

Habitus, the Writings of Irish Hunger Strikers and Elias's 'The Loneliness of the Dying'

Connolly, John; Dolan, Paddy

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John Connolly & Paddy Dolan:

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Habitus, the Writings of Irish Hunger Strikers and Elias's *The Loneliness of the Dying*

John Connolly & Paddy Dolan*

Abstract: »*Habitus, die Texte der irischen Hungerstreikenden und Elias' 'Die Einsamkeit der Sterbenden'*«. Elias maintained that over the course of several centuries death has become associated with greater shame and embarrassment feelings due mainly to four interwoven processes. In this paper we consider how these specific processes or 'special conditions' Elias referred to, in conjunction with other processes, shaped the experience of dying and the image of death for twentieth century Irish hunger strikers.

Keywords: Habitus, Hunger strikes, Dying, Elias, Ireland.

1. Introduction

A considerable body of work has addressed the subject of hunger striking historically and sociologically (see for example Yuill 2007, Mulcahy 1995, O'Malley 1990, Flynn 2011, Dingley and Mollica 2007, Waismel-Manor 2005, Miller 2016). In this paper we draw on the work of Norbert Elias (2012 [1939], 2012 [1970], 2010a [1979]) and the theoretical frame of figurational sociology associated with him to partially explore the issue. Our focus though is not in explaining and documenting how and why particular hunger strikes took place or the motivations of the individuals involved in an empirical-theoretical sense. Rather, we are interested in how dying, or the risk of dying, is experienced by those on hunger strike within the context of wider civilising processes. And while our analysis and discussion is shaped by the overarching frame of figurational sociology, particular emphasis is given to the ideas and reflections Elias expressed in *The Loneliness of the Dying*. Here Elias reflected on changes wrought in how death is experienced and treated by both the dying and those around them as a consequence of a long-term civilising process in several European societies. Essentially Elias argued that during this civilising process people's attitudes to death and dying underwent considerable directional change. Notably, dying and death became increasingly pushed behind the scenes and progressively associated with feelings of repugnance, shame and

* John Connolly, DCUBS, Dublin City University, Ireland; john.connolly@dcu.ie.
Paddy Dolan, School of Languages, Law and Social Sciences, Dublin Institute of Technology, Ireland; paddy.dolan@dit.ie.

embarrassment. Consequently, this paper explores how aspects of these civilising changes found expression in the habitus of hunger strikers in Ireland¹ in the twentieth century.

2. Empirical Setting and Data

Data is primarily based on the autobiographical notes and reflections of two Irish hunger strikers: Frank Gallagher who undertook a hunger strike in 1920, and survived; and Bobby Sands who went on hunger strike in 1981, and who died as a result. Before giving a fuller account of their personal lives and the social context in which the hunger strikes took place, it is perhaps important to offer some detail of the special significance of hunger striking in Ireland. Certainly, the concept of hunger striking is not unique to Ireland. However, there has been a long tradition of hunger striking as a political, and even military, strategy within wider socio-political conflicts in Ireland with hunger strikes taking place in every decade of the twentieth century (Healy 1982, Sweeney 1993).

As noted, while our data is based mainly on the autobiographical writings of two hunger strikers it was supplemented by the writings of other Irish hunger strikers and socio-historical material concerning the wider context in which the hunger strikes took place. The social climate in which both men went on hunger strike concerned British governance and political control in Ireland and the efforts of militant groups to challenge this and establish an independent state. Gallagher's hunger strike took place when the British monopoly of violence (which was never complete) broke down (1919-1921) with open warfare between British military forces and Irish militant groups seeking independence. It was this conflict which ultimately led to the formation of an independent Irish state (known as the Irish Free State) and simultaneously the partition of Ireland. The six north-eastern counties (Ireland is comprised of 32 counties) remained under the jurisdiction of Britain following the war and a treaty (the latter the outcome of negotiations between British and Irish representatives following a truce in hostilities in 1921). The treaty led to a bitter civil war in Ireland (1922-1923) with those supportive of the treaty (partition was enshrined within it²) prevailing. Frank Gallagher was involved in both conflicts – on the anti-treaty side during the civil war when he was also jailed.

The diary of Frank Gallagher was first published in 1928 as *Days of Fear*, and concern the nine days of his incarceration and experience of his hunger

¹ We use the term Ireland to refer to the whole island.

² Many on the pro-treaty side also opposed partition but they saw the formation of an independent Irish state as a stepping stone to a united independent state at some point in the relatively near future.

strike which began on April 5, 1920. Of lower middle-class stock, Gallagher was born in 1893 in the very south of the country. He went on to become a journalist and joined one of the more militarist groups (the Irish Volunteers which later morphed into the Irish Republican Army) comprising the Irish nationalist movement in 1917. His involvement eventually led to his imprisonment by the British authorities in Ireland and his subsequent hunger strike. Gallagher survived this and, indeed, the military conflicts which followed to later become the editor of a national newspaper and later a senior state employee (Walker 1992).

We also examined the diaries/notes of Bobby Sands, who along with nine others, died on hunger strike in 1981. Sands wrote notes of the first 17 days of what became a 66 day hunger-strike which ended in his death. The notes were smuggled out of the prison and subsequently transformed into a short book, *The diary of Bobby Sands* (published in 1981). We also analysed earlier letters and notes which Sands wrote during his incarceration in the late 1970s during what were called the ‘blanket’ and ‘dirty’ protests. They were published (circa 1982) as a short book titled *One Day in My Life*. As we demonstrate later, reflections that appeared in *One Day in My Life* help illustrate changes in relation to the image of death and the gradual effect of brutalisation processes on the habitus. Bobby Sands was born into a working-class family in 1954 in Belfast, County Antrim (Bishop and Mallie 1988) – one of the six counties which remained under British jurisdiction. While the six counties was renamed Northern Ireland, the territory was (and is) euphemistically referred to as ‘the North’ by many people in Ireland. The boundary of the territory of Northern Ireland was specifically selected to ensure a unionist (those in favour of the union with Britain) majority. So while a majority (mainly protestant in religious orientation) of those living there favoured the union with Britain, a significant minority (mainly catholic) identified with the independent Irish state and the desire for a ‘united’ Ireland. Their position was also supported by many within the newly independent Irish state. Consequently, in the decades that followed partition militant nationalists, namely the Irish Republican Army (IRA) continued to use violence against the authorities in Northern Ireland loyal to the union with Britain, in their belief that it was a means of reuniting Ireland. So while both the newly independent Irish state³ and the authorities in the North gradually established an effective monopoly over violence, it was fragile and never complete right through to the 1960s. Furthermore, both the legitimacy, and the effectiveness, of the state monopoly of violence differed significantly between each territory. Large sections of the population in the North never strongly identified with the ‘Northern Ireland’ state. Indeed, ten-

³ The IRA continued to organise and operate in the Irish Free State (the Republic of Ireland from 1949) which its members used as a base to coordinate and launch attacks on state forces in Northern Ireland and in Britain.

sions in the North escalated significantly in the late 1960s and early 1970s culminating in a demonopolisation of violence phase. It was at this time that Bobby Sands joined the IRA⁴ (in 1973). He was subsequently jailed in 1976 for 14 years for activities connected with his membership of the IRA (O'Malley 1990). In that sense the socio-political backdrops to the hunger strikes, in which both Gallagher and Sands took part, though separated by over sixty years, exhibit many similar characteristics.

3. Elias's *The Loneliness of the Dying*

While the contentions and theoretical ideas expressed by Elias within *The Loneliness of the Dying* have previously been alluded to by sociologists, it tends, as Stanley and Wise (2011, 951) suggest, to be only 'in passing and not [an] in-depth assessment'. In *The Loneliness of the Dying* Elias sought to explain how death and dying had become increasingly sequestered in the twentieth century in comparison with earlier times. Based on his previous work and the development of a theory of civilising processes, Elias (2010a [1979], 10) argues that death, and the experience of death, change during the course of a civilising process: 'Like other animalic aspects, death, both as a process and as a memory-image, is pushed more and more behind the scenes of social life during this civilising spurt'. In that sense he argues that death takes on greater shame and embarrassment feelings, with specific aspects increasingly sequestered.

Elias argues that this is particularly pronounced in contemporary society (bear in mind the *Loneliness of the Dying* was first published in 1979) owing to what he identifies as four interwoven processes or what he termed 'special features'. The first of these is *the length of individual life*. In contemporary societies the average age span of people has risen significantly in comparison to earlier times. Thus, death or the prospect of death for most people in their 20s and 30s is more remote, pushed into the distance. Death becomes 'forgotten' in a relative sense. The second special feature is *the experience of death as a final stage of a natural process*. By this Elias sought to emphasise how people in contemporary societies have come to see and experience death as an 'ordered natural process', a process facilitated by the knowledge emanating

⁴ The IRA was proscribed as an illegal organisation in both the Irish Free State in 1936 and in Northern Ireland (from 1922). Those convicted of membership and/or with activities connected with the IRA were usually given jail sentences. Within both prison systems IRA activists tended to operate as prisoners-of-war; a position generally accepted and tolerated by the prison and government authorities. Indeed the criminalisation policy introduced into the prison system in Northern Ireland in the 1970s was to eventually lead to the 1981 hunger strike.

from medical science and technological developments. Knowing that death will come at the end of a natural process greatly assuages the anxieties around dying. Advances in medical knowledge and technology help, for the majority of people, to not only postpone death but to lengthen the period of one's physical prowess. The third characteristic and one closely interwoven with the previous characteristics is the *high degree of internal pacification*. The connection here with a civilising process is clear – the development of a relatively strong and stable state monopoly of physical violence and the protection offered to people from violent death. Violent death and the risk of violence become the exception. Such conditions help transform and sustain a specific type of personality structure, one in which the image and experience of death is envisaged as relatively peaceful – one dies 'old' in one's bed. The last special condition Elias highlighted as contributing to the specific image and treatment of death in contemporary society is the *high degree of individualisation* that has advanced over the course of several centuries. This advance in individualisation and the resultant self-image connected with it, in conjunction with the other special conditions referred to, sustain the image of death in contemporary society and to its repression in human consciousness. Such a short synopsis of Elias's contentions can easily gloss over the detail and nuance within Elias's observations. He was keenly aware that even in highly pacified societies the expectation of a 'long' natural life culminating in one's death in bed is deceptive and that there remains violence and the risk of group conflicts. Indeed, he claimed that one area deserving of more attention is 'the psychological transformation undergone by people removed from a situation in which the killing of other people is strictly forbidden and heavily punished' (p.40). That to an extent is partly the focus of our paper for in the next section we consider how the special conditions Elias referred to, in conjunction with other processes, may have shaped the experience of dying and the image of death for Irish hunger strikers.

3.1 Civilising Processes and Wanting to Live and Wanting to Die

Over the course of several centuries Irish society underwent civilising processes, though not on a linear basis. People from infancy became increasingly required to curb their emotions and drives to a greater extent, to extend their capacity to look into the future and the past rather than just the present moment, and to more extensively develop what Elias (2012 [1939], 408-9) called 'the habit of connecting events in terms of chains of cause and effect'. An inability to successfully internalise these in a comprehensive manner in line with prevailing social standards could threaten a person's social existence, but also their psychic and corporeal existence. For example, since the widespread uptake of motorised vehicles children must learn, and make the connection between the series of events, that if they walk out in front of a vehicle and are struck by it they will/could die. The prevention of such an incident also re-

quires specific levels of self-restraint, which children must also learn and internalise.

Thus by the time (their mid-20s) that both Gallagher and Sands went on hunger strike a long and significant (in relation to habitus formation (Elias 2012 [1939], 128)) part of their life had occurred in which ways of extending one's life would have become deeply ingrained; and to a significant degree within the social parameters or special conditions referred to by Elias. They were socialised into expectations of a relatively long life, relatively free of the prospect of violent death, in light of state pacification processes. The habitus, and its socio-psycho-biological aspects, were directed towards living within the relative boundaries of these special conditions. We say relative in that there are significant moderations or disruptions to the special conditions or processes Elias described, which we discuss later. Nonetheless significant aspects of the special features Elias referred to had emerged in Ireland by the twentieth century. Certainly both Gallagher and Sands lived at times when average life expectancy had increased – though there are notable differences between the 1920s and 1970s. For instance, average expectancy (for men) increased from 49.6 years in 1870 to almost 58 years by 1926, increasing further to 70 years by 1981 (Fitzgerald 2016). Indeed, a deeply sedimented desire to live, within the habitus, finds clear expression in the early writings of the hunger strikers shaping their reactions during the hunger strikes. For example, early in his hunger strike Gallagher wrote:

Once or twice I wanted it [food], yearned for it, desired it with every fibre in my body; just for a second each time... Then its attraction ceased; when the mind is made up it is easy.... Noticed in yesterday's papers that some French journalist spoke of our "pangs of hunger."... Nobody would ever believe that there are none There is revulsion at death, a wild longing to live ... but no physical call for food.... That ceased on the second day.... Now tastes and smells are pleasant to think of, but mean nothing If the mind took the fast as quietly as the body does, the whole thing would seem like a joke, there would be so little suffering in this (p. 78)

In Sands' writings in *One Day in my Life* we can see the desire to live too:

The biting cold refused to yield. If I didn't get a blanket or two soon I'd be in trouble. You don't ask for them either... show one sign of weakness and you've dug your own grave (p.33).

My thoughts turned to food. Friday, fish for dinner. Cold potatoes and hard peas. But there was always that vague hope that it might be served hot and with salt on it (p. 33).

Where are those bloody blankets? I'm freezing to death (p. 39).

At this stage Sands was not on hunger strike but part of another prison protest which became known as the 'dirty protest'. The detail and significance of this we will return to later in the article. The point we are seeking to illustrate here is the clear desire to live; death remains something that is pushed into the dis-

tance, something to be avoided. Later when Sands begins his hunger strike this desire to live, and the social standards that had become established within the habitus, mean that considerable tenacity and calculated resistance is required to endure the physical and psychological challenges he faces. The desire to live, the expectations around the length of life, and the learning since infancy directed at prolonging one's life now deeply internalised within the habitus, push against the behaviour and feeling involved in hunger striking. The following was written on the twelfth day of his hunger strike:

... but the weariness is slowly creeping in, and my heart is willing but my body wants to be lazy, so I have decided to mass all my energy and thoughts into consolidating my resistance.

That is most important. Nothing else seems to matter except that lingering constant reminding thought 'Never give up'. No matter how bad, how black, how painful, how heart-breaking, 'Never give up', 'Never despair', 'Never lose hope' ... our laughter will be the joy of victory and the joy of the people, our revenge will be the liberation of all and the final defeat of the oppressors of our aged nation (*The Diary of Bobby Sands*, 40).

The latter sentence in which the narrative of victory and revenge is invoked is a common feature within the diaries. It becomes central in moderating the fear of dying, the image and threat of death, and in making death more bearable.

Two of the special features which Elias argued were central in explaining the sequestering of dying and the social repression of death within consciousness: death as a natural process and the level of internal pacification were fractured by the act of hunger striking and wider social context in which it occurred. It was these processes that pushed against the deeply sedimented desire, within the habitus, to live. The breakdown in social constraints is significant. In both cases state (British) legitimacy was weak and when the effective monopoly of control over violence sustained by their representatives disintegrated the related psychic constraints within individuals also weakened. During both periods when Gallagher and Sands were incarcerated, life generally, but especially for combatants, was more insecure and the threat of being shot or violently killed was greater (see Lee 1989, Bishop and Mallie 1988). In such circumstances, the traditional social constraints formed as part of a civilising process gradually break down and dissolve somewhat (Elias 2013 [1989]). Death and dying come to be experienced more closely; the danger of death is more omnipresent. In addition, the undertaking of a hunger strike brings the concept and feeling of dying even closer in a psychic and bodily sense. The resultant heightened awareness of the possibility of death manifests itself in several ways. The image of death is increasingly brought to the fore in their consciousness. And in turn the ingrained feeling directed at living is increasingly accompanied by the concept, and awareness of the possibility, of a premature death. That dying is occurring in a corporeal sense too reinforces this. This unshackling of previously repressed fears and concerns about dying manifest

themselves in extreme fluctuations in the emotions towards both living and dying. As this next extract from Gallagher illustrates, the greater accommodation or acceptance of death is swiftly countered by a desire to stop or prevent it, and live:

My thoughts are peaceful to-night, even running, simple thoughts. ... The fear of death has gone. ... Perhaps it will come back before the night is passed and the new day begins.

Oh!... I am afraid.... It has all come back ...come back wildly, suddenly.... Why did I think of my calmness? ... The horror is beginning again, the madness is coming back I would run and run if I could, anywhere, away from my thoughts.... I feel it all, fear, despair, doubt, revulsion.... I cannot do anything to stop it now.... It has me in its black arms.... I have tried so often to resist it and have failed ... I am tired of trying ...

Yes, it's the only way ... The Dail must declare the strike off; must order us all to stop striking... A note M.C. ... I will ask Philip to send a note to Mick Collins to have the Ministry issue a statement calling off the strike [...] That must be done now, at once ... at once. So it has got as far as this... my suggesting surrender, meanly suggesting it, trying to escape the odium of it by putting the surrender in the mouths of others (pp. 115-6).

The experience of such fluctuating emotions and their contradictory nature were not lost on Gallagher and he noted:

Though I know deep, deep in me that it is right and just and good for us to die, I cannot kill the fear of dying ... Sometimes I am not sure which is deeper ... the dread of dying or the sorrow of not dying (p. 125).

Such swings in mood were not untypical; we also noted similar oscillations between the desire to live and to die in the diary of Peadar O'Donnell⁵ (1965 [1932]). So on the one hand, hunger strikers continuously seek to push death away and, on the other, confront and embrace it; trying to live and the willingness, however ambivalent, to die gradually start to co-exist. The swings in mood and feelings were directly connected with the unpredictable nature of life at the time (Elias 2012 [1939]) wrought by the wider conflict of the period but equally by the insecurity of life generated by hunger striking itself.

The bringing of death and dying more to the fore is also demonstrative of a less repugnant feeling towards death. It can also be witnessed in a less repulsive feeling and attitude towards the death and suffering of others too. As civilising barriers dissolve it permits a 'crueller' and more 'colder' attitude towards the death of others. In his diary Gallagher recounts the following on receipt of a letter from another hunger striker by the name of Brennan:

⁵ Peadar O'Donnell fought in the war of independence and in the civil war on the anti-treaty side. He was part of a mass hunger-strike in 1924 by anti-treaty fighters still imprisoned after the civil war had ended.

Brennan says he has fasted nine days.... It is not his courage which is lacking. But he has seven kiddies.... If he dies, they starve.... "My heart is torn out of me thinking of them," the letter says. "The Doctor told me this morning that I cannot live without brandy. I would not ask it for myself... If you say no, I will not take anything..."... My impulse was to let him decide for himself whether he should take anything or not.... Then realized that, horrible though refusal was, this was the test case ... The answer, if other men's lives are to be saved must be, "Take nothing." ... A bitter answer.... Yet, how can it be otherwise? ... If this strike breaks, not ourselves alone, but Ireland is beaten.... Men must die... But it is awful to have to kill men... to have to starve little children...

Oh! I wish I had never begun...And it was I ...I who began it! ... For what? ... Aye, for what? ... Ireland? ... nonsense! ... Justice? ... piffle! ... For vanity; that was it, far vanity!... I wanted to show how strong I was... (pp. 79-80).

Though there is an acceptance of death and of the need for people to die, the ingrained taboo towards death re-emerges. Guilt feelings, however peripheral, as can be seen, still emerged redolent of a longer individual civilising process which had shaped the habitus. While it is clear from Gallagher's account, Sands too felt compelled to write: 'I have been thinking that some people (maybe many people) blame me for this hunger-strike, but I have tried everything possible to avert it short of surrender' (*The Diary of Bobby Sands*, 26).

3.2 Barbarisation Processes and Civilising Standards

The disintegration of forms of conscience and behaviour which permit a greater acceptance of death and its intrusion into consciousness in a more direct way occurred over time. As illustrated by Gallagher, and Sands in his early writings, the desire to live was 'second nature'. Though the concept of death and dying came to the fore there remained a certain level of repugnance towards death. However, with Sands the image of death presented in his writings gradually changes. The repugnance towards death dissolves somewhat, as does the desire to live. Our observation here is similar to the conclusion drawn by O'Malley (1990, 57), who notes: 'The lyrical tone of his earlier writing fades and his later writings, especially his poetry, reflect an almost pathological preoccupation with sacrifice and death as the one inescapable release'. Indeed, by the time Sands enters his hunger strike the image and attitude towards dying and death (in *The Diary of Bobby Sands*) appears far more fatalistic. The expressions to live that appear in the earlier writings are much less pronounced.

While the demonopolisation of violence in the North, and the structure of violence that emerged permitted a psychic transformation in which death became less repugnant, we can see from Sands' earlier writing the desire to live was very deeply ingrained within the habitus. We argue that the processes of brutalisation and dehumanisation within the prison had a significant role in making death and dying less unacceptable and repulsive. The heightening of tensions within the prison in 1976 led initially to what was known as the blan-

ket protest whereby prisoners refused to wear a prison uniform. Left naked in their cells, they began to use the blankets from their beds to cover themselves. This escalated into the no-wash protest and then the dirty protest in 1978:

... when prisoners were refused buckets to slop out into after they were denied permission to use the toilets unless they wore a prison uniform. They broke the windows in their cells and threw packages of excrement wrapped in whatever was at hand out into the yard below; warders outfitted in special suits threw it back in. When the windows were blocked, they smeared the feces on their cell walls and the ceiling (O'Malley 1990, 22)

In *One day in my life* Sands recalls the beginning of this. We can observe here too the prevailing civilising standards and sense of shame and embarrassment as he is forced to contravene them:

That's it, I thought, and in a way it was a welcome thought after five days of severe constipation, I'm going to have to go to the toilet, which sounded a bit ridiculous, as I lifted some tissues and retreated to the corner of my cell [...] Despite the relief from constipation I felt like an animal squatting in the corner of the cell among the rubbish and dirt. But there was nothing else for it. It had to be done, however humiliating and degrading (p. 50)

The dirty protest lasted over two years involving a spiral of brutalisation and dehumanisation processes which enveloped both prisoners and prison warders and involved considerable violence (O'Malley 1990, Flynn 2011). Moreover, intra-prison tensions became more interwoven with the on-going conflict outside the prison,⁶ escalating in a further spiral of retaliations and revenge attacks often with brutal consequences.

3.3 Degree and Scope of Individualisation and the Monopoly of Violence in Ireland

The fourth special feature which Elias saw as a precondition for the image of death in contemporary society was the pattern of individualisation that had emerged in comparison to earlier times. The writings on death and dying expressed by the hunger strikers certainly reflect a significant level of experienced individuality, that is, if we make judgements in how people envisaged themselves several centuries earlier (Elias 2010b [1987], 2010a [1979]). Yet the extent and pace of individualisation varied in Ireland over the course of the twentieth century (Dolan 2009). Though chains of social interdependences lengthened and individualisation processes advanced in Ireland, the scale and pace of this was more limited in the North. External restraints remained more fragile given the failure by many to accept the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland authorities (and the role of the British state in Ireland) – ambivalence towards the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland 'state' was not only confined to

⁶ The IRA killed 19 prison officers in the North between 1976 and 1980.

people in the North but was felt by many throughout Ireland. Thus, the failure to accept the legitimacy of the Northern Ireland authorities, and the lack of identification with that state and Britain, helped sustain a greater ambivalence towards ‘political’ violence. That these same states, and their military and policing forces, were perceived to act or represent the established group concomitantly reinforced this dis-identification and strong ‘outsider’ we-group identification amongst the ‘nationalist’ community. Ethnic tension, enmity and violence sustained a strong reliance on the we-group for protection – one’s ethnic community became a survival unit. It was these social circumstances too that reinforced the we-image and ideal of a re-united Ireland and gave it a significant emotional charge. Indeed, the resort to militant activities, of sacrifice, including the hunger strike, becomes a manifestation of a more extreme form of this we-ideal. For instance, Marion Price, who was on hunger strike in the 1970s, in a letter to her mother stated: ‘Sometimes we can achieve more by death than we could ever hope by living. We’ve dedicated our lives to a cause and it’s supremely more important than any one individual life’ (cited in Flynn 2011, 150-1). It suggests too that we-I balance was in some ways more strongly anchored towards a more extreme we-group identification.

The demonopolisation of violence also slowed the development of more functionally differentiated occupational structures. The inability of the ‘state’ to guarantee a more pacified social space hampered the development and expansion of longer and more diverse networks of trade. Consequently industrialisation and commercialisation processes remained fractured, reducing the scope for individualisation on two fronts. More extensive functional specialisation (central in facilitating individualisation processes) was kered. And, second, a significant number of employment opportunities were ‘state’ related meaning both social groups (nationalist and unionist) became heavily dependent on their we-group; patronage and favouritism based on ethnic affiliation remained significant in the allocation of jobs and other social resources (Lee 1989). This applied in other domains also (including that of physical protection). This structure of independence in conjunction with the political and ethnic conflict reduced the scope and opportunities for individualisation for it meant one’s we-group retained important functions.

For the hunger strikers, prison also reduced the scope for individualisation; indeed, the ‘group’ protests (blanket, dirty, hunger) within the prison contributed to significant we-identification and reference in decision making. So on several levels the scope for individualisation was reduced. Frank Gallagher’s experience of individuality was shaped by both similar and different processes. Like Sands, the more violent and precarious conditions of the time – prison and hunger striking – greatly reduced the scope for greater individualisation. That Ireland was a more agrarian society at the time also sustained a specific we-I balance more heavily weighted towards the ‘we’.

Within both time frames the structure of interdependencies in Ireland certainly differed in many ways. However, both the social context of conflict and the scale and structure of interdependencies of the North (which had perhaps more symmetries with 1920s Ireland than the Republic of Ireland in the 1970s) meant the differences in the level of individuality experienced by both Gallagher and Sands were not as wide as might be expected given the individualisation processes which had occurred in Ireland over the course of the twentieth century. For both Sands and Gallagher, the more fragile and limited monopolisation of violence, and the structure of interdependencies that ran alongside it, meant that it became more difficult for social constraints to be transposed into more even self-restraints, and for more advanced levels of self-steering (greater individualisation) and greater levels of distaste towards violence to develop.

4. Conclusion

Elias argued that state-formation processes, though interwoven with other processes, were important in propelling greater, and more all-round, levels of self-restraint and greater levels of repugnance towards violence within the habitus. However, a particular disposition and feeling towards violence formed during the course of a state-formation process can become deeply sedimented, shaping actions and reactions across generations: ‘the structure of state development and that of national traditions of behaviour and feeling are very closely bound up with each other’ (Elias 2010b [1987], 395). The quest to establish an independent Irish state and the partial success of this through violence helped anchor and sustain the valorisation of violence within the Irish habitus (Dolan 2005); though there were of course generational and class differences to this. In that sense, the tradition of violence in the form of militant uprisings and self-sacrifice that had been a feature of state development processes in Ireland over many centuries became embedded in the national habitus.

Such a habitus facilitated a higher tolerance of violence but especially in relation to violence directed at representatives of the British state. Though civilising advances were on-going over the course of the twentieth century and the threshold of repugnance advanced, with some fractures, this aspect of the Irish habitus helped moderate wider civilising spurts. It also means the emotional conflicts experienced by Irish hunger strikers must be understood within the wider frame of this aspect of the national habitus (Dolan and Connolly 2009). The reactions and attitudes to death and dying in the different diaries depend on the personality structure and the interwoven social processes which shape this. There are many similarities in the experience of dying between Sands and Gallagher despite socio-historical variations. Both experienced war and the greater insecurity of life that comes with this and with hunger striking itself. While it is difficult to disentangle the different processes that shaped their

experience of death we argue that longer brutalisation processes experienced by Sands appears to have generated a less repugnant feeling towards death.

Finally, the non-linear nature of civilising processes has often been emphasised by followers of Elias's approach with the acknowledgement that civilising processes can also go into reverse. As Elias (2008 [1995]) himself and others (van Krieken 1999, Dolan and Connolly 2014) have stressed civilising and de-civilising processes can intertwine and overlap to significant degrees. This perhaps should be alluded to more strongly in countering criticisms of linearity in Elias's theory. The interwoven nature of such processes, of civilising spurts and brutalisation processes, mean that it can be difficult to disentangle them, as is the case here. The tendency to refute critiques by merely suggesting that civilising processes can also go in the opposite direction can give a rather simplistic impression that social developments oscillate between civilising or de-civilising processes.

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