Pareto and Elias Facing the Crisis of Contemporary Society

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to compare Vilfredo Pareto and Norbert Elias. Although they differ in many ways, the juxtaposition between the two sociologists provides useful elements to analyze crisis in contemporary society. The distance between their theoretical and thematic approaches can be an innovative driver, fostering a comprehensive analysis of contemporary society.

The paper is structured as follows. The first section explains the reasons for juxtaposing the two authors, highlighting useful elements for our objective.

The second section focuses on Pareto's contribution to the current crisis of democracy and the rise of populism, identifying their roots and historical continuity. Factors of such "political decivilization" are, in some respect, more serious today than in Pareto's time.

The third section begins with Elias' notion of "decivilization". The analysis focuses on the regressive phenomena of our civilization, such as the rise of irrational behaviour, questioning the competence of experts, and the rejection of science. It also highlights worldviews that rely on imagination rather than on factual data, which can be surprising and disconcerting.

Keywords: Pareto, Elias, Élites, democracy, civilizing process, contemporary Society.

1.   Introduction

Scholars considered classic are those who never go out of fashion. Although their relevance may fade and re-emerge in response to changing historical circumstances, their thought can shed light on the phenomena we

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wish to scrutinize. By pairing apparently distant authors, we can potentially gain innovative insights.

This seems to be the case with Vilfredo Pareto and Norbert Elias. Both offer keys to understanding contemporary reality. They are complementary, despite their significant divergences.

This paper aims to provide tools of comparison and analysis of the two, while examining contemporary society through their theories. This will highlight the elements of crisis that society is currently experiencing.

The paper is structured as follows: the first section explains the reasons for the comparison of the two authors. This section of the paper highlights useful elements for our purpose.

The second section discusses Pareto's contribution to the current crisis of democracy and the rise of populism. It helps to identify the roots of the latter phenomena and thus defines historical continuity. Today, these factors can be considered as contributing to "political decivilization", which is more serious than in Pareto's time.

The third section begins with Elias' concept of "decivilization", with the aim of helping us to define and better frame regressive phenomena in our society. These include the rise of irrational behaviour, questioning the competence of experts, the rejection of science, worldviews based on imagination rather than on factual data, and the increase in surprising and disconcerting behaviour.

Despite their apparent differences, these two authors can be viewed as complementary. By combining Pareto and Elias's contributions, we can address the crisis of contemporary society from multiple perspectives, while highlighting both its sociogenetic and psychogenetic dimensions, as Elias would say[1].

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[1] The civilising process refers to the slow and gradual change that took place in Europe from the end of the Middle Ages to the threshold of industrial society. In the context of the civilising process, Elias (2000) explains two distinct yet related aspects which he calls "psychogenesis" and "sociogenesis", respectively. Psychogenesis refers to the processes of developing self-control and self-discipline. It can be seen as the emergence of the modern psychological mindset. Through psychogenesis, social action is carried out within the boundaries of affectively neutral standardised behaviour, according to impersonal criteria and with more moderate forms of expression. Sociogenesis deals with the processes of structural change. It records the transformation of both material living conditions and geopolitical structures in Europe, such as the development of nation States (Lenzi, 2023; Shennan, 2000).
The result of the process of civilisation is, on the one hand, that modern people have developed a different sensibility, adopting more respectful, civil, emotionally controlled behaviour. This leads to greater social pacification (Elias, 2000, pp. 45-182). On the

2.   The reasons for the comparison

There are two main reasons to compare and juxtapose Pareto and Elias. Firstly, both scholars are concerned with the problems of modern society, which is the core of their analyses. Secondly, the comparison between Pareto and Elias relates to the historical events we are witnessing. These events seem to directly challenge the theorizations of Pareto and Elias more than of other scholars.

Unlike other classical sociological authors, Pareto views the problems of modern society as inherent rather than as effect of social transformations. He argues that the dysfunctional and chaotic nature of modern society is due to the irrationality of human beings (Marshall, 2007; Mornati, 2015; Susca, 2023).

On the contrary, Elias addressed the regressive trends of social transformations, labelled as "decivilization" (Elias, 1998, 2006b; Mennell, 1990, 2001).

In short, it can be argued that human emotions and passions were the *causa prima* of their theorizations, present in both Pareto and Elias.

The second reason for a joint reading of Pareto and Elias is to identify tools capable of analysing the crisis of contemporary society. The global transition we are experiencing keeps testing our civilisation and undermines the certainties and well-being that we have grown accustomed to (Castel, 2003; Colombo & Magri, 2020; Giddens, 1999; Occorsio & Scarpetta, 2022; Schirm et al., 2022).

Similarly, Pareto observed significant transformations that caused chaos and left no clear solutions or paths for improvement. Even today, finding a way out of the crisis we are experiencing is very difficult, and every potential solution seems inadequate (Gerstle, 2022)[2]. Therefore, by exploring Pareto, we may uncover the causes of contemporary society's problems (Adair-Toteff, 2023).

Elias' concept of decivilization – which refers to a withdrawal from the achieved level of civilization – helps us to understand the regressive trends and psychological roots of the crisis (Elias, 1998; Kramer & Ludes, 2020).

In contemporary public debates and politics, regressive opinions and values have become more prevalent over the past decade, often replacing

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other hand, Elias argues that the progressive pacification of modern Europe led to the emergence of nation States, overcoming the constant conflict typical of feudal society (Elias, 2000, pp. 185-362).

[2] Although finding valid solutions to counter the anomie of contemporary society is difficult – it can cause estrangement and generate socio-political phenomena such as populism (Fitzi et al., 2019) – anti-globalist solutions (Held & McGrew, 2007; Poletti, 2022), or a return *sic et simpliciter* to 20th century solidarity models, may be difficult to achieve (Bello, 2004).

scientific and expertise-based standards typical of Western societies. In developed countries with high standards of living, despite high rates of education (OECD, 2024[3]), we are witnessing a rise of irrational values and behaviours. These are characterised by strong emotional involvement and a rejection of science, culture, and expertise (Nichols, 2017). Many people tend to rely on pseudoscientific but simpler and more convincing arguments rather than on experts. They dislike the scientific process, which involves interpreting facts and events based on empirical verification rather than on imagination and fantasy (Tipaldo, 2019).

It's important to note that claims based on evaluations, and not on scientific data, are not true but plausible. "Verbal derivations" (Pareto, 2013, p. 1862) appropriately orchestrated and repeated are often believed to be valid and thus spread ideas and arguments that do not correspond to reality among an uninformed and easily permeable public opinion. The latter is strongly marked by emotional involvement. Moreover, Pareto describes contemporary phenomena that are commonly referred to as "fake news" (Jayakumar et al., 2021; McBrayer, 2020).

Their effects, particularly in terms of negative behaviour and attitudes, have alarmed authorities to the extent that the European Commission (EU, 2018) intervened. It's important to avoid subjective evaluations and use clear, objective language in order to maintain a balanced and precise content.

These manifestations indicate a form of societal decline and can be characterised as "decivilization" (Elias, 1998), particularly in the political sphere. They reflect the discontent of the public, whose opinions accuse the elites and mainstream powers of exclusion and victimisation (Dorato, 2019).

As we will see below, Elias emphasises the regressive trend as a psychogenetic process. He explains that during difficult times, the subjects, and social groups most affected by transformative processes tend to regress from the level of rationality and self-control they have achieved. Elias thus highlights the negative impact of transformation as decivilization. The author relates the phenomenon of decivilization to the challenges of personal and social fulfilment, which in turn leads to an identity crisis of individuals and social groups in times of great change.

Summing up, while Pareto and Elias have their differences, their theories can be effectively compared in order to explain some of nowadays' unique social trends. Pareto and Elias offer complementary perspectives on the crisis in contemporary society. Pareto examines the sociogenesis of the crisis with regard to socio-political processes and actors, while Elias allows us to grasp its

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[3] On average, in OECD countries, 79% of adults aged 25-64 have completed upper secondary education and 40% have a tertiary degree (OECD, 2024).

psychogenesis, including the psychological roots of regression processes and the impact of structural transformations on people's socio-psychological well-being. By juxtaposing the two authors, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the crisis.

3. Political decivilization: challenges, difficulties, and "betrayals" of democracy

The current crisis in contemporary society is reflected in the challenges that democratic institutions face due to globalization and the expectations of citizens. To address these challenges, democratic institutions must become more responsive to the needs of citizens. The latter find that democratic institutions and procedures are detached from the problems citizens face in their daily lives, if not oppressive, to a certain extent (Burstein, 2020; Giugni & Lorenzini, 2020; Lopez-Claros et al., 2020).

It's not the case for an in-depth examination of this complex of issues and we therefore take the liberty of referring to the ongoing scholarly debate (Crouch, 2004; Kim & Fallon, 2020; Tomini & Sandri, 2018).

The challenges, difficulties, and "betrayals" of democracy are revealed in these brief outlines, similar to what Pareto observed. Democratic institutions are challenged in terms of their organization and even in their cornerstones, as in the case of the right to vote. There are arguments suggesting that political rights should only be granted to competent citizens or those who understand the consequences of their choices (Brennan, 2016).

Pareto also raised concerns about citizens' competences. It is important to note that the author expressed concern about the malfunctioning of democratic institutions and scepticism towards popular participation in political life. This point of view was based on an assessment of the population's discernment and capacity of mobilisation. The argument can be considered well-founded given the socio-historical conditions of the population at that time. It was believed that the population's political education and competences were poor due to high illiteracy rates.

Today's concept of public opinion, which the political class must consider, is based on certain possibilities and characteristics of the modern political system. This requires widespread education, a variety of information sources, increased political participation, and the involvement of multiple subjects and organizations that have made the political landscape diverse and the political debate more sophisticated. These are all features of the political system that were slowly established in the second half of the 20th century, helping to mature, broaden, and stabilise the political framework.

Another question concerns the effectiveness of democracies, especially when compared to autocracies. During the Covid pandemic, it was wrongly assumed that authoritarian regimes were better able to cope with the crisis (Kroenig, 2020; Stasavage, 2020). Furthermore, democracy is facing competition from populism, a global phenomenon (Moffitt, 2016; Stockemer, 2019), as well as the weakening of the State's role.

The rise of populism in contemporary society has been facilitated by rapid social, economic, and cultural changes, as well as by the shortcomings of institutional and administrative structures in governing these changes. Furthermore, growing expectations of citizens who feel that democratic regimes have not kept their promises have contributed to this phenomenon (Baykan, 2023; de la Torre, 2019; Merker, 2009 provides a historical-theoretical framework).

Pareto's work on the transformations of democracy is also noteworthy (Femia, 2006; Pareto, 2016). The author's arguments and criticisms regarding political life appear to foreshadow the rise of authoritarian populist political forms in contemporary Western democracies (Crewe & Sanders, 2020; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2020; Tomini & Sandri, 2018; Urbinati, 2019). Additionally, the author expresses concern about the mismanagement of State resources at the expense of the community.

Pareto's concept of the State was associated with robust institutions that could guarantee stability and effective governance (Mongardini & Maniscalco, 1999). Therefore, he advocated for a system that would ensure that only those with the required skills and abilities could hold positions of power. Pareto believed that these representatives lacked the necessary reasoning and governance skills to manage power. He argued that the extension of suffrage to representatives of lower social classes resulted in a shift in the social power balance in favour of larger but less rational social groups. Consequently, the weakening of central sovereignty has favoured centrifugal forces[4].

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[4] Pareto (1921; 2016, 31 ff.) distinguishes periods based on centripetal and centrifugal forces. Centripetal forces consolidate the State, while centrifugal forces weaken the State or lead to the crumbling of its sovereignty. Instead of facing each other in political competition, centrifugal forces prefer to make preliminary agreements on the methods of dividing resources and then proceed in this direction. Pareto believed that parliamentary agreements not only disintegrate an institutional model but also have negative effects on governance. Contrary to any political haggling, Pareto saw these effects as detrimental to good governance. Such agreements damage the community, particularly on an economic and financial level, by increasing public debt and imposing a tax burden on wealthy taxpayers (Pareto, 2016, 63-64; 82-83).

Pareto believed that the State is weakened because the management of public affairs is no longer in the hands of the elites, but in those of the less competent parliamentary majorities. The latter bend institutions to their clientelistic interests. Only the elites, i.e. personalities endowed with extraordinary abilities in comparison to the masses, could guarantee this function[5]. Pareto argued that the concept of democracy led to the distortion of State institutions, as it served the interests of the new ruling class. According to Pareto, parliamentary majorities were often "spurious", consisting of speculators and workers (Pareto, 2016).

Furthermore, Pareto observed that the genesis of the modern State was based on the link between political representation and the contribution of citizens, particularly taxation. In Paretian theory, "democracy" can often lead to poor governance, resulting in the squandering of resources rather than in their efficient use. The effects of such measures would soon be felt in the future, with an increase in public spending (Pareto, 2016). The author argues that social policies often prioritize the immediate satisfaction of a specific group of beneficiaries, without considering their long-term effects. Pareto seems to be an observer of the social policy measures adopted today for the benefit of specific social groups (Baldissera, 2019).

Moreover, Pareto criticized bad customs and particularistic interests, such as entrepreneurs who rely on State support. According to Pareto, State-supported entrepreneurs aim to maintain their privileged positions instead of producing collective wealth in terms of social tasks. Although Pareto is a sincere liberal, he criticizes such practices.

For Pareto, the market is the best way to allocate resources and improve the general interest. Furthermore, the freedom of the economic actor is functional to this goal (Pareto, 1946). Furthermore, he believed that any form of resource redistribution was incorrect. He argued that social differences did not depend on available income, but on individuals' ability to act autonomously within the market. This, he claimed, was the only way to promote and ensure well-being for the whole society (Pareto, 1971; Aron, 1971). Conversely, those who solely pursued their own interests could harm society by causing dysfunction and anomie.

Therefore, Pareto's principle can help us to identify persistent bad habits and structural problems, as well as their origins (Busino, 2000; 2013). However, implementing opposing solutions can be challenging and often lead to failure.

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[5] According to Pareto (2013, p. 2215), the elite consists of individuals with the highest indices in their respective fields. Aron (1971) similarly describes them as those who have excelled in the 'life exam' and have also been fortunate in the "lottery of social existence".

This principle can also be applied to our society, as it can uncover the roots of our current crisis (Barbieri, 2017).

However, the current situation appears to be more serious than in Pareto's time. Although the conditions for citizens to exercise their political rights have been met, democracy is facing challenges today. Many people are still unable to participate effectively, despite widespread levels of high education. Democratic procedures are often seen as cumbersome and ineffective, while autocracies are viewed as efficient due to their centralized power. It is important to address these issues in order to strengthen democracy.

All these elements suggest that we are experiencing, in general, a decline in our civilization and that a particular regressive form we are witnessing can be labelled as "political decivilization".

4.   Decivilisation in contemporary society

Elias is known for his theory of the civilizing process, which describes the changes in behaviour and psyche that Europeans underwent during modernisation from the end of the Middle Ages to the advent of industrial society. Through civilization Europeans – starting with the aristocracy and later extending to other social strata – learned to control their passions, contain their emotions, master their impulses, and reject violence in interpersonal and interstate relations.

Civilization, like any process of change, has its reverse, which Norbert Elias refers to as "decivilization" (Cavalli, 1991; Fletcher, 1995). Elias applies the notion of decivilization to various situations attesting regressive phenomena of the civilizing process and recognizes its manifestation in many cases (for a reconstruction see Mennell, 1990; Mennell, 2001, p. 32)[6].

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[6] The "decivilization" cases to be mentioned in Elias' work are the following:
a)   the Holocaust and other mass murder (Elias, 1998).
b)   The growing informality within the permissive society, particularly concerning the way of behaving, bathing, sport wearing that leave large portions of the body uncovered; dressing casually even in the workplace; interpersonal relationships frequently adopting informally addressing.
c)   Violence in contemporary society. In this case, Elias refers to political terrorism in the 1970s in the *Bonner Republik,* the former Federal Republic of Germany at that time (Elias, 1998). Today we could consider the many cases of interpersonal violence as a way of regulating disputes, as well as episodes of gratuitous violence committed without inhibitions.
d)   The disappearance of the great civilizations (such as the Maya, the Aztecs).

The term "decivilization" seems to have become fashionable today. It has been used in various contexts, including by French President Macron in May 2023 when referring to racially motivated violence that occurred in France[7].

As argued by Nachtwey (2017), traces of decivilization can be found in contemporary society with regard to the role and social position of the subject. In contrast to modernity, where the subject is the driver, in contemporary society, the subject is constantly under pressure to perform, thus leading to a deterioration in living conditions. In advanced countries, this phenomenon affects not only the social strata that were traditionally at risk of social marginalization but also members of the middle class. Nachtwey refers to this as "regressive modernization", as the exaltation of the subject spills over into neoliberal era.

To further clarify the relationship between decivilization and the crisis of contemporary society, we will examine how Elias offers valuable insights. Elias mentions cases of decivilization when individuals and social groups struggle to fulfil their potential and to find their place in the world. This was the case for the German bourgeoisie during the Weimar Republic, who formed the social base of Nazism. Similarly, the younger generations of the German bourgeoisie, who in the affluent society of the 1970s were practitioners of political terrorism (Elias, 1998).

Decivilization phenomena occur more easily and frequently when individuals and social groups most exposed to the negative effects of transformation processes regress from the level of progress, rationality, and self-control they have acquired up to that point. According to Elias, social transformations trigger an involutional process by altering the conditions of personal and social fulfilment and increasing difficulties. The impact of major transformations can cause individuals and social groups to experience an identity crisis.

When applying this interpretive scheme to contemporary society, it is evident that over the last thirty years, the stability of the development model

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e) The last case of civilization regression occurs in conjunction with the advent and diffusion of technology. In these cases, human beings must develop appropriate behaviour and self-regulation mechanisms so that they can use technology adequately (Elias, 2006b). Thanks to this last case, the concept of decivilization doesn't only reflect the loss of an acquired level of civilisation. Elias (2006b) argues that it can also be seen as a prelude to necessary sociogenetic and psychogenetic changes resulting from processes of social change induced by technological innovation (Bianco, 2021).

[7] https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/violences-en-conseil-des-ministres-emmanuel-macron-alerte-contre-une-decivilisation-de-la-societe-24-05-2023-ZJPHQ2DXOVB2BG4ET74K346XNE.php

that was consolidated in the West after WW2, which we refer to as "civilised", has been called into question. Inclusive institutions that were fundamental to our way of life, such as stable employment relations, the provision of generous social benefits, and public services considered essential for all, have been downsized. Today, due to increasing precariousness, these downsizings appear to be in regression.

Furthermore, the current global transition is challenging the certainties and welfare that we have grown accustomed to (Colombo & Magri, 2020). Certain social groups are disproportionately affected by these phenomena (Boeri, 2017), leading to feelings of estrangement and anomie, as well as socio-political reactions such as anti-globalism and populism.

The distribution of incomes (Piketty, 2013) is among the structural causes of this phenomenon. Since the 1990s, the trend of income distribution has been unfavourable to the western middle classes. This has coincided with, or to some extent been the consequence of, increasing difficulties for the baby-boomer generation. There is a growing concern about the uncertain and unfavourable working conditions, difficult career prospects, and increased pressure on professional performance faced by workers (Chauvel, 2007; Costa, 2005). Generally, it is becoming increasingly challenging to secure a job, and the earnings do not correspond to the high level of education achieved (Elias, 2006a).

This is the description of the experience of the contemporary middle classes in the West, as well as the present difficulties and coming prospects of younger generations. It highlights the increasing vulnerability of certain individuals and social groups in the West, which can lead to marginalisation and a weakening of social cohesion. All these factors can contribute to the emergence of decivilizing processes, similar to those that underpinned Nazi violence and political terrorism in the 1970s (Elias, 1998). Today, these factors provide a conducive environment for the emergence of extremist ideologies and conspiracy theories.

This understanding forms the basis for the phenomena and behaviour mentioned in the previous paragraph. An increasing number of citizens are exhibiting reactions of rejection, if not outright hostility, towards the current social order. Top positions are being contested, and there is a general distrust of expertise and specialised skills, such as those of scientists. Democratic procedures are being questioned, and functional and rational criteria for regulating society are being disregarded.

Elias also clarifies how the increased insecurity and the tendency to explain reality in an emotional and abstract way, i.e. fantastic, are affecting society. Elias (2000, p. 255) argues that modern science was established when humans became more rational and distanced themselves from subjective evaluations.

This allowed them to study natural phenomena as a concatenation with its own laws, independent of human will. Elias gives the example of the transition from the geocentric to the heliocentric conception. This maturation allowed individuals to adopt a more detached attitude, accepting nature as an external and independent entity. The development of modern science was made possible not so much by scientific progress, but rather by the psychological maturation of human beings. As a result, modern science was able to flourish (Elias, 2000).

However, it is observed that individuals tend to avoid reality and resort to fantastical explanations when they struggle to comprehend the world around them. This sheds light on the current questioning of the competence of experts and science, the weakening of social controls on evidence and truth in political debates and public opinion, and the increasing scrutiny of climate change deniers on scientific grounds. During the pandemic, a vocal minority, such as the anti-vaccination movement, questioned scientific expertise and denounced anti-Covid containment measures, claiming they were a form of "health dictatorship" (Amossy, 2023). In the humanities and social sciences, some theories may be revisionist and assert themselves even against historical evidence. They may advance theses driven by ressentiment and fundamentalist options that propose to establish a new social order based on outdated canons, in a dystopian manner.

Summing up, Elias helps us to establish the links between transformation processes, people's living conditions, and their socio-psychological equilibrium. Thus, it is possible to reconstruct the psychogenetic origins of the decivilization processes and analyse certain phenomena that currently manifest regression from the typical standards of modern society.

5. Concluding remarks

This paper presented a comparison between Pareto and Elias, who offer insights into contemporary society despite their differences. The distance between their theoretical and thematic approaches can be a useful tool for analysing societal phenomena.

In terms of their differences, aside from the generational gap of half a century, they are also culture-sensitive, which significantly affects their conceptualization of social mechanisms. Pareto maintained a distance from German culture, which is where Elias originated from[8]. Elias dealt extensively

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[8] Bobbio (1964, p. 28) observes that Pareto did not mention prominent German sociologists, such as Ferdinand Tönnies and Max Weber, in his work. This omission of reference to such influential figures raises questions about Pareto's engagement with

with aristocrats, the genesis of the modern State, and processes of democratic transition. He developed a different approach to "political sociology", ignoring Pareto.

The authors differed significantly in their theoretical approach, character, training, and influences from the evolution of sociological theory. Pareto, like other influential thinkers of his time such as Weber and Freud, represented the conflict within human beings between their passionate and irrational component and the rational component that enables them to engage in social relations (Aron, 1971, p. 171; Bobbio, 1964; Romania, 2021).

While Pareto believed that human passions and irrationality were immutable facts and the cause of social disorder, Elias departs from this conception. Elias considers passions to be dynamic and has a plastic view of the human mind. He believes that the process of civilization does not consist solely in repressing instincts, but rather in each human being learning self-control, self-transformation, and in the exercise of their autonomy. In other words, adapting to new social and environmental conditions can transform one's personality, whilst creating a different psychological habitus (Elias, 2000).

It is equally significant to note the convergences between Pareto and Elias, who both had eclectic backgrounds and moved from disciplines far from the original nucleus of sociology. These are commonly referred to as the "hard sciences" today: engineering and economics, according to Pareto (Malandrino & Marchionatti, 2000; Mongardini, 1973; Riccioni, 2016), and medicine according to Elias (Tabboni, 1993). Their broad scope of study enabled them to address a wide range of issues. Their recognition of the importance of psychology, for example, led them to focus on the irrational aspects of society, which Pareto deemed irredeemable, whereas Elias believed could be progressively mastered.

Both Pareto and Elias believed in the importance of a comprehensive view of social phenomena to understand the subjects that animate their many facets. This allows an analysis of social reality in its true dimensions. They were both against the idea of a subject separated from its context, which Elias referred to as *homo clausus*. Elias traced this concept back to Leibniz's metaphysical construction (Elias, 2000).

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the broader sociological debate of his time. Pareto did not speak German and had a dislike for anything coming from Germany. Furthermore, Pareto's sociological approach, as outlined in his work, was purely experimental, akin to the "hard" sciences (Pareto, 2013, p. 292). This approach differed greatly from the humanistic-comprehensive approach of the German school. Noteworthy is that Carroll (1973) highlights Nietzsche's influence on Pareto, partially contradicting Bobbio's claim.

Based on the above, Pareto and Elias provided anticipatory insights into current trends in contemporary societies that witness the rise of regressive phenomena concerning the standards of rationality, which have been typical of Western history and culture.

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