effect, or the fact of having suffered, enjoyed, and hoped together' (p. 19). Suffering, in particular, notes Renan, 'unifies more than joy does', and 'griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort' (p. 19). Nations are, following Renan's observation, to a large extent 'victim communities' (Jaffe, 1991), held together by some sacred narrative of shared suffering, loss, trauma, or unjust deprivation of sacred territory or status, struggled against by exemplary figures whose martyred identity serves as a model of what it means to be 'established' for the rising generations.

Elias's account adds to this analysis an emphasis on the tight relationship between national honour, status and prestige, and the individual sense of self-worth. Nations are experienced by their members, Elias argues, as representatives of themselves, making a nationalist ethos 'a form of self-love' (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 165), and making nationalism an 'archetypical formation of "established" identity' (van Krieken, 2024: 25). This means that a decline of power and status at the level of relations between nations is experienced as humiliation and injury at a similar level to individual experience. Whether there is any substance to the conception of a decline in relative national status is in fact irrelevant: as Adorno observes in relation to the ideology of nationalism in the context of globalisation, 'it is very often the case that convictions and ideologies take on their demonic, their genuinely destructive character precisely when the objective situation has deprived them of substance' (Adorno, 2020 [1967]: 5). 'Declining national power and status' comes to stand in for (represent) the real sources of discontent – increasing inequality and precarity, collapse of state functions, badly managed immigration, and so on.

Elias draws on this point in his observations relating to the case of Germany in analysing the turn to fascism in the 1930s, when he suggests that people 'experience the descent of their nation from the highest to a secondary position in the global power and status hierarchy of states as a fall from grace, as a lowering of their own human value' (Elias, 2007 [1987]: 10). As a result:

[11] In relation to Russia, see also Malinova 2014 and Stephenson 2019.

> Their self-love suffers. The loss of power is tacitly experienced as a loss of their value as human beings. As their pattern of self-restraint was formerly sustained and rewarded by the narcissistic enjoyment of their nation's power and pride, a decline in power can easily lead to a loosening of restraint. The lessening of a people's love for itself which before had a strong integrating function may turn into self-denigration if not self- hatred. For a while, a people's mourning for past greatness can thus have a de-civilizing effect. (Elias, 2007 [1987]: 10)

Elias says 'for a while', because he considers it possible for some adjustment to the decline in national status to take place.

Although he does not refer to it as resulting from a drag effect, an important counter-example given by Elias, leading to different outcomes, is that of declining national we-images and we-ideals, when members of a nation may 'suffer for centuries because the group charismatic we-ideal, modelled on an idealized image of themselves in the days of their greatness, lingers on for many generations as a model they feel they ought to live up to, without being able to do so' (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]: 28). The dream, or rather fantasy, of national superiority can be kept alive 'through the teaching of history, the old buildings, masterpieces of the nation in the time of its glory, or through new achievements which seemingly confirm the greatness of the past'. This dynamic of 'unresolved drag' can develop in one of two ways – first, as a means of navigating present conditions with national self-esteem intact, if a little deluded, such that it provides useful survival value. Second, as 'a group strategy in pursuit of a fantasy image of one's own greatness that may lead to self-destruction as well as to destruction of other interdependent groups' (Elias and Scotson, 2008 [1965]: 28). In discussing the German case, he explains that if the decline is slow, intermittent or at times ambiguous, if it 'never goes far enough to compel recognition, never reaches a point where it has to be faced,' the result is that 'the symptoms of a profound status-insecurity may sink deep into the make-up of its members and permeate its whole belief and behaviour tradition' (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 285). A third possibility is some combination of the two, and one can see the many forms of authoritarian populism as falling into this category – not exactly self-destructive, but responding to dysfunctions in existing social conditions as they have unfolded over many decades in ways that exacerbate rather than resolve those dysfunctions.

This dynamic is not at all restricted to Germany in the 1930s; it is a general one, observable in a number of recent lines of development, including, of course – but not restricted to – Brexit and the US 'Make America Great Again' movement. The transnational competitive dynamics of ever-shifting processes of globalisation continue to be fertile ground for the ongoing production of grievance about national status and a sense of a need to 'make us great again'. Diana Mutz notes that the

realisation that globalisation no longer works to US advantage, the increasing interdependence of the US with the rest of the world and the decline of US global dominance in all areas except the military were all important factors in the sense of overall decline among those who supported Donald Trump in 2016.[12] In relation to the Brexit example, Craig Calhoun emphasises that, on the whole, support for Brexit was more expressive than an instrumental effort to secure any particular outcome, animated by 'hope that a vanishing way of life could be saved and a proud national identity celebrated' (2017: 58). Dunning and Hughes comment along similar lines that a decisive role was played by 'the enduring sense of decline, of post-colonial impotence, of growing insignificance, of nostalgia for a once glorious past' (Dunning and Hughes, 2020: 285–6). An important dimension of the shifts in collective feelings that has taken place in the growth of right-wing populism, then, has been the question of the restoration of national honour, and the ways in which individual feelings of shame and ressentiment became interwoven with the perceived honour of the nation as a whole.

Conclusion

The analyses of authoritarian populism that draw on the concept of ressentiment as one of its essential foundations can usefully be developed, then, by drawing on these aspects of Elias's thought. Authoritarian populism can be understood as lying at the intersection point of the three dynamics discussed by Elias: (a) the drag or hysteresis effect characterising all social change, (b) volatility in established–outsider power and status relations, inevitably involving some loss of power and status among some groups, and (c) volatility in the established–outsider power and status relations between nations – real and imagined – generating possible perceptions of loss of relative national status and honour requiring rectification to restore ancient glories so as to 'make us great again'. Both the drag effect and the logic of shifting established–outsider relations within and across nations are central to the ways in which ressentiment constitutes the emotional 'fuel' for authoritarian populism.

What is also brought more clearly to the surface in Elias's approach to these topics, with, in turn, significant implications for a central element of the concept of ressentiment, is the resulting tendency towards value-inversion or transvaluation. Elias notes that this emotional dynamic will tend to generate the kind of moral transvaluation (not his term) that lies at the heart of ressentiment, observing that the defence of a superior status will tend to rely on breaching the very values on which that status is meant to be based. As Elias elaborates:

[12] See Alikhani & Droste's (2021) use of Elias and Scotson's established–outsider framework to discuss the decline in US 'group charisma' in relation to the appeal of Donald Trump's 'make America great again' concept. See also Hochschild 2016.

> Members of more powerful social formations are willing to fight when their power is slipping away from them, and frequently under such circumstances no means is too rough or barbaric for them, because their power and their image of themselves as a great and splendid formation has a higher value for them than their lives. And the weaker, the more insecure and desperate they become on the road to their decline, the more they develop the sense that they are fighting for their supremacy with their backs against the wall, the more savage for the most part does their behaviour become and the more acute the danger that they will disregard and destroy the civilized standards of conduct on which they pride themselves. That is because, whatever other functions they may serve, civilized standards of conduct are often only meaningful for ruling groups as long as they remain symbols and instruments of their power. (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 284)

When their backs are to the wall, writes Elias, the champions of civilisation 'easily become the greatest destroyers of civilization' (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 284). In order to avoid this danger, both our theory and practice will be significantly improved by incorporating these aspects of Elias's work – his analysis of the drag effect, and the development of his established-outsider relations theory to include shifting power and status relations within and across nations. The problem with using concepts like 'losers of globalisation' to understand populist politics is that it assumes that the categories 'loser' and 'winner' are relatively stable and unambiguous. In contrast, the emphasis in Elias's account of established-outsider relations is on their development over time, on their potential volatility, and on the dynamics of established groups being subjected to a loss of relative status and power. If today's 'losers' were once 'winners', this makes it important to approach the more potent and virulent forms of authoritarian populism precisely as a 'revolt of the established'.

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