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The History of Turkish Labour Relations as a Figuration: An Eliasian Reading

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Abstract

The history of labour relations in Turkey has predominantly been examined through a simplistic chronological framework, with studies grounded in comprehensive theoretical foundations being exceedingly rare. This study offers a reinterpretation of Turkey's labour relations history by employing the concept of "figuration" developed by Norbert Elias, a prominent figure in contemporary social theory. It focuses on three key historical moments: the period of the first labour law's enactment, the post-World War II era, and the early 2000s. The analysis aims to illustrate how labour relations have been shaped by complex and dynamic interactions rather than the absolute power of any single actor. Drawing on Elias's game models as an analytical framework, the study argues that labour relations resemble a game, where each actor's actions influence and are influenced by others. Empirical data from the three historical moments are utilized to substantiate this perspective, providing a fresh theoretical approach to understanding Turkey's labour relations history.

Keywords: Norbert Elias, figuration, game models, Turkey's labour relations history.

1. Introduction

Norbert Elias's The Civilizing Process (2000) though written in the 1930s, was recognized by social scientists much later, in the 1960s. From that point onward, this work not only became a modern classic but also inspired a broad body of literature on the concept of the civilizing process. In his study, Elias focuses on Western European history to illustrate the transformation in self-

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restraint and behavioral constraints over time. He demonstrates this by examining etiquette manuals written roughly between the 16th and 19th centuries. The historical shift that Elias refers to as the "civilizing process" implies a transition from behaviors closer to the "natural" to those that are more cultured, constrained, and self-controlled—from more barbaric, oppressive, violent, and coarse behaviors to more refined, delicate, and repressed conduct. This theoretical framework does not view this transformation as the outcome of intentional or foreseen actions by actors; rather, when viewed through long historical sequences, a tendency towards a specific direction becomes evident.

Elias explains the fundamental dynamics underpinning this transformation with two key elements. The first is the rise of modern nation-states in the context of the centralization or monopolization of power in European history. The second is the increasing division of labour, which leads to a greater degree of mutual interdependence. The latter concept, in particular, later becomes central to Elias's literature through the notion of figuration. Elias employs the concept of figuration not only to analyze the civilizing process but also as a fundamental tool in nearly all his analyses, highlighting the mutual dependencies that influence the parties involved. As intersections with different actors increase, the behavioral dynamics within each figuration change, leading to greater control over behavior.

This conceptual framework can be applied to historical analyses, labour relations, management practices, and similar fields. Indeed, researchers employing Elias's concepts hail from diverse disciplines beyond sociology, including political science, international relations, and management studies (Braun, 2019; The Civilized Organization, 2002; Kınlı, 2014; Linklater, 2012; Newton & Smith, 2002; Taïeb, 2014; Woute, 2007). In this study, I aim to reinterpret the history of Turkish labour relations through Elias's conceptual lens. By doing so, I will attempt to show that this history, which is typically analysed through the perspective of conflict theory, can also be understood as part of the civilizing process. To achieve this, I will use the concept of figuration as a key analytical tool. Elias employs figuration not only to describe mutual relationships among individual actors but also to explain the mutual relations of institutions, organizations, and larger social structures, and the effects of these relationships on the actors involved.

In this study, the history of Turkish labour relations will be reanalysed using Norbert Elias's concept of figuration. This approach will illustrate how significant turning points or developments in this history—such as the first labour law, the transition to a multi-party system, the first union law, and the current labour legislation—have been shaped by the mutual interactions of the actors constituting the labour relations figuration.

However, before engaging with Elias's concepts and applying them to the Turkish context, it will be useful to briefly explain why I chose to employ Norbert Elias's conceptual framework rather than that of another theorist. If the aim is to emphasize the importance of relationality and interactions, why not use, for example, Pierre Bourdieu's concepts of field and habitus (Bourdieu et al., 2025 ;Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992); Erving Goffman's interactional concepts (Goffman, 1974); Anthony Giddens's concept of structuration (Giddens, 1986); or Alain Touraine's approach to action and social movements (Touraine, 2020)?

This is, in fact, a critical question. The choice of a conceptual or theoretical framework largely depends on how the researcher structures the study and what kind of answers they seek. Theoretical tools enable the researcher to situate the phenomenon or object of study within a context and to make sense of it. These tools function as forms of abstraction that help explain why a phenomenon appears in one way rather than another within a specific context. They are therefore always open to testing and revision.

Using one theoretical framework does not imply that others are invalid or lack explanatory power. For example, one could also attempt to interpret the history of Turkish labour relations through any of the frameworks mentioned above; however, each would require shifting the analytical focus of the study. If the analysis were conducted at a more micro level, for instance within workplaces, Goffman's perspective would be more appropriate. Similarly, if the focus were on the actions of labour movements, Touraine's approach would be preferable; and if the emphasis were on the relations and capitals of actors within a "field" such as the labour market, Bourdieu's framework would be the more suitable option.

However, if the aim is to understand how the actions of actors within a network of relations are shaped by and, in turn, reshape that network over long historical sequences, then Elias's theoretical apparatus seems most appropriate. Elias examines social processes from both a macro perspective and within a framework of continuity. Therefore, if we are searching for traces of a process of refinement or civilizing, his concepts prove particularly useful.

This, of course, does not mean that Elias's theory is without limitations. It is unnecessary to enumerate all the critiques directed at his framework here, but it is worth recalling some of the most relevant ones: that his theory is Eurocentric, that it does not clearly capture power and class relations, and that it relegates subjective experience to the background. One limitation relevant to this study concerns the direction in which the field of employment relations appears to evolve. Although Elias explicitly rejects a teleological understanding of history, he nonetheless conceives long historical sequences as a process of

civilization—where more violent and crude forms of behavior gradually transform into subtler and more "civilized" forms.

In this study, I discuss what might be considered, in Elias's temporal scale, a relatively short process of civilization within the field of Turkish labour relations. Yet, is not the contemporary tendency toward precarization—widely discussed in twenty-first-century social science literature—a kind of reversal? This is a crucial question. Elias's framework encourages us to compare the present not with the past decade or two, but with a much longer historical trajectory. He himself acknowledges that short-term reversals can occur within long-term sequences. Although he developed the concept of decivilizing processes primarily in the context of the Nazi period in Germany, it can also be applied to the domain of labour relations (Elias, 1996). Whether the current state of precarization constitutes a decivilizing process is something that only future researchers will be able to determine; nonetheless, interpreting it as such would not contradict Elias's theoretical logic.

Finally, I would like to explain why my analysis begins with the early Republican period, moves swiftly beyond the post–World War II years, and proceeds directly to the 2000s. It is possible to argue that the most dynamic and vibrant period in the history of Turkish labour relations was between 1961 and 1980. The 1961 Constitution granted workers the right to strike for the first time and opened a relatively more liberal space for labour relations. There are numerous moments within this roughly twenty-year period that could be examined in great detail; however, addressing all of them would far exceed the limits of a single article. Instead of focusing on each moment separately, I chose to approach Turkey's relationship with the European Union as another level of figuration. This approach, as elaborated throughout the text, better reflects the logic of figuration that underlies the analysis.

2. Figuration

Norbert Elias frequently expresses in his writings that he is against conceptual dualities in social theory, claiming that these dualities prevent us from seeing certain things. These dualities are often presented as if they are isolated from each other, which leads to overlooking processes and relationality (Elias, 1978, 1992). For example, when discussing the individual and society, there is an implicit suggestion that each can exist independently of the other. Elias explicitly rejects these isolated conceptual uses. According to him, these mistaken or incorrect usages are also linked to the nature of language. Therefore, it is impossible to speak of an individual without society. There is not a one-way determinism between these two, but rather a series of mutual

influences. In this context, power should also be understood in terms of relationships or networks — the power of any actor is embedded in the networks surrounding them (Elias & Scotson, 1994; van Krieken, 2017; Loyal, 2021). Thus, the relationships between individuals and groups of individuals, or between organizations, states, social classes, etc., influence and shape both sides. In the context of this study, the relationship between labour and capital, or worker and employer, or manager and managed, is also not one-directional.

Some aspects of Elias's theoretical position include the following (van Krieken, 2005): viewing social life as the unintended or unplanned consequences of intentional human actions; understanding people as mutually interdependent entities forming figurations or networks; focusing on relationships rather than situations; and dealing with dynamic processes of development and change rather than fixed structures. While these elements complement each other, I will focus on mutual interdependence here. According to Elias, one can only become human within a network of social relationships and mutual interdependencies. This relationality begins with the state of being born as a helpless baby who cannot control their environment (Dolan, 2014; van Krieken, 2005). Therefore, Elias does not take essentialist approaches seriously; for example, in his biography of Mozart, he interprets even the concept of "genius," which implies a kind of essentialism, through a series of relationships or the logic of figuration (Elias, 1993).

Baur and Ernst (2011), who have conducted significant work on Elias's methodology, emphasize three steps in his process-oriented methodology. These three steps also provide a comprehensible framework for those who wish to approach phenomena in this context. The first step (1) concerns the macro-level, specifically the formation of figuration or the identification of its rules and social structure. Elias defines figuration as a social structure composed of individuals interconnected by positions, rules, norms, and values (Elias, 2009). Thus, the structure of figuration is a framework that organizes and directs the actions of individuals or groups. Each actor has different access to positions within a figuration, facilitating some behaviors while constraining others. In other words, every actor within a given figuration is bound to their position, facing certain limitations and choices. If actors are part of figurations, this means they are within a network of relationships, which often involve tensions and conflicts (van Krieken, 2017; Scheff, 2001). Therefore, the first step is to identify the rules and social structure of the figuration.

The second step highlighted by the authors (Baur & Ernst, 2011) (2) concerns the micro-level, specifically the individual's place within a figuration, how they perceive it, and their ability to change it. We know that figurations provide a framework for individual actions. Thus, depending on their position within the figuration, an individual has more or less power to act. However, this

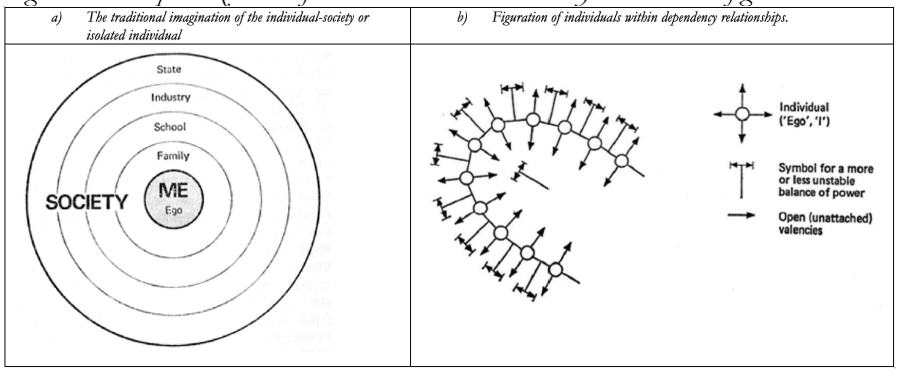
is not a one-way relationship — indeed, one-way influence is one of Elias's primary objections — as individuals can change both their positions within the figuration and the figuration itself (its structure and rules) (Treibel, 2001). In this context, researchers adopting a figurational approach need to analyse how individuals interpret the figuration they are in, how their actions intertwine with other members' actions, why and how individuals enter or leave a figuration, how and why their positions within a figuration change over their lifetime, and how and why they can or cannot influence a figuration (Elias, 1978).

The third step (3) concerns the socio-genetic reconstruction of figurations. This means that neither figurations nor actors are static or unchangeable; both individuals and figurations are constantly changing and interwoven with each other. This change can only be understood by considering long-term processes rather than focusing on a single moment (Elias, 1978).

The concept of figuration, a key term in Elias's literature (expressed as configuration in his early texts, see Elias & Scotson, 1994), is a recurring conceptualization throughout his works. One of the clearest presentations of the concept is found in his work What is Sociology? (1978). At the beginning of this book, Elias critiques the isolated treatment of individuals or actors in social analysis. He notes that people today are often depicted as separate from other people and institutions, with everything else positioned as objects outside of them. In other words, a single individual and their environment, a single child and their family, etc., are discussed, but it is forgotten that these single entities are simultaneously part of or belong to their surroundings. Because the family only exists with the child, and society only exists with individual members. Elias attributes one of the main reasons for this to the tools of language and thought, which objectify everything outside of us. For example, when one says "the wind is blowing" or "the river is flowing", there is an implicit suggestion that the wind can exist independently of the breeze and the river independently of the current (Elias, 1978, p. 112). Similarly, when concepts like "family" or "school" are used, treating them as external objects like rocks, houses, or trees — rather than as figurations involving networks of relationships — exemplifies this objectification (Elias, 1978, p. 13). Elias visualizes this common approach with a diagram (Figure 1-a). This image shows each individual "self" within social structures, but portrays these structures as entities external to the individual. However, Elias argues that individuals, groups of individuals, and institutions should be understood in relation to each other. This is the essence of the concept of figuration. He also visualizes this idea (Figure 1-b) (Elias, 1978, p. 13–17). The concepts of isolated individuals versus relational individuals appear in Elias's terminology as homo clausus and homines aperti. The former implies a closed, isolated individual (Figure 1-a), while the latter implies an open or connected individual (Figure 1-b) (Dunning & Hughes, 2013, p. 96–100; Elias,

1978, p. 119; 125; 2001, p. 199; Elias & Scotson, 1994, p. xlii; Fletcher, 2005, p. 78).

Figure 1. Conceptualizations of traditional individual-society vs. relational figuration.



Source: (Elias, 1978, p. 14–15).

Elias's explanation of this second image is a simple account of figuration (Elias, 1978, p. 15):

> "As we shall see, these traditional ideas have to be replaced by a different, more realistic picture of people who, through their basic dispositions and inclinations, are directed towards and linked with each other in the most diverse ways. These people make up webs of interdependence or figurations of many kinds, characterized by power balances of many sorts, such as families, schools, towns, social strata, or states. Every one of these people is, as it is often put in a reifying manner, an ego or self. Among these people belongs also oneself."

In another work (Time: An Essay), Norbert Elias demonstrates that the conceptualization of the isolated or detached individual has many representatives in the history of philosophy (Elias, 1992). The two names he most frequently mentions are Descartes and Kant. Descartes, by doubting everything he previously knew through the use of reason, sought to identify the most fundamental principle and believed he found it (cogito ergo sum) (Descartes, 2006, p. 33). Similar a priori faculties form the foundation of Kant's philosophy (Schopenhauer, 1966). Elias vehemently criticizes these assumptions. He does not take such presuppositions seriously due to their imposition of mechanical causality, their representation of immutable absolute constants, and their disregard for learning (Elias, 1992). According to Elias, a starting point beyond doubt and an unchanging notion of reason are

problematic. The concepts used in reasoning, the language employed, and so forth — all of these reach their form in any given historical period as the result of the practical and theoretical efforts of many generations (Elias, 1992)[1]. In short, Elias's concept of figuration rejects the understanding of the individual as isolated from society and the notion of a priori precedence that is detached from experience and history.

An illustrative analogy for this concept is dance (Dunning & Hughes, 2013, p. 92; Elias, 1992, p. 138, 2000, p. 482, 2001, pp. 19–20; van Krieken, 2005, p. 55; Quintaneiro, 2004). Waltz, tango, halay, horon, or dance in general differs from walking. For example, a person participating in a halay (a form of folk dance in Türkiye) is expected to perform movements that match the rhythm or the style of the dance being performed. Here, a dance figuration imposes certain ways of dancing on the individual. Although dance cannot occur without individual participants, it seems to become an entity separate from them. Yet it is the individuals who make the dance possible, and it is the dance itself that leads the individual to perform in a certain way

3. Game models

One of the most detailed explanations of the concept of figuration — a concept referenced throughout almost all of Elias's works — can be found in the third chapter of What is Sociology?, titled "Game Models" (1978). What makes Norbert Elias's concepts somewhat difficult to explain is the fact that almost all his key concepts (such as process, figuration, interweaving, etc.) are interrelated and can only be understood within the context of these relationships. This is consistent with his general approach, which opposes static analyses. Therefore, I refer to this third chapter within our current context; if I were discussing the concept of interweaving, I would still emphasize the

[1] "Or take Descartes: having argued his case in the highly developed philosophical language of his age, he summed up his findings in the famous Latin tag 'cogito ergo sum', implying that everything outside himself might be an illusion and its existence doubted - only his own reasoning and, thus, his own existence could not be doubted. Yet all this was argued in languages such as Latin and French and thought out with the help of the tradition of knowledge handed on to Descartes together with these languages. He thus derived from what he had learned from others the very means of discovering something 'within himself' which, as he saw it, did not come from 'outside' and could not, therefore, be a possible illusion. If, however, everything that is learned from others and is therefore an experience from 'outside' can be doubted as a possible illusion, may not the language which one has learned from others also be an illusion and the others from whom one has learned it, too?" (Elias, 1992, p. 63–64).

importance of this chapter. As Elias highlights both in the long introductory section he added to later editions of The Civilizing Process (Elias, 2023) and in many other places (Elias, 1992, 1993, 2001), he remained distant from the mainstream static emphasis (or Parsonian dominance) in social theory during the period these texts were written and focused on processes and relational dynamics. The most detailed and clear expression of these patterns of interdependence appears in this third chapter. This discussion is also significant because it attracted the attention of some first-generation Eliasian scholars (Mennell, 2022). In an interview, Mennell explains how, when he first encountered game models, they so clearly exposed the obsolescence of Talcott Parsons' theoretical approach (Mennell, 2022, p. 20).

> "The Game Models, in contrast, were a revelation. Their central point is that this mythical substance "agency" is a function of changing power ratios within chains of social interdependence (from birth onwards). They go on to show how, as the number of participants increases and/ or as the power ratios become relatively more equal, the more the course of social processes becomes relatively more unplanned and relatively less the outcome of individual intentions as they appear to individuals who imagine themselves to be sovereign authors of their own lives."

So, what does Elias explain in this chapter (1978)? Here, Elias attempts to demonstrate the complexity of the social world through various game models. He broadly categorizes these game models into two types. The first model, which might correspond to the earliest stages of human history, Elias refers to as the "primal contest". This model illustrates a figuration without any rules or norms. The second type of models consists of normalized figuration models. In these, Elias describes increasingly complex game types: games played between two people (games 1a, 1b -Table 1-), games played among multiple people at one level (games 2a, 2b, 2c, 2d -Table 1-), and games played among multiple people at two levels. In this final type, he even compares two-layered game models: an oligarchic type and a democratizing type (games 3a, 3b).

Elias notes that real-life situations are far more complex, involving not just two layers but sometimes contexts with four or five layers (such as international and supranational structures) (Elias, 1978). However, for the sake of simplifying the narrative, he limits himself to two levels. While this is not the place to detail each game model, Elias broadly illustrates that understanding the social requires recognizing increasingly complex relationships — from the simplest (e.g., between two people) to those involving groups interacting with each other and

within themselves — and understanding the dynamic processes in which all these relationships are interwoven.

In analysing the modern world, the models to consider are normed figurations. In all these models, even in the simplest one — 1a (Table 1), where one person is very powerful and the other is very weak — power is not absolute but a relational form. Elias highlights that although examples of the 1a model (Table 1) can be found in modern societies (e.g., the relationship between an expert and a non-expert or between a slave and a non-slave), it remains marginal. For contemporary societies, 2c and 3b models (Table 1) are more useful.

Table 1. Game models.

Primal Contest: model of a contest without rules	Normed models of figuration: models of interweaving processes with norms		
For example, the struggle and relationship between two small tribes hunting in an untouched forest.	*Two-person games*	*Multi-person games at one level*	*Multi-person games at two levels*
	1a (A is very strong, B is very weak)	2a (Strong A vs. weak B, C, D, etc.)	3a (Two-level game model: oligarchic type)
	1b (The difference in power between A and B has decreased)	2b (A against the others as a group)	3b (Two-level game model: increasingly democratic type)
		2c (A with decreasing power and the others)	
		2d (Multiple individuals against multiple individuals)	

Source: Compiled from Chapter 3 of What is Sociology? (Elias, 1978, p. 71–91).

The 2b model (Table 1) represents a game played on a single plane with multiple players, where one player (A) faces many weaker players. A's power is influenced by the strategies of the other players. If the weaker players form a group, A's ability to manipulate them diminishes. This figuration model can be used to understand different phases in the history of labour relations. For example, in the 2a model (Table 1), the players opposing A are individually weak and incapable of forming a group. In contrast, in the 2b model (Table 1), opponents can organize and act collectively. These two models seem to provide conceptual tools for explaining the early stages of the Industrial Age, where workers initially acted individually against employers and later formed unions.

The 3b model (Table 1) represents relatively democratizing relationships between the administrators of a large-scale bureaucratic structure (e.g., a state) and the governed. This model has two levels: the "upper" level of administrators and the "lower" level of the governed. Unlike the oligarchic 3a type (Table 1), the 3b model features a more flexible and unstable balance of power (Elias, 1978). In the context of labour relations, 3a and 3b models can

be frameworks for examining relationships in large bureaucratic organizations. If labour relations in an entire country are to be analysed, single-level, two-levels, and multi-level relationships should be considered based on the research objective. For instance, understanding Turkey's post-World War II labour regulations or reforms in the early 2000s would require analysing not just two-levels relations but multi-level figurations involving international influences (e.g., the U.S. and the EU).

Another important point is that as figurations become more complex and power differences diminish, controlling the game's outcome becomes more difficult for any single player or group of players. The intertwining moves of numerous players start to shape the game's progression, which becomes relatively independent of individual intentions. In such cases, the game's progression is attributed to a supra-individual characteristic that cannot be controlled, though the outcome is still the result of numerous actions. Elias illustrates the complexity of real-life figurations with a table of relationships among ten people. In this scenario, while the number of pairwise relationships is 45, the number of all possible multi-player relationships rises to 5110 (Elias, 1978).

In What is Sociology?, Chapter 4, Elias explains the concept of figuration (in a subsection titled "the concept of figuration") (1978, p. 128–133). Here, he aims to show and overcome language's tendency to depict individuals and society as separate entities. He uses the concept of figuration as a tool to overcome this duality, employing the metaphor of a game once again. He illustrates figuration with two game examples. One example is a card game played by four people sitting around a table, who form a figuration through the game context. Each player's move depends on the others' actions, and vice versa. The game might appear to exist independently of the players, as reflected in statements like "Isn't the game slow tonight?" However, the game itself does not have an independent existence; it is a network of relationships formed by the intertwined actions of interdependent people. Just as the players are concrete, the figuration itself is also concrete (Elias, 1978). Elias elaborates on the nature of figuration by discussing the tension patterns between players. Interdependence can involve both alliances and rivalries. He also notes that the figuration concept can be applied not only to a group of players around a table but also to societies with thousands or even millions of members. Examples include students and teachers in a classroom, patients and doctors in a therapy group, customers at the same restaurant table, or a village (Elias, 1978).

Based on these insights, we can consider labour relations or employment relationships as a figuration. Discussing this type of relationship means addressing a dynamic figuration shaped by tensions arising from mutual dependencies. If we are examining labour relations between a single employer

and workers, single-level game models apply. For large-scale corporate employers (with boards of directors), two-level game models are relevant. If the analysis includes the traditional tripartite structure of industrial relations, incorporating the state as a third actor, two-level game models remain useful. When international actors are included in the dynamics of labour relations figurations, multi-level game models become necessary.

In the following, I will reinterpret Turkey's labour relations history within this context. To stay within the scope of an article, I will focus on specific periods: the adoption of the first labour law, regulations and developments immediately after World War II (e.g., the establishment of the Ministry of Labour, the first trade union law, and the transition to a multi-party political system) and regulations during the early 2000s European Union adaptation process.

4. A brief history of Turkish labour relations as a figuration

It is worth reiterating: the purpose here is not to provide a comprehensive account of the history of Turkish industrial relations, as such an undertaking would exceed the scope of this work. Instead, within the framework of the concept of figuration outlined in the first section, I will focus on specific moments of this history and offer a reinterpretation of these moments. Numerous critical turning points can be identified in Turkish industrial relations history; however, considering the constraints of a single article, I will deliberately select a few of these pivotal moments and analyse only a portion of them. By doing so, I hope to maintain a design aligned with Elias's notion of process within the boundaries I have specified.

Although the literature on Turkish industrial relations generally begins its narrative from the late 19th century (Akkaya, 2002; Gülmez, 1991; Işık, 1995; Koç, 2016; Mahiroğulları, 2005; Makal, 2018; Quataert, 2000; Sencer, 1969; Sülker, 2004; Yıldırım, 2013), I will not go that far back. Instead, I will take the first labour law enacted during the early Republican period as the initial moment, then examine the 1940s—particularly the post-World War II era—and finally consider the reforms made during Turkey's EU accession process around the 2000s. In this way, it will be possible to observe how both single-level and multi-level games, as discussed above, operate.

The Communist Manifesto, published by Marx and Engels in the mid-19th century (1848), begins with the famous sentence: "A specter is haunting Europe—the specter of communism" (Marx & Engels, 1910, p. 11). During this period, European history witnessed numerous social movements and uprisings. The history of industrial relations and social policy typically presents

the social insurance systems introduced in the 1870s as tools European states employed to combat this specter (Rosenberg, 2014). In other words, during periods when labour or social movements intensified, the authorities sought to defuse these movements by implementing certain reforms. Whether this is good or bad is not a matter for scientific inquiry. However, if this is indeed a fact, then the game metaphor mentioned above is at play.

Commentary on the history of Turkish industrial relations often attributes inherent importance to the parties involved (e.g., workers, employers, the state). In other words, these actors are depicted as if they are isolated or self-contained (homo clausus) players on the stage. One of the most frequently cited and contested interpretations in this literature comes from Bülent Ecevit, who held significant roles in Turkish political life (such as Minister of Labour and Prime Minister). One of Ecevit's remarks appears in a newspaper article written during the Democrat Party's rule. In this piece, based on a brochure published by the Republican People's Party (CHP), he asserts that the rights of Turkish workers were granted by the state, making arduous struggles unnecessary (Ecevit, 1958). Those who emphasize the intrinsic importance of workers criticize Ecevit's approach, arguing that these rights were achieved through workers' activism. However, in the Eliasian context, both approaches exhibit a similar tendency to highlight or absolutize the will of one actor. The concept of figuration, on the other hand, emphasizes not isolated wills but mutual interactions, influences, and effects. This framework will guide our examination of the historical moments discussed here.

4.1 The 1930s and the first labour law

The founders of the modern Republic of Turkey oriented the nation towards the West, necessitating the establishment of Western institutions. Although the early phases of the Republic coincided with a period when pluralist democracies in the developed world were stagnating, democracy was embraced as an ideal concept. Thus, in 1930, Turkey attempted a transition to a multi-party political system for the second time (the first attempt was in 1924, (Zürcher, 1991, 2004, 2023). The global economic crisis and the unique post-war conditions in Turkey led to immense enthusiasm for the newly established Free Republican Party (Serbest Cumhuriyet Fırkası). The party's significant worker support in certain regions prompted the ruling CHP to work on a new labour law proposal after the party was dissolved (Özveri, 2024).

Before this period, several attempts had been made to draft a comprehensive labour law, but none resulted in legislation (Deniz, 2005; Gülmez, 1986, 1991; Güzel, A. 1986; Özveri, 2024). Although there was a

considerable delay between the intention to pass a labour law and its realization, Nusret Ekin highlighted the progressive provisions of the 1936 labour law, drawing parallels between developments in Turkey and the "civilizing process" in Western countries that had undergone the Industrial Revolution (Ekin, 1986). This parallel is a key aspect of this study as well. Some authors who analyse early Republican industrial relations emphasize the "amele (labourer) problem" of this period (Özden, 2022). Indeed, the newly founded Turkish Republic lacked the concept of a "regular workforce" essential for a modern industrial society. The "moral economy" (Thompson, 1993) of the labourers contributing to economic growth through production was far from aligned with this regular work discipline.

Although the "amele problem" of this period was not as central as the "labour problem" that shaped U.S. labour history (Budd, 2004; Kaufman, 2014, 2008), it was still a significant variable in the passage of the labour law. The goal here is to show that the enactment of fundamental labour legislation was influenced not only by political will but also by the conditions of workers, a key actor in industrial relations. Indeed, it would be more accurate to consider a multitude of factors. For example, Ahmet Makal (2012) categorizes the factors influencing the enactment of the first labour law into internal and external factors, listing social, political, and economic internal factors alongside external factors such as the International Labour Organization and authoritarian regimes in Europe.

The literature on early Republican history often portrays the authoritarian tendency of this period as a form of "absolutism" or the absolutism of political will. If so, what was the motivation to create a more "civilized" labour law compared to previous periods? One of the significant moments of worker activism in Turkish labour history was 'strikes of the declaration of liberty' (ilan-ı hürriyet grevleri) that followed the proclamation of constitutional monarchy in 1908 (Akkaya, 2002; Makal, 2018; Toprak, 1996, 2016). Although the number of wage earners was not substantial, there was considerable dynamism in worker activism. This dynamism was suppressed during the early years of the Republic through the Takrir-i Sükun law (the law on the maintenance of order) (Koç, 1998; Sencer, 1969). As noted, attempts to transition to a multi-party system highlighted workers' demands, eventually leading to the enactment of the first comprehensive labour law in 1936.

Reading this law through the lens of the political will of the period underscores its restrictive nature regarding collective rights and its alignment with populist ideology (Çakmak, 2007; Man, 2013). However, an Eliasian interpretation sees this law as part of a "civilizing process" within the broader context of Turkish labour history (Quataert, 2000, 2006). Provisions such as limiting working hours, restricting child labour, and mandating weekly rest days

reflect a refinement in labour relations compared to fifty or sixty years earlier. Interestingly, Ali Fuat Başgil, a prominent figure in Turkish labour law history, described this refinement as a sign of civilization in a 1936 parliamentary speech: "Today, the level of a nation's civilization is measured by the rights and protections it ensures for its workers. The conscience of justice today revolts against the exploitation of individuals and labour by capital and property" (Başgil, 2018, p. 116).

Did this refinement occur spontaneously? The concept of figuration suggests that the actions of the players mutually influence each other. Both the late Ottoman administration and the early Republic were authoritarian, particularly towards the working class. However, there was also significant resistance potential among workers, evident in the 1908 strikes and the controlled transition to a multi-party system during the early Republic (Koç, 2016; Makal, 1999, 2018; Man, 2013; Şanda, 1978; Sencer, 1969; Toprak, 2016). This resistance contributed to the dynamism that eventually led to the first labour law of the mid-1930s.

4.2 Increase in interactions and the complication of figuration: the 1940s

One of the most significant developments of the 1940s in Turkish political history was the transition to a "truly" multi-party political system. After the end of the war, signs of this transition began to manifest in President İsmet İnönü's discourse (Koçak, C. 2010; Timur, 1991). Starting in 1945, several developments, especially related to democratization, took place. So, what were the reasons for this fundamental transformation? There is extensive literature explaining these reasons (Ahmad, 2010; Koçak, C. 2010, 2012, 2017; Zürcher, 2004). An excerpt from the introduction of Murat Karataş's article discussing the dynamics of the transition to a multi-party system (2022, p. 305) states:

> "However, after the Allies won the Second World War, Turkey could not afford to ignore the wave of democracy that it wanted to align with in the Western world. At the same time, due to the war economy, it was inevitable to address the dissatisfied masses emerging domestically. In addition to the rising public discontent, the pressure from existing or potential international reactions against authoritarian/totalitarian practices made it necessary to take serious steps towards democratization. From this point, President İnönü had only one option left: to join the liberal democratic bloc formed after the Second World War."

This excerpt is highlighted here both because it summarizes how the broader literature of the period addresses the issue and because it exemplifies the notion of figuration used as a central theme in this study. The author explains the transformation by referencing both domestic forces and the new international situation. This precisely exemplifies the multi-layered figurations shown in the game models above. Another point highlighted in this excerpt is that the actors were not isolated from their environments; to use one of Elias's terms, they were not homoclauses. The post-World War II transformations in Turkey should therefore not be seen merely as the product of a state leader's pure will but rather as the outcome of several factors, both domestic and global, steering the country towards a relatively more liberal direction. In other words, neither the will of those governing the country nor the influence of external factors is the absolute determinant. Instead, using Elias's frequent metaphor of the game, the situation should be understood as players adjusting their positions in response to each other's moves.

In terms of labour relations, one of the key turning points in Turkey during the 1940s, particularly after the Second World War, relates to a legal change that led to developments known in the literature as "1946 Unionism". Two significant laws were enacted in 1909. One was the Tatil-i Eşgal Kanunu (Strike Law), which prohibited unionization in public service institutions. However, this ban did not prevent workers from forming associations, as the Ottoman Constitution (Kanun-i Esasi) did not include provisions regulating the establishment of associations. Subsequently, the 1909 Law on Associations (Cemiyetler Yasası), added later as a constitutional article, defined the framework for associations (Koç, 2016; Yaşayanlar, 2024). Article 9 of the 1938 Law on Associations (Law No. 3512) listed prohibited associations. By including "class-based" associations among the prohibited groups, this law legally blocked workers' ability to organize. Of course, one should not view a single law as an absolute determinant (Koç, 2021). The habitus of the period generally did not support a vibrant union movement. The prohibition on class-based associations was lifted in 1946 through an amendment to the relevant law, removing a major legal obstacle to workers' organizing. In other words, the regime shifted from one of union prohibition to union freedom (Makal, 2004). Although there was no law regulating worker organizations, the absence of prohibitive clauses allowed workers to organize rapidly, mainly with the support of some socialist parties.

Explaining the labour developments of the 1940s solely through the conscious actions of labour relations actors would be incomplete. By the 1940s, the number of industrial workers had significantly increased. The share of industry in employment nearly doubled between 1924 and 1944, rising from 4.6% to 8.3%. This quantitative growth brought significant human resource

management issues, primarily high turnover and absenteeism rates. In 1944, Sümerbank's turnover rate reached 93%. At the Kayseri Textile Factory, the workforce had been completely renewed seven times in the previous five years by 1940. The turnover rate at Ergani Copper Mines between 1940 and 1950 was 250%. At the Nazilli Textile Factory, between 1937 and 1941, the workforce changed four to five times (Özbek, 2006). Institutional and state inspection reports proposed solutions to these issues, leading to the provision of social benefits spanning wages, healthcare, social security, housing, nutrition, education, and culture (Özbek, 2006).

To comprehensively regulate working life, a Ministry of Labour was needed. The ministry was established in 1945, and a new law defining its organization and duties was passed in 1946 (Law No. 4841). Article 1 of the law outlines the ministry's duties (Resmi Gazete, 1946): "The Ministry of Labour is responsible for regulating working life, improving workers' living standards, harmonizing employer-employee relations for national benefit, making labour productivity contribute to national welfare, achieving full employment, and ensuring social security." Significant institutional developments in social security occurred in the late 1940s, such as the establishment of the Employment Agency in 1946, laws on occupational disease and maternity insurance, and the founding of the Workers' Insurance Institution in 1945 (Özbek, 2006).

Analysing the developments described above through the figuration of labour relations reveals how workers, employers, and the state influenced each other. The dynamism of these actors was driven by factors beyond their control, while their deliberate reactions led to outcomes not always aligned with their individual intentions. In simple terms, employers' profit-maximizing priorities resulted in poor working conditions, exacerbated by unforeseen developments like World War II. The threat of social movements compelled the state to implement institutional reforms. The "1946 Unionism" and subsequent developments (such as the 1947 Trade Unions Law) illustrate how actors shaped the figuration through mutual interactions. Worker autobiographies, such as Zehra Kosova's memoirs, reflect the struggles and intentions of labour activists and security forces (Kosova, 2011; and for 1970s accounts see, Atay, 2013).

> "After the amendment of the Associations Law in 1946, tobacco workers in Ortaköy came together to form the Istanbul Tobacco Workers' Union. (…) But officials, particularly the police, did everything they could to break up this legally formed union. I'll never forget: [the police] tied the union founders with ropes and marched them from Ortaköy to Sirkeci Police Department. (…) After holding

> the unionists in cells for two days, they released them – the goal was to intimidate." (Kosova, 2011, p. 105–106).

In the memoirs of Zehra Kosova, there are numerous narratives regarding the dynamics of mobilization, which is one of the elements of the figuration discussed in this study. Here is one such account (Kosova, 2011, p. 91):

> "During the war years, life in Istanbul was extremely difficult. There were blackout measures. (…) Those with money fled to Anatolia to escape the dangers, while the streets were filled with hungry people. The natural landscape of Istanbul's streets consisted of people rummaging through garbage bins, begging for a slice of bread in front of restaurants, army deserters, and every imaginable form of poverty and misery."

The relationship between a state tradition that engaged in class-based unionism or even disapproved of any kind of unionism (Gülmez, 1991; Man, 2013) and actors willing to sacrifice themselves for the ideal of a proletarian dictatorship led to outcomes unintended by either party (Koçak, M. H. 2019).

It is possible to reinterpret every moment in the history of labour relations in Turkey within this context. For example, the transition that ended the rule of the Republican People's Party (CHP) — which is generally regarded in the literature as the transition to a multi-party system — the regulations implemented after the May 27 coup, the innovations brought by the 1961 Constitution regarding working life, the tensions within Türk-İş (Confederation of Turkish Trade Unions) and how these tensions led to the formation of a new confederation, the June 15-16, 1970 events, and an extended list of further incidents and fractures (Aydın, 2020; Çelik, 2010; Güzel, M. Ş. 1996; Işık, 1995; Koç, 1986, 2016; Makal, 2003, 2004; Sülker, 1980) can all be analysed in this context.

Of course, such an enumeration would be beyond the scope of a study as limited as this one. Therefore, I wish to fast-forward through history to the early 2000s. At this point, there exists a notable case that serves as a good example of the multi-level game models mentioned by Elias. In this case, it is possible to observe the dynamics that influence the figuration when international actors enter the equation.

4.3 Turkey-EU relations as a multi-layered game field and the new labour law

Recalling the game models described in the first part of this study, Elias limited his analysis to two-layered game models for the sake of simplicity. When we attempt to incorporate states, large bureaucratic organizations, and international institutions or relations into this model, we need to transition to more than two layers. Therefore, to illustrate these multiple layers in the 2000s, we once again turn our attention to labour law. This time, we are confronted with a new labour law. The preparation process for this new law predates the AK Party (the ruling party, Justice and Development Party) government, but its enactment coincided with the tenure of the said party. As is known, in the early 2000s, there was no hesitation in Turkey's intent to integrate with the West (or the European Union). In the initial years of the AK Party government, these integration efforts were pursued even more comprehensively. The current Labour Law No. 4857 was formulated at such a historical moment.

From Prof. Dr. Sarper Süzek (2016), a member of the scientific committee that prepared the law, we learn that one of the common references for the nine professors on the committee was the conventions of the International Labour Organization (ILO) and European Union norms. In the general preamble and the article-specific justifications of the new labour law submitted to the parliament under the signature of then-Prime Minister Abdullah Gül, frequent references are made to Europe, the European Union, and International Labour Organization norms (with 40 references to Europe or the EU and 10 references to the ILO). In this section, I will use excerpts from the report detailing these justifications (Draft Labour Law and Report of the Commission on Health, Family, Labour, and Social Affairs) (T.C. Başbakanlık, 2003) to demonstrate multi-layered dynamics and interactions.

Early in the report, the multi-layered nature of figuration dynamics is emphasized (T.C. Başbakanlık, 2003):

> "Undoubtedly, the impact of economic, social, and political conditions on labour legislation is not exclusive to Law No. 3008. Indeed, after the end of World War II, the efforts of the Republic of Turkey to establish its place in the democratic world, the initial steps taken to allow free organization by amending the Associations Law, the adoption of the first Trade Unions Law (No. 5018) in 1947, the establishment of official organizations such as the Ministry of Labour, the Workers' Insurance Institution, and public employment services, as well as the establishment of close relations with the International Labour Organization, and the introduction of significant changes to

labour law in 1950, including the creation of specialized labour courts, all reflect these influences."

Other significant excerpts from the "General Preamble" section of the report can also highlight this context:

"The universal reasons explained above necessitated the adoption of a new labour law in our country, while another development brought Turkey to the threshold of a historic turning point. This development was Turkey's recognition as a candidate country for the European Union. During this new process, it must be remembered that the European Union possesses distinctive legal norms in the field of social law. Therefore, while continuing efforts to fulfill the requirements of international labour conventions ratified by our country, it became necessary to align with European social norms. In this regard, the advantage of the Republic of Turkey is that, as a result of Atatürk's reforms, Turkish labour law has long been inspired by European law and influenced by the norms of the International Labour Organization."

"However, in the process of full EU membership, norms that are not yet part of Turkish legislation but are binding for EU countries must also be incorporated into Turkish labour law. This requirement means amending several laws, particularly the labour law, as part of the harmonization process."

"Undoubtedly, aligning labour legislation with European norms will be achieved over the period leading up to full membership. However, at this stage, the most prudent approach would be to adopt the fundamental regulations of European social law and gradually eliminate provisions that contradict them from Turkish legislation."

"The economic, social, and political conditions mentioned above, which closely affect working life, Turkey's nearly seventy-year experience in labour law, the problems encountered in practice, the need for flexibility, and the obligation to comply with European Union and International Labour Organization norms made it necessary to prepare a new labour law rather than making amendments to the existing Labour Law."

Similar references are also found in the justifications for the articles. To avoid extending the text by including all the emphases, I will write only a few of them briefly. For example, some excerpts from the justifications for Articles 2 and 5: "New regulations have been introduced considering the European Union's acquis on labour relations," "In the proposal, consistent with the European Union acquis...," "On the other hand, in the European Union acquis...," "Shown in the new regulation in accordance with European Union norms," "The European Union labour acquis has also been taken into account...," "In order to comply with the European Union acquis, two more issues are included among the provisions of the article."

The article justifications continue in this manner. This report clearly demonstrates how influential the political context was during the drafting of the current labour law. The labour law is significant, especially as an example of the multi-layered figurations that Elias references, even though it does not fit directly into game models. Of course, other regulations and decision-making processes could also be examined in this context, but in our case, we are referring specifically to the labour law.

5. Discussion and conclusions

The existing literature on the history of labour relations in Turkey informs us about certain key moments in this history. However, when it comes to interpreting this history comprehensively, we see that the number of studies based on theoretical foundations is quite limited. The existing literature generally follows a chronological line, and works that attempt to make sense of this line usually interpret labour relations through the lens of Turkish modernization. At this point, multiple axes can be discussed. One of these axes is the "centre-periphery" framework, which has become a paradigm in Turkish political science literature and is primarily based on the works of Şerif Mardin (Keyman, 2009; Mardin, 1990). According to this explanatory framework, during the Republican period in Turkey, the centre consisted of a secular-bureaucratic and narrow bureaucratic elite, while the periphery comprised the broader masses. This central elite, in their effort to modernize the people despite the people, also caused significant tensions. This conflict is the fundamental dynamic explaining the course of Turkish politics and how actors come to power. It is worth repeating that this explanation is primarily used in the political science literature to explain state-society relations in Turkey (Yaşlı, 2024), while in the labour relations history literature, it is indirectly referenced within the context of bureaucratic modernization. In other words, while

discussing the state's role in the history of labour relations, this framework is used to analyse the actors that constitute state power.

A second axis is an explanation that places the state at the centre, which we can call a statist approach. As highlighted in relevant parts of this text, analyses of labour relations history based on this approach position the state as an omnipotent actor. Rights are understood not as inherent to individuals but as something granted by the state to its citizens. Therefore, workers' rights are not seen as emerging from workers' struggles and demands but as rights bestowed by this omnipotent state. It is important to note that this perspective reflects the state's viewpoint. The primary sources for this perspective are generally labour legislation and parliamentary debates during the drafting of these laws (Ecevit, 1958; Gülmez, 1991).

A third axis, which has led to a broader body of literature on labour rights and labour movements, reads the history of labour relations in Turkey through leftist analyses. Here, the term "left" encompasses a wide range from social democratic tendencies to radical Marxist views. This approach bases its analysis on the concept of class and explains developments or changes through class dynamics (Aydın, 2020, 2021; Çelik, 2010; Koçak, M. H. 2014, 2019; Şafak, 2012; Savran, 2024)

Each of these three axes contributes significantly to our understanding of the history of labour relations in Turkey. However, these approaches either do not refer to interactions at all or imply very limited interaction. For example, in the state-centred view, workers appear to have no role in the development of labour rights, while in the class-centred view, all labour-related achievements are attributed solely to the workers' "conscious" struggles.

Norbert Elias's approach is significant because it considers the actions of all actors (state, working class, or employers) in shaping the field of labour relations, necessitating the consideration of these actions. Thus, we avoid imagining a passive mass of workers when the state is centred, or a submissive central authority when the class is centred. Instead, this perspective offers the option of reading labour relations through the relationality where each actor's action affects the actions of the others. Elias's game models provide conceptual tools for analysis in this context. This study aimed to do just that. Moreover, an Eliasian perspective does not deny the importance of class struggle but does not place it in an absolutely determinative position either. When the game models or the concept of figuration are used alongside Elias's key concept of the "civilizing process," an optimistic possibility arises that the world of labour relations does not necessarily have to be interpreted in a grim manner. The hallmark of today's world of labour relations, precarization, when situated within a long historical process, does not have to be seen as an inevitable "dark age." Using Elias's term, it can also be interpreted as a "decivilization." An

Eliasian framework might mistakenly be seen as legitimizing such a situation where the "double movement" goes in the opposite direction. However, Elias always drew attention to long-term trends rather than short-term moments.

In conclusion, this study sought to reexamine certain sections of Turkey's labour relations history, which has a substantial literature, using Norbert Elias's key concepts, particularly figuration. The motivation behind this was to go beyond the often-seen chronological recounting in the literature and offer a reading grounded in theory. Many of Elias's concepts are interconnected. Elias considers history in long segments and reads it as a process. In this context, the process is one of the key concepts, and it is not possible to pinpoint a starting point. One factor that turns a process into a path of civilization is the interactions between actors. It is impossible to understand actors—whether strong or weak—outside of these interactions. Therefore, an a priori understanding is meaningless for him.

In Elias's conceptual set, the concept that highlights this relational or interactional feature is the concept of figuration. This study aimed to show how and in what meanings this concept is used in Elias's corpus and to demonstrate that reading certain histories or relationships with this concept can offer a new perspective. Elias's concepts are adaptable to different disciplines and are indeed being used. In this study, I applied these concepts to Turkey's labour history. The point I aimed to illustrate is that just as viewing certain phenomena through dualities offers only a limited understanding, labour relations should not be analysed solely by focusing on actors. What shapes the field of labour relations are neither workers, nor employers, nor the state alone, but the interactions between these actors and the intended and unintended consequences of these interactions. I tried to demonstrate this using Elias's game models. Elias shows that real life is too complex to be schematized in a text, offering only a few models. In this study, I re-examined Turkey's labour relations history, considering examples of single and multi-level games in the context of worker-employer-state relations and interactions with international actors.

Of course, many other historical moments in Turkey's labour relations and Elias's other concepts await exploration. These can be noted here as suggestions for future research

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