Power, Individualism, and Collective Self Perception in the USA

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Stephen Mennell [*]

Abstract: »Macht, Individualismus und die kollektive Selbstwahrnehmung in den USA«. The thesis of this paper is that the key element in the shaping of the habitus of Americans has been their very long-term, virtually unbroken, experience of their country becoming more and more powerful vis-à-vis its neighbours. An increasing sense of their own powerfulness is related to the "individualism" that has so often been discussed as a key characteristic of the American "national character." The long-term process of habitus formation has had important consequences for the role of the USA in world affairs since the Second World War, and may continue to do so in a future marked for the first time by a long-term decline in American power.

Keywords: USA, habitus, identity, we-feelings, individualism, established-outsider relations.

1.   Introduction: Habitus and National Identity

"Habitus," in Norbert Elias's simple definition, is "second nature":[1] everything that we have *learned* since birth through experience in contact with other human beings, but which has become so deeply ingrained that it feels even to ourselves to be something "innate" or "natural." The concept is now widely

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[1] It is often mistakenly believed that the concept of "habitus" was invented by Pierre Bourdieu. On the contrary, it has a long history, and can be traced back at least to Hugo Grotius in the 16th century (Goudsblom, 2002), or even to Thomas Aquinas, who drew upon Aristotle to distinguish between *dispositio*, an invisible inner force, and *habitus* as something visible from outside. "Habitus" was widely used by French and German social scientists in the inter-war years, including by Norbert Elias in the original 1939 edition of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*. What is true is that the term had almost disappeared from English since about the 17th century – though the *Oxford English Dictionary* included it with the meaning "an acquired tendency that has become instinctive", almost exactly Elias's sense, though he would have rejected the word "instinctive" – and for that reason in his English-language writings Elias and his translators at first used terms like "personality make-up." After the word was re-introduced into English by Bourdieu's translators in the 1980s, Elias began to use in English the word that he had always used in German. Bourdieu characteristically provided a far more complicated and abstract definition than Elias's.

recognised as indispensable in bridging the supposed macro-micro divide.[2] Because habitus is acquired in groups, it comprises traits that are *shared* in groups. Such traits may range from, for example, ways of talking or walking that individuals learn from parents in the microcosm of the family, to attitudes and behaviour that are seen as marks arising from the experience of membership of a whole nation state with its particular history. For obvious reasons, there is often unease about the notion of "national character" – which admittedly has to be handled with great care (Mennell, 2015a). It tends to provoke objections that "all human beings are alike" or that "every individual is different."[3] To clarify this issue, I have often quoted a remark made long ago by the anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn and the psychologist Henry Murray (1948, 35).

Every man is in certain respects
- a)   like all other men
- b)   like some other men
- c)   like no other man[4]

The domain of habitus is at level (b). In a lecture he gave in 1962, Norbert Elias made the point clearly: he spoke of differences between countries that are

> precipitated in the language and modes of thought of nations. They manifest themselves in the way in which people are attuned to one another in social intercourse, and in how they react to personal or impersonal events. In every country the forms of perception and behaviour, in their full breadth and depth, have a pronounced national tinge. Often one only becomes aware of this in one's dealings with foreigners. In interactions with one's compatriots, *individual* differences usually impinge so strongly on consciousness that the *common* national coloration, what distinguishes them from individuals of other nations, is often overlooked. First of all, one often expects that people everywhere will react to the same situations in the same way as people of one's own nation. When one finds oneself in a situation in which one is compelled to observe that members of different nations often react in a quite different way to what one is accustomed to at home, one mentally attributes this to their "national character." (Elias 2008a, 230-1)

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[2]   The absence of any such concept of habitus, or indeed of any social psychological component, is a structural weakness in the work of many contemporary "theorists," notably Marxists such as Zygmunt Bauman (Kilminster 2017, 2019) and Weberians such as Michael Mann.

[3]   In a long review article about by book, *The American Civilizing Process* (Mennell 2007), my old friend, Randall Collins (2009) was very uncomfortable with any discussion of the peculiarities of American "national character." Collins began essentially from the crude argument that there is no such thing because all American individuals are different from each other. His deeper theoretical argument – equally misguided in my view – is the conventional symbolic interactionist view that behaviour and feelings are always situationally "constructed" in the here and now.

[4]   Seven decades ago, before consciousness of the need for gender-neutral vocabulary, "man" and "men" were of course habitually used to mean "person" and "people."

But why should history at the level of the nation state be so particularly important in the formation of habitus at the level of individual citizens? Because of its rootedness in group identity, habitus is never devoid of an emotional charge; it is linked to people's "we-feelings," their feelings of belonging to groups of other people. Now, it is possible that in the earliest stages of human social development, when people thought about "us," they were always referring to their own small hunter-gatherer band. But today people belong to many groups at every level; I have spoken of "the filo pastry of identity" (Mennell 1994). My suggestion is that, beyond their immediate family, people are likely to feel the strongest emotional attachment to their "survival group." What Elias meant by that term[5] was the collectivity to which people mainly look for their basic needs: of protection, food, shelter, reproduction. Every human being is born into a survival unit, and as Kaspersen and Gabriel (2008) point out, this "is a relational concept which cannot be conceived outside a relationship with other survival units". Over thousands of years of the development of human society, the very long-term trend has been towards survival groups on a larger and larger scale (Elias 2008b). That has gone along with the widening of circles of mutual identification (De Swaan 1995) to include ever larger numbers of other people. Factually, it may be argued that we live in a single planet-wide survival group – we are all dependent for our survival on everyone else. As Elias put it, "all possible actors are already on stage" (Elias 2007, 154). But, precisely because there is no other group from outside threatening humanity as a whole – we have not seen a realisation of H. G. Wells' *War of the Worlds* – it would probably be fair to say that few people on the planet experience it as their most powerful emotional identification. No, in the modern world, the largest survival group with which most people have a sense of belonging and with which they emotionally identify strongly has typically – in recent centuries – been a nation state.[6] But this is not inevitable; and it is not fixed. Feelings for one's nation do not obliterate loyalties to groups at lower levels. Indeed, those remain important in times of stress: the emotional centre of gravity, so to speak, may slide up or down through the filo of identity. In particular, this process is associated with rises and falls in the level of dangers experienced in people's everyday lives. Or, more exactly, one should speak of rises and falls in levels of *fear*, because it seems that the effect is brought about by *perceived* danger, whether real or imaginary. There appears to be an asymmetry involved. The broadening of identity appears normally to be a slow process, marked by

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[5] At first, Elias used the term "attack-and-defence units" (see Elias 2012a), but later settled on the broader term "survival unit."

[6] Eugen Weber's great study (1977) of the transformation of "peasants into Frenchmen" demonstrates how relatively weak was a sense of national identity in the remoter areas of provincial France even in the 19th century. It is a useful reminder of similar processes in other countries such as Germany, Italy, and the USA.

considerable "cultural lag."[7] For example, although in its origins the European Union was precisely an attempt to reduce the danger and the fear of there ever again being wars among the states of Europe by binding them together into a wider web of interdependence, only a small minority of European people feel the emotional commitment to the EU that they feel to their country (the point was dramatically demonstrated by the outcome of the Brexit referendum in 2016, when a narrow majority of British people – including a disproportionate number of older and less well educated people – voted for the UK to leave the EU.) In contrast, an abrupt rise in fears and dangers may lead quite rapidly to a narrower sense of identity, as could be seen in the breakup of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.[8] In that case, people often faced factually increased dangers from neighbours with whom they had lived in peace for many years before. The main point of my argument here is that the circle of mutual identification can contract as well as increase in scope, and that in the USA, habitus and identity have been marked both by overall national pride and by intense localism – a sort of bimodalism has emerged. Of course there are millions of Americans who share few if any of the characteristics I am about to discuss, but there are more millions who do.

2.   The Formation of the American State and Empire

The process of Americans becoming ever more powerful in relation to their neighbours began almost immediately after the first European settlements in North America in the early 16th century. After Independence, for many Americans, loyalty to one's state of origin at first outweighed sense of allegiance to the Union. It is often recalled that as late as the start of the Civil War, Robert E. Lee was offered command of the Union armies, but considered he owed primary loyalty to his own state of Virginia. However, from Independence onwards, the number of states created by the Union came to outnumber the 13 who had created the Union, and the Union gradually became the main focus of patriotism. True, in the South, some identification with the Confederacy has lingered, but the Civil War settled the question of whether states had the right to secede. On the whole, most Americans take pride in their country's dominance in the

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[7] The term "cultural lag" was introduced by the great American sociologist W. F. Ogburn (1923); much later, to convey much the same idea, Pierre Bourdieu introduced the term "hysteresis," borrowed from the natural sciences, where it refers to the state of a system being dependent on its history. This is a fine example of sociologists' endless tendency conceptually to re-invent the wheel.

[8] The essay in which I first used the expression "filo pastry of identity" (1994) was written at the time of the civil war in which Yugoslavia broke up into (at least) six smaller survival units: the new states of Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, Montenegro, and what is now to be called North Macedonia as well as Bosnia, which itself is a fragile unit.

world, even though for many that goes along with resentment at the internal power of "Washington."

Growing power becomes associated with a sense of one's country possessing a special virtue; in the case of other imperial powers, most notably the British in the 19th century, this can take the form of a "civilising mission," or "the white man's burden" (in spite of said white men being a burden to others). At first glance, this intense pride in their power over others may seem to be at odds with the popular perception of the social character of Americans, whose manners have been seen to reflect the supposedly egalitarian character of American society. But a connection needs to be made between the development of internal power relations and external power relations with the peoples of neighbouring societies. The link between the two becomes clearer in the light of Elias's model of established-outsider relations.

By way of explanation: around 1959–60, Norbert Elias and his MA student John Scotson conducted a study (2008) of a small industrial settlement on the periphery of Leicester. Briefly, it contained two working-class groups (white working-class, one should perhaps say now – it was before the advent in Leicester of large numbers of South Asian migrants). The two groups worked in the same factories, and, by ordinary sociological classifications based on their occupations, they were indistinguishable. The main difference, however, was that one group lived in the "Village," an area of housing dating from the 1880s, where many of the families were old-established and had intermarried over the generations, weaving dense social networks. Being long established in the neighbourhood, they had also come to occupy all the main centres of local power – in the churches, charities, clubs, pubs, and so on. The other group, living in the "Estate," built on the eve of the Second World War, were relative newcomers, many of them relocated with their employers from London during the war. The essential point is that the "established" Villagers contrived to despise the extremely similar "outsiders" in the Estate. One of Elias's most interesting insights was into the role played by gossip. The Villagers gossiped among each other about themselves, in terms of a "minority of the best." That is, they constructed a we-image – a kind of group self-stereotype – based on a selection of the most upright and worthy members of their own group. That was "praise gossip." It provided the basis for strong we-feelings and a collective sense of virtue. But there was "blame gossip" as well. They gossiped about the people of the Estate, in terms of a "minority of the worst," constructing another stereotype, a "they-image" of the Estate based on the behaviour of just two or three families who were violent and drunk and promiscuous, and whose children were in danger of becoming "juvenile delinquents." Most people in the Estate were not like that. But they could not retaliate with a wave of counter-gossip because their social networks and their positions of power were not as well developed as those exploited by the "Villagers." Still more significantly, Elias and Scotson found that the people of the Estate had tended to some extent

to absorb the Villagers' adverse image of them into their own we-image – they had begun to think of themselves as to some extent "not as good as" the Villagers. But that did not obliterate a persisting resentment too. Outsider groups – the less powerful parties to a power ratio – are generally marked by ambivalence, by fluctuations between acceptance of and resentment at their position of inferiority. And, in general, when the power ratio between an established and an outsider group comes to be more evenly balanced, the resentment will come more to the fore. I should like to suggest that the relationship between America and the rest of the world has become the largest-scale, global, established-outsider relationship.[9]

There is a tendency – especially among Americans – to think about the United States as if it were an emanation of the human spirit, as if its existence and its constitutional arrangements were a bloodless product of the Enlightenment, John Locke, the genius of the Founding Fathers, and the pure democratic spirit of "No taxation without representation!" In fact, the formation of the territorial unit that we now know as the USA was a bloody business, not at all dissimilar to the formation of states in Western Europe. If we look back a thousand years, Western Europe was fragmented into numerous tiny territories, each ruled – that is, protected *and* exploited – by some local warlord. Out of the patchwork, over a period of many centuries there gradually emerged a smaller number of larger territories. This was a violent "elimination contest" (Elias 2012b, 304-10). It is a mistake to see the process as driven by "aggression," as if the personality traits of individual warriors were the determining force. That would be to fall into the same trap of a one-sided cultural explanation as the "pure Enlightenment" account of the USA's origins. In an age when the control of land was the principal basis of power, a peace-loving local magnate could not sit idly by while his neighbours slugged it out: the winner, who gained control over a larger territory, would then be able to gobble up the little peace-loving neighbour. War and "aggression" thus had a survival value. The process was Janus-faced: as larger territories became *internally* pacified, the wars *between* territories came to be fought on a steadily larger scale.

In fact Elias hit the nail on the head when he drew a humorous comparison between medieval Europe and westward expansion in 19th-century USA: "To some extent the same is true of the French kings and their representatives as was once said of the American pioneer: 'He didn't want all the land; he just wanted the land next to his'" (Elias 2012b, 346). One difference between the two continents is that the struggle for territory after the beginnings of European settlement was initially driven exogenously by conflicts between the great powers back in Europe, as much as by rivalries endogenous to North America. In the early stages, the process somewhat resembled the competition for territo-

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9 I have illustrated this argument by taking a tough case: Western perceptions of the annexation of the Crimea by Russia in 2014; see Mennell (2015b).

ry in 19th-century Africa. Apart from early skirmishes with the Indians in the eastern seaboard states, most of the early wars there were branches of contemporaneous wars in Europe, including the Anglo-Dutch wars, the War of the Spanish Succession, and the Seven Years War. Through these contests, first the Swedish colonies and then the Dutch were eliminated, and later French and Spanish power was broken. The various Indian tribes were also involved in these struggles as allies of the European powers, and were simultaneously engaged in elimination contests amongst themselves. Gradually, however, the struggles came to be shaped much more by endogenous forces, and especially by the logic of "wanting the land next to his."

This is not the place to retell the story of how American Independence came about, except to say that the taxation to which the settlers did not wish to contribute without representation arose from the costs of military control over a much larger territory after the effective elimination of French power from Canada and the trans-Appalachian region. But there is another side to the story besides this familiar one. The British had intended to reserve the Ohio Valley for their Iroquois allies, but settlers were already pressing westwards. As has been recognised at least since Theodore Roosevelt wrote *The Winning of the West* (1889-99), the War of Independence was also a war over the control of conquests. The colonials were also colonisers.

Westward expansion at the expense of the Native Americans (Stannard 1992) was driven by the pressure of land-hungry migrants pushing forward in advance of effective federal government control of the territory, in contrast with policies followed in the settlement of Canada and Siberia. The scenes with which we are familiar from the Western movies are a glamorised version of a process of conquest and internal pacification, which played an important part in the formation of modern American habitus.[10]

In the decades after the Civil War, the USA increased rapidly in population and industrial power. The West was populated, to the extent that in 1891 the frontier was deemed to have been "closed." But it is important to grasp the continuity between the final stages of westward expansion and the early stages

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[10] Americans sometimes point out that they *bought* much of their territory rather than conquering it by force of arms. That is certainly true of the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 doubled the federal territory. It arose, however, out of a particularly favourable conjunction in European power politics, when it suited Napoleon to be rid of extraneous responsibilities. It is also true that another huge acquisition of land took place when the United States paid Mexico for a vast swathe of territory. But that was only after it had impressed upon Mexico that this was an offer it could not refuse, by invading that unfortunate country and sacking its capital city. "Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States", as President Porfírio Diáz later remarked. Ulysses S. Grant, who served as a young officer in the Mexican War, regarded the war as "one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory" (Grant, 1994 [1885], 37).

of the acquisition of its first overseas empire – including the Philippines, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, and, for a time, Cuba (Zimmerman 2002; Hopkins 2018) – through the Spanish-American War of 1898. In other words, the elimination contest that began before Independence was in effect continued in the world beyond America's boarders. Yet, until after the Second World War, it would not be fair to see the USA as the militaristic state that it has since become. Historically, the USA always had what was in international terms a low "military participation ratio" (Andreski 1968) – in other words, it normally had a very small army in relation to its population (Mennell 2007, 240-4). After each war – in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, the Civil War, the war with Spain, the First World War – its military establishment fell back to very low peace-time levels. But, for the first time, that did not happen after the Second World War. By 1961, in his famous farewell address to the nation, President Eisenhower (1961) warned his fellow Americans against what he christened "the military-industrial complex." His warning was not heeded. In effect, America has, ever since the Second World War, fought a series of "splendid little wars"[11] that have had the latent function of keeping its economy prospering and feeding the congressional pork-barrel process. They include the many proxy wars in which the Cold War with the USSR was acted out – notably the disaster of Vietnam – through the hubris of the 1990s and further disasters of the early 2000s in Afghanistan, Iraq and the greater Middle East. By the early 21st century, the USA was clearly an imperial power – albeit an "incoherent" one (Mann 2004) – even if its regional governors did not wear cocked hats. The 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States* declared that the USA had the right to intervene against its opponents anywhere in the globe, and came very close to claiming for the American government a monopoly of the legitimate use of force throughout the world.[12] In other words, in terms of Max Weber's definition of a state (1978, i, 54), the USA has come close to declaring itself a world state. In some ways, indeed, the USA does now act as a world government (Mandelbaum 2006). Its military expenditure is as large as that of all the other countries in the world combined. It has in effect garrisoned the planet, dividing the entire globe into US military commands. It currently has military bases in about 80 of the countries of the world (Slater 2018), including

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[11] The phrase "splendid little war" was used by John Hay (subsequently US Secretary of State) to describe the Spanish–American War of 1898. In a letter to his friend Theodore Roosevelt, he wrote, "It has been a splendid little war; begun with the highest motives, carried on with magnificent intelligence and spirit, favoured by the fortune which loves the brave. It is now to be concluded, I hope, with that firm good nature which is after all the distinguishing trait of our American character." (Quoted from Thomas 1971, 404).

[12] Helmut Kuzmics (personal communication) contrasts the gung-ho American military adventurism of recent decades with the "hesitancy" that marked the Habsburg empire in its declining phase.

some in the territory of the former Soviet Union.[13] American dominance, though, does not by any means rest on military power alone, but also, and especially, on its economic power. The establishment of the US dollar as the world's principal currency has enabled the USA to claim extra-territorial jurisdiction for its own laws in many fields,[14] while itself refusing to be bound by the corpus of international law that most other countries accept.

Overall, since the Second World War, the USA has turned into a "warfare state," a thoroughly militaristic society, something that is much more visible from outside than from within the USA. William Astore (2018) has compared "Blitzkrieg overseas" with "Sitzkrieg in the homeland." In accordance with the principle that in very unequal power ratios, the more powerful side knows, perceives, and understands much less about the weaker party than the weaker does about the stronger,[15] surveys have repeatedly shown how ignorant a large part of the American population is about the rest of the world, and how relatively few of them ever travel beyond the frontiers of the USA.[16] Yet stereotypes of the outside world play an important role in American we-images. As Gore Vidal mordantly observed, there is always "a horrendous foreign enemy at hand to blow us up in the night out of hatred of our Goodness and rosy plumpness" (2004, 6); this helps to stoke up internal fear about external threats. This ignorance (Alexander, 2011) is not confined to the American lumpenproletariat: it has also guided members of the elite in the idiocies of American foreign policy.

On the other side of the power ratio, it often seems that America sets cultural models and standards for the rest of the world, which laps up American media and popular culture uncritically. Certainly, American popular culture feeds into Americans' own "praise gossip" amongst themselves, and it is also true that it forms part of the rest of the world's "they-images" of the USA. It is

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[13] Including all types of bases, for example intelligence-gathering ones as well as military, the figure is probably much higher. Chalmers Johnson (2004) claimed it had bases in 130 out of 194 countries.

[14] Any financial transaction that "pings" for even a nanosecond through a computer in New York is deemed subject to US law, thus permitting the US government to take punitive action against a great range of non-American corporations which, for example, trade with one of the many countries in the world on which the US has imposed economic sanctions. The dominance of American economic policy has been further reinforced through organisations including the IMF, World Bank, and credit-rating agencies.

[15] The principle was probably first described by Hegel (1977, 111) in his discussion of the master–slave relationship, but has been confirmed in many empirical sociological studies since then; see Mennell, 2007, 311-4.

[16] A vivid illustration of this is the American journalist Suzy Hansen's account (2017) of her move to Turkey, which she not only experienced as culturally very different from the USA but also found helped her through obstacles to coming to terms with her own country's violent role in the world.

often seen in Washington as a major resource of "soft power."[17] But that should not be exaggerated. There is also a long list of things that outsiders do *not* like about America, which also feed into their "blame gossip," their they-images of the USA. These features include aspects both internal to American society and external to it. Among internal faults may be listed: a corrupt electoral system (including gerrymandering of boundaries, and the systematic disqualification of millions of citizens); racism, seen especially in exceptionally high rates of incarceration; a highly politicised judiciary; the retention of the death penalty in a good many states, now considered unacceptable in most Western countries; and the extreme domination of the US government by big business and big finance. Among the disliked aspects that impinge mainly outside the USA itself, one may briefly mention: the USA's bloated military machine; its continuous record of military intervention in countries in many parts of the world; its programme of kidnappings and targeted assassinations of people deemed to be its enemies; its routine use of torture and its use of long-term imprisonment without trial at Guantanamo Bay; its support for corrupt authoritarian regimes in the Middle East and elsewhere; and its interventions in the politics of countless other countries (which make the furore about Russian intervention in the 2016 Presidential election especially piquant). To the extent that these features help to form negative "they-images" of the USA on the part of many people elsewhere in the world, and to the extent that Americans become aware of those hostile feelings, they give fears of "hatred of our Goodness and rosy plumpness" a self-fulfilling quality.

How does this "macro-level" picture enter into the "micro-level" processes of habitus-formation in individuals? A good illustration is the changing balance of power between USA and Britain over more than two centuries. Until late in the 19th century, Britain was a far more powerful force in world affairs than the USA; it had much larger armed forces, and until the 1850s even had a larger population. Through a study of the perceptions of British visitors to the USA from the 18th century onwards, Allan Nevins (1948) demonstrated that, as the balance of power between Britain and the USA gradually swung in the latter's favour, the British – who had started by rather looking down on Americans – came very much to look up to them and admire them. That is true, but Nevins rather missed the ambivalence in British attitudes, which were and are peppered with resentment as well as a sense of enduring cultural superiority. Symptoms of resentment are not hard to find. For example, as early as 1930, the American economist and journalist Ludwell Denny wrote a book entitled

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[17] The historian Alfred McCoy (2018) has argued that China's prospects of attaining global hegemony are somewhat impeded by its relative lack of such resources of "soft power," but that President Trump is rapidly destroying America's advantage in this respect.

America Conquers Britain: A Record of Economic War.[18] After the Second World War, the two countries fought it out again for supremacy in the aviation industry (Engel 2007), America winning hands down. The role of the USA in the dismantling of the British Empire in the same period – no doubt a "good thing" in itself – is widely recognised. The most dramatic event was President Eisenhower's scuttling of the Anglo-French invasion of Egypt in 1956. Beneath the embarrassing cringing by British governments for a "special relationship" with the USA, it is not hard to find a level of resentment among ordinary British people. In the dynamics of established-outsider relationships, that may be of little consequence, since Britain is highly unlikely to be able to tip the scales of the power ratio back against the USA (especially after Brexit, when it cuts itself off from the world's largest trading bloc). But that is not true of other, rising, powers, notably China. How will that affect American habitus?

3.   American Individualism

"Individualism" has long been seen as one of the chief characteristic of American habitus. The term seems first to have been used by Alexis de Tocqueville in his classic *Democracy in America*. America, he said, was one country in the world where the precepts of Descartes were least studied yet most followed. In their common assumptions Americans sought "to evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and [...] to seek the reason of things for oneself, and in oneself alone." In short, "each American appeals to the individual exercise of his own understanding alone" (1961 [1835-40], ii, 1-2).

Tocqueville here elegantly captures an American proneness to what Norbert Elias (2012b, 512-9, 522-6) later called the *homo clausus* conception of human beings – a mode of self-experience as a "closed person," as a single isolated individual separate from other individuals. But this characteristic is not the product of free-floating "ideas." The rootedness of "individualism" in practical experience was described by Frederick Jackson Turner in his celebrated 1893 paper, "The significance of the frontier in American history" (1947 [1920]). Most famous were Turner's remarks about "rugged individualism."

> [T]he frontier is productive of individualism. Complex society is precipitated by the wilderness into a kind of primitive organization based on the family. The tendency is anti-social. It produces antipathy to control. The tax-gatherer is viewed as a representative of oppression. (1947 [1920], 30)

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[18] The title page of my copy says "Economic War," while the cover of the book reads "Economic Strife."

Even after more than a century of debate among historians, it is generally agreed that there is a kernel of truth in "the Turner thesis."[19] It appears to me, however, that the roots of this aspect of American habitus, this mode of self-experience, do not lie exclusively on the frontier. Images of cowboys and farmers in the West tend to focus on their plucky self-reliance in the face of dangers, notably from the prairie "Indians," but at least as important must have been their experience of their own ultimately invincible power over those they displaced. The experience of being on the favourable end of a power ratio was scarcely confined to the frontier, however. At least as important in the mix that became American habitus was the slave-owning South. In the 1830s, at just the same time as Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau brilliantly captured the difference in habitus between northern and southern congressman:

> It is in Washington that varieties of manners are conspicuous. There the Southerners appear at most advantage, and the New Englanders to the least; the ease and frank courtesy of the gentry of the South (with an occasional touch of arrogance, however), contrasting with the cautious, somewhat *gauche*, and too deferential air of the members from the North. One fancies one can tell a New England member in the open air by his deprecatory walk. He seems to bear in mind perpetually that he cannot fight a duel, while other people can. (1838, i, 145)

One senses that, for all that she appears to have admired the polish of the southerners, the word "bullies," or something like it, was lurking in Martineau's subconscious. The Southern swagger at which Martineau hints may have first been associated with the minority of planters who owned large numbers of slaves, but the sense of superiority and power over African-Americans certainly spread to "poor whites" in the Reconstruction and Jim Crow periods, and it has not entirely disappeared today. I would argue that a similar process of "trickling down" of feelings of superiority, power and entitlement has arisen – for Americans in general – from identification with the growth of the USA as an economic, political and military power, and also through the abundant opportunities which were presented for many Americans to "better themselves." In short, it is linked to the "American Dream," which today has become largely mythical.

The writer Hari Kunzru (2015) remarked that "Americans are culturally averse to any explanation not based on the feelings and doings of the sovereign individual." It is tempting to say that when Americans boast of their "individualism" and "the freedom of the individual" they mean what the rest of us call "selfishness."[20] That would, however, be unfair: between "selfishness" and "altruism" there is never a simple dichotomous choice. It is better seen as a

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[19] For a summary of the long controversies among historians about the "Turner thesis," see Mennell (2007, 193-7; or, more briefly, Mennell (2017).
[20] American authors occasionally make the same point: see for instance James L. Collier (1991).

continuum, a question of how large in scope is the "circle of mutual identification," how far-flung is the range of people with whom one can feel some emotional tie and sympathy. Or it can even better be seen in terms of the "We-I balance" (Elias 2010, 137-208) in people's habitus, or "habits of the heart." It probably is true to say that the real effect of the practical Cartesianism to which Tocqueville pointed is to pose a barrier to the easy comprehension of how events at the national and international level are linked to the experience of individual people.

What is perhaps most peculiar about the modal American We-I balance was obliquely summed up back in the 1960s by the historian David Potter, when he remarked that it had been the "curious fate" of the United States, to exert immense influence in the modern world "without itself quite understanding the nature of this influence." He observed that:

> In the twentieth century the United States developed what was perhaps the first mass society, but the American cult of equality and individualism prevented Americans from analysing their mass society in realistic terms. Often they treated it as if it were simply an infinite aggregation of Main Streets in Zenith, Ohio. (Potter 1968, 136)

That insight was magnificently illustrated much more recently in Arlie Russell Hochschild's ethnographic exploration of Tea Party supporters in Louisiana (2016). She was at pains to stress that her respondents were not monsters: many or most were likeable and friendly people, showing normal human sympathy and consideration *within their local communities*, but with little understanding of the broader social forces that caused them hardship and suffering. Notable among those causes were the oil and chemical corporations associated with dreadful pollution. But they had also provided employment for many local inhabitants, whose resentments tended to be directed not at big business but at what they saw as big government,[21] and at its spending for the benefit of other communities elsewhere, including blacks and other minorities.[22]

Yet there is indeed a grain of truth in there being in America a cult of the "sovereign individual" that acts as an obstacle to any explanation not couched in terms of motives and psychology of individuals; it has many practical conse-

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[21] Again, there is an historical background. Data from the Pew Research Centre show that trust in US government was notably high in the post-war years, but underwent a steep decline at the time of the Vietnam War, from which it never recovered: see <http://www.people-press.org/2017/12/14/public-trust-in-government-1958-2017/>. Vietnam provoked massive resistance within the USA because of the draft; subsequent military disasters have had less domestic effect because the draft was abolished.

[22] Nathan Glazer (2005, and elsewhere) has argued that the relative weakness of social welfare, including health care, provision in the USA is linked to voters' reluctance to pay higher taxes for the benefit of what they perceive to be "undeserving" welfare recipients, especially racial groups disproportionately found among the poor: African Americans and Hispanics. This is a symptom the boundaries of such voters' "circle of mutual identification."

quences. Most obvious is the "gun culture," which kills many thousands of Americans every year. (More people have been killed in firearm-related incidents within the USA in last 50 years than have died in all the wars in US history – about 1.5 million compared with 1.2 million. See Adam Hochschild 2018; Henigan 2016.) How often does one hear the specious argument that "Guns don't kill people, people kill people"? This idea is associated with thinking in purely interactionist terms, about "how do I protect myself if the other person has a gun and I don't?" The notion that it would be very different if gun ownership were uncommon and very strictly regulated is a foreign one. Most countries – since at least the "sword hunts" of early Tokugawa Japan – have sought to limit the right of citizens to own weapons for their own use in attack and defence. Not so in the USA. The most convincing long-term explanation is that offered by Pieter Spierenburg (2006), that "democracy came too early" to America. He argues that, for example in what became France and in most other parts of Western Europe, there had taken place over many centuries gradual processes of centralisation, eventuating in the concentration of the means of violence in fewer and fewer hands, and ultimately in the establishment of a relatively effective monopoly apparatus in the hands of kings. Gradual it may have been, but the struggles among a warrior elite were bloody, as more and more players were deprived of their capacity to wage war independently of the central ruler. The process was in its final stages when European colonisation of North America began. Once stable and effective royal monopolies of violence had been established, as they were in general by the late 17th and the 18th centuries, the people's aim in subsequent struggles – most spectacularly in the French Revolution – was not to challenge or destroy the monopoly as such, but rather to "co-possess" the monopoly (as Spierenburg terms it). In other words, the aim was to assert a more broadly based control over those who exercised the monopoly, to democratise it. Conditions were very different in North America: "there was no phase of centralization before democratization set in," and

> [T]he inhabitants did not have sufficient time to become accustomed to being disarmed. As a consequence, the idea remained alive that the very existence of a monopoly of force was undesirable. And it remained alive in an increasingly democratic form: not [as in medieval Europe] of regional elites carving out their private principality, but of common people claiming the right of self-defence. [...] Local elites and, increasingly, common people equated democracy with the right of armed protection of their own property and interests. (2006, 109-10)

On the frontier, especially, the forces of the state were often too distant to be called upon,[23] so settlers had no alternative but to use their own arms to protect themselves from danger; and as noted above, the myth of the frontier has endured as a cultural influence into an age when most Americans live in cities.

Spierenburg acknowledges that it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the transition from struggles to destroy the monopoly apparatus to struggles to co-possess it did not take place at all in the USA, but "the best one can say is that the majority of the population wanted it both ways": they "accepted the reality of government institutions but at the same time they cherished an ethic of self-help" (2006, 110).

In any case, the ideal of tight regulation of gun ownership is now practically unattainable. The Second Amendment, in the Bill of Rights, guarantees that "A well-regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed."[24] A well-regulated militia means a force under public control, but the highly politicised Supreme Court, in *District of Columbia v. Heller* (2008), chose to interpret the amendment as protecting individual rather than collective rights. Most non-Americans (like many Americans) regard this as preposterous.

Another instance of what might be called the "micro-level default setting" in American habitus – one which has had as widespread effects across the world as has American militarism – is the near-universal deference paid to free-market, micro-economic economic doctrines. Although this was no doubt already a strong current in American popular attitudes, it found its purest intellectual expression in the so-called "Friedman Doctrine." Milton Friedman (1963) argued that a corporation need concern itself with only one goal: making profits for its shareholders. It should not take into consideration any responsibility to society more broadly – to the welfare of its employees, customers or the communities in which it was located (unless of course such considerations promoted profits); it was up to shareholders in their private capacity to exercise social responsibility (good luck with that!). Were companies to consider their social responsibilities, that would lead to totalitarianism – an extension of the argument advanced by Friedrich Hayek in his book *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). Although it is usually dangerous to exaggerate the influence of academic work on popular thinking, Friedman's ideas undoubtedly strongly influenced the policies of governments (not just in America) and the behaviour of corporations.[25] This Manichaean pattern of thought may also have

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[23] That was true for only limited spans of time in any one location: as the frontier moved westwards, the forces of the federal and then state governments back-filled the void quite quickly. See Mennell (2007), chapter 8.

[24] For a full study of the Second Amendment, see Uviller and Merkel (2002).

[25] There was always a dissident minority of economists, even in America – for example Heilbroner (1976). Among many recent critiques of the consequences of Milton Friedman and the Chicago School of economics, see notably Naomi Klein (2007).

had popular appeal in the USA, reinforcing a tendency to think in black and white, and filtering down to affect the general principles of how individuals feel able to live their everyday lives – perhaps caring for the people they know face-to-face, but with few other duties apart from one of broad national loyalty to the USA. When Americans express their pride in "individualism," they fundamentally mean the pursuit of self-interest with no concern for the public good, which, by means of magical-mythical thinking, they assume can be left to take care of itself. The effect of that belief is to reduce pressure in an increasingly complex society to exercise more and more complicated *foresight* – contrary to Norbert Elias's expectation (2012b, 418-22) that the pressure would *increase* as a result of people becoming enmeshed in longer chains of interdependence in the course of social development.

Underlying this is a curious blindness to *power relationships*.[26] Free-market economists generally make the mistaken assumption that the existence of a "market-clearing price" means that the power of buyers and sellers is equal – it must be, because they have reached agreement. Nor is this confined to economics. It has also been largely true of American sociologists – at least since C. Wright Mills (1956), who certainly did understand power; in general, they remain stuck at the level of "interaction" rather than "interdependence," with the so-called "macro-micro problem" still viewed (erroneously) as an unbridgeable gulf. They may *know* that modern individuals belong to long chains and dense webs of interdependence with millions of people across the globe whom they never meet face-to-face, with more or less unequal power ratios involved at every link in the chain and node in the web, but they do not adequately conceptualise how this "macro" fact relates to the "micro" experience of individuals.

If all this sounds to be at too high an intellectual level, too abstract to relate to the everyday habitus of American citizens, consider what a large proportion of them can be counted upon to sing the praises of "freedom" in their "free country." That is an over-abstract idea if ever there was one. For, as Norbert Elias pithily observed,

> when [...] the "freedom", of the individual is stressed, it is usually forgotten that there are always simultaneously many mutually dependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one's scope for action. (2012a, 162)

And some are more free than others …

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[26] For a fuller discussion of this point, see Mennell (2014).

4.   Conclusion

I have argued that American habitus has been formed during a very long-term, virtually unbroken, experience of the USA becoming more and more powerful vis-à-vis its neighbours. The USA's overwhelming military, political, and economic power in the world today is a source of great national pride to most Americans, usually in a largely unreflective way. This abundance of power, so taken for granted, appears to distort American perceptions of themselves and others. In accordance with Elias's model of established-outsider relations, Americans have tended to employ a sort of praise-gossip to construct a very favourable we-image, or collective self-image, a picture of their own virtue and superiority. It makes it especially difficult for them to understand why such a large proportion of the world's population hates America and the wreckage it has made of the world order.

Frederick Jackson Turner traced the individualism that is so often seen as a main characteristic of American national character, tending towards the "anti-social" and an "antipathy to control," to the experience of the minority of Americans who pushed the frontier westwards in the 18th and 19th centuries. I have argued its foundations are broader than that. The USA's growing power and wealth, along with the immense opportunities it has offered to its citizens over more than two centuries, have given them a sense of their own power and superiority.

This long-term trend may be about to change for the first time since the beginnings of European settlement in North America. The *military* superiority of the USA will endure for at least several decades more, but its economic and political domination is no longer quite as unchallenged as it was in the 1990s and early 2000s. It is generally expected that China, in particular, will in a relatively short time surpass the USA in the size of its economy. The future may bring unaccustomed national humiliations. Indeed, the 9/11 attacks on New York and Washington in 2001 were, besides acts of mass murder, intended as such humiliations. In that light, it appears likely that the USA will become an even more dangerous force in world affairs than it has been in the first decades of the 21st century. For, as Norbert Elias pointed out,

> the fortunes of a nation over the centuries become sedimented into the habitus of its individual members. Sociologists face a task here that distantly recalls the task that Freud tackled. He attempted to show the connection between the outcome of the conflict-ridden channeling of drives in a person's development and his or her resulting habitus. But there are also analogous connections between a people's long-term fortunes and experiences and their social habitus at any subsequent time. At this layer of the personality structure – let us for the time being call it the "we-layer" – there are often complex symptoms of disturbance at work which are scarcely less in strength and in capacity to cause suffering than the neuroses of an individual character. (Elias 2013, 24)

Moreover, in a remark that was prescient and piquant in light of Britain's vote in the 2016 referendum to give up its membership of the European Union, Elias observed that "Britain in the recent past is a moving example of the difficulties a great power of the first rank has had in adjusting to its sinking to being a second- or third-class power" (2013, 6). There is no danger in the foreseeable future of the USA becoming a second- or third-class power, but all power is relative, and a relative decline vis-à-vis other powers may be experienced as humiliating by individual Americans. That is one significance of the success of Donald Trump's slogan "Make America Great Again." The danger is that, while his presidency may help the rest of the world to view America in a more realistic and less deferential way, it may also make it even more difficult for Americans, looking out, to see themselves as others see them.

> O, wad some Power the giftie gie us
>
> To see oursels as others see us!
>
> It wad frae monie a blunder free us
>
> – Robert Burns, *To a Louse*

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