

REVIEW ARTICLE

What Does it Mean to be Civilised? Norbert Elias on the Germans and Modern Barbarism*

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The Germans, published in German in 1989 and in an excellent English translation by Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell in 1996, was Norbert Elias's last book, and forms one of the central nodes of his thinking, along with *The Court Society* (1983), *The Civilizing Process* (1994) and *The Society of Individuals* (1991). Both Elias himself and his interpreters have tended towards the view that his approach did not change substantially after *The Civilizing Process* was completed in 1939. However, the development of Elias's ideas in this collection of essays, written between the 1960s and 1980s, shows a more nuanced picture; in fact *The Germans* ranges from a reiteration of his original arguments, through a development or refinement of his ideas, to a distinct change of direction and emphasis. To understand Elias and the potential application of his ideas, it is essential reading; to understand German history and national identity, its value is more contestable, but even in disputing the book's approach and interpretations, one comes away with an enriched understanding of state and cultural formation.

There are four major themes running through the book: first, the question of the historical formation of national identity, with specific reference to Germany, and how processes of both civilisation and decivilisation interrelate within the development of any particular nation-state and the *habitus* of its members. The second, related theme is the contradictory and ambivalent character of processes of civilisation, their 'dark' sides and the question of 'civilised barbarism'. The third is the process of 'informalisation', developing a point made in *The Civilizing Process* concerning how increased self-restraint can manifest itself in an apparent relaxation of norms surrounding a variety of human activities. Finally, Elias drew attention to the significance of 'the problem of generations', the structure and distribution of opportunities and power between the established generation and the next, and the role that this can play in explaining a range of social and political events such as the youth rebellions of the 1960s and, more particularly, German terrorism in the 1960s and 1970s/

In most of his earlier work, Elias's primary focus was on the characteristics of social development which Western European societies shared with each other, rather than the features of the history of particular nation-states which distinguished them from one another. This does not mean that he neglected relations and differences between states; *The Civilizing Process* begins with a discussion of differences between French and German perspectives on cultures and civilisation, and his analysis of European state formation was organised around the specific developments in France, Germany and England, all 'social formations with a quite specific structures and a momentum and regularity of their own' (1994: 274). None the less, his eye was ultimately on the ways in which the processes of state formation in different countries was converging, on the formation of ever-larger 'survival units' and monopolies of violence, on the similar effects of lengthening chains of interdependence. Indeed, the very distinctiveness of Elias's approach lies to a large extent in his emphasis on the dynamics of the larger *network* of nation-states. His understanding of the development of any single nation anticipates more recent discussions of the world economic system

and processes of 'globalisation'. However, this also means that he used the category 'nation' sparingly, and his analysis of the civilising process emphasised tendencies which all the Western nations had in common with each other, such as increasing social differentiation and interdependence.

After the 1950s, however, Elias's ideas changed to give more attention to the specificity of historical development within particular nation-states, as well as on the features of relations between states. Hans Haferkamp has referred to this change of focus as 'a shift of emphasis from intra-societal to inter-state societal processes' (1987: 546). This shift is also reflected in the change in terminology from *the* civilizing process to civilizing processes. The particular expression of this change in orientation is his analysis of the 'peculiarities of the Germans' which underlay the rise of fascism and the Holocaust. His emphasis in *The Civilizing Process* had been on identifying the 'long-term trend' which would eventually override the changes in the direction of the civilising process, but in analysing the rise of Hitler and the Nazi state's genocidal practices it was clear that the reality of 'decivilisation' needed to be taken far more seriously, as many of his critics had argued. Elias thus described his analysis in *The Germans* as 'an attempt to tease out the developments in the German national *habitus* which made possible the civilising spurt of the Hitler epoch, and to work out the connections between them and the long-term process of state-formation in Germany' (1).

It is worth noting the biographical significance of Elias's turn to a discussion of German national identity and culture, and particularly the Nazi period and the Holocaust. Not least because of his Jewish parentage, he fled Frankfurt in 1933, along with Mannheim as well as Adorno, Horkheimer and the rest of the Frankfurt School. After a brief stay in Paris, he ended up in London, where he wrote *The Civilizing Process* in very quick time. His parents came to visit him there, but he could not persuade them to stay, and shortly after their return to Breslau, his father died and his mother disappeared into Auschwitz - Elias presumed she perished there in 1941. It would be reasonable to suggest, then, that this background had not a little to do with the length of time it took Elias to engage more directly with 'civilized barbarism' and the peculiarities of the Germans, with this book appeared when he was 91, only a year before his death in Amsterdam.

The aggression and violence which took place under Hitler, suggested Elias, could be explained in terms of four peculiarities of the German state-formation process. The first was the particular position of the German territories within a larger figuration of nation-states, caught in particular between the Slavs in the East and the Franks in the West. The second was the relative weakness of the German territories in comparison to surrounded states, and their exposure to foreign invasion, which, Elias argued, 'led to military bearing and warlike actions being highly regarded and often idealized'.** The third was the larger number of breaks and discontinuities in the development of the German state, and the fourth was the ideological weakness of the bourgeoisie relative to the military aristocracy. Elias argued that the aristocracy's greater success in unifying Germany 'led to an outcome which can perhaps be described as the capitulation of the broad circles of the middle class to the aristocracy'.*** The 'central question' in analysing the 'civilized barbarism' of the Hitler period was, suggested Elias, 'how the fortunes of a nation over the centuries become sedimented into the *habitus* of its individual members' (19).

A central feature of the ideology and culture of industrializing state-societies in the nineteenth century, wrote Elias, was a fundamental tension between a valorization of the collective entity of the nation-state on the one hand, and human individuals on the other, between the demands of nationalism and the hopes and expectations of liberalism (162). He suggested that 'the development of a dual and inherently contradictory code of norms is one of the common features of all countries which have undergone the transformation from an aristocratic-dynastic into a more democratic national state' (161). Elias also felt that from the nineteenth century onwards - essentially from the beginnings of movements for political and social democracy (334) - nationalism came to play a crucial part in individual identity-formation, with the value attached to any individual's nation being central to their own perception of their personal self-worth. 'The image of a nation experienced by an individual who forms part of that nation,' wrote Elias, 'is also constituent of that

person's self-image' (151). National identity is thus a central source of personal meaning and value; indeed, of the social sources of worth, Elias thought that today 'nations in their relationship to one another, in their rank-order, appear to have become the dominant and most powerful of all these supra-individual influences on people's feelings of meaning and value' (352). A useful example here is the emotional response to performances in the Olympic Games and the success or failure of 'our' athletes.

In the case of Germany, Elias considered that the tenuousness and fragility of German state-formation generated a fearfulness and anxiety about national 'worth', which encouraged a tipping of the balance towards a commitment to the demands and authority of the collectivity as opposed to the expectations of a respect for individual self-worth. As Elias put it, the 'cumulative effect of Germany's disturbed history...facilitated the emergence of a particularly malignant variant of beliefs and behavioural tendencies which also arose elsewhere' (329). The deeply-rooted cultural dominance of the German military aristocracy generated a tolerance, indeed an expectation, of rule from above and little or no sense of the importance of democratic participation from the ruled (338). Elias argued that 'the personality structure, conscience-formation and code of behaviour had all become attuned to this form of regime' (338).

When an attempt was made to establish a liberal democratic state system in the Weimar republic, then, it faced a range of significant obstacles rooted in the political culture and individual habitus of ordinary Germans, obstacles which essentially arose from an absence of many of the features of the civilizing process, since the movement away from political authoritarianism 'requires the learning of new social techniques and skills which make greater demands of people's independence and self-control and ability to make judgements of their own' (341). The historical development of German society, argued Elias, 'often produced a rather weak individual conscience' which was 'dependent on someone outside watching and reinforcing the compulsion, the discipline which individuals were incapable of imposing unaided on themselves' (383). In addition, the commitment to the maintenance of what was experienced as an unstable and fragile national identity encouraged a hostility towards 'outsiders' or 'foreigners' who appeared to threaten that national identity. All these processes combined both to produce genocidal behaviour among particular groups in German society and to undermine other Germans' ability to resist the forces of conformity and obedience to the dictates of the nation, the state, and their personification, the Führer.

The second important feature of Elias's thinking in *The Germans* was the attention he paid to the question of 'modern barbarism'. In *The Civilizing Process*, the relationship between barbarism and civilization had been presented largely as mutually exclusive, one turning into the other, with possible 'reversals' of direction. To a large extent *The Germans* is consistent with this line of argument, raising the possibility that specific processes of state-formation produce either a 'deficient' process of civilization, or result in a clear process of decivilization encouraging the more widespread manifestation of brutal and violent conduct. However, Elias also raised the possibility that civilization and decivilization can occur *simultaneously*. For example, he made the point that the monopolization of physical force by the state, through the military and the police, cuts in two directions and has a Janus-faced character (175), because such monopolies of force can then be all the more effectively wielded by powerful groups within any given nation-state, as indeed they did under the Nazi regime. Pursuing a line of thought he had been developing since the 1970s, in one of his entries to a German dictionary of sociology published in 1986 he argued for the reversibility of social processes, and suggested that 'shifts in one direction can make room for shifts in the opposite direction,' so that 'a dominant process directed at greater integration could go hand in hand with a partial disintegration' (1986: 235). Similarly, in *The Germans* he remarked that the example of the Hitler regime showed 'not only that processes of growth and decay can go hand in hand but that the latter can also predominate relative to the former' (308). In a critique of Kingsley Davis' understanding of social norms, he argued that Davis emphasised the integrative effect of norms at the expense of their 'dividing and excluding character'. Elias pointed out that social norms had an

‘inherently double-edged character’, since in the very process of binding some people together, they turn those people against others.

Third, Elias developed a point he had made in *The Civilizing Process* concerning the effects of increasing self-restraint on the character of explicit rules and norms governing human behaviour. As social restraint becomes increasingly ‘second nature’ to individuals, social rules and sanctions become less significant and we can observe a more relaxed and informal attitude to manners and etiquette. He referred to a general relaxation of norms in the period after World War I, in relation to what is said about natural functions as well as ‘modern bathing and dancing practices’, and argued that this was possible only ‘because the level of habitual, technically and institutionally consolidated self-control, the individual capacity to restrain one’s urges and behaviour in correspondence with the more advanced feelings for what is offensive, has on the whole been secured’ (Elias 1994: 115). Elias introduced the concept of the ‘informalization process’ to capture this dimension of civilizing processes, although it was first used and developed by the Dutch sociologist Cas Wouters (1977). Using the example of sexual behaviour, Elias argued that a less authoritarian system of sexual norms actually increases the demands made on each individual to regulate their own behaviour, or suffer the consequences. He said that although individuals enjoy greater freedom from norms imposed by family, community or state, this ‘informalisation’ ‘brings with it stronger demands on apparatuses of self-constraint, and, at the same time, frequent experimentation and structural insecurity; one cannot really follow existing models, one has to work out for oneself a dating strategy as well as a strategy for living together through a variety of ongoing experiments’ (37). The same could be said of the more informal relations between superiors and subordinates in the workplace, which also requires a greater degree of self-restraint in the absence of formal, explicit rules and formulae governing everyday conduct.

As power relations change and the rules of human interaction become less formalized and routinized, more flexible, we are all compelled to develop a more self-reflexive and sophisticated apparatus of self-regulation to be able to negotiate such an ever-changing and contingent network of social relationships. The declining relevance of an established code of behaviour ‘inevitably brings with it a widespread feeling of uncertainty to many people who are caught up in the turmoil of change’ (25). What we might perceive, then, as an increase in individual ‘freedom’ is actually a greater demand for self-compulsion and self-management. It is at this point where Elias’s ideas link up with those of Foucault on ‘governmentality’ in liberal democracies, and they suggest a re-thinking of his views on sexuality as being increasingly ‘hidden behind the scenes’ or ‘constrained’.

Fourth, Elias also drew attention to an issue which he had only touched on in *The Civilizing Process*, namely that processes of social change could only be properly understood in terms of a relation between *generations*, between dominant social groups growing older and gradually losing their dominance and rising younger groups striving to improve their position within the established power relations. Karl Mannheim had referred to this as ‘The problem of generations’ in an essay first published in 1928 (Mannheim 1952). Mannheim’s piece engaged in some important conceptual ground-clearing, making a variety of important points about how the social phenomenon of ‘generations’ emerges from the biological facts of ageing and physical reproduction, including how a variety of socially-conditioned ‘generation units’ can exist within the same physical generation and the relationship between generational conflict and the rate of social change. Elias fleshed out and expanded on Mannheim’s arguments in a comparison of the structural position of right-wing German youth groups in the 1920s and 1930s, and left-right terrorist groups in the 1960s and 1970s, both examples of outbreaks of organized violence within state-societies which had otherwise more or less monopolized the means of violence.

The central point around which Elias’s arguments revolve is the idea that although any given younger generation strives for meaning and personal fulfilment as well as for opportunities and power, those opportunities can widen or narrow depending on particular historical configurations. He commented that ‘it is easy to distinguish between periods with comparatively open channels for upward mobility for the younger generations, and other periods in which these channels become

narrower and narrower and perhaps for a while even become completely blocked' (242). 'One could say,' then, 'that these processes form the kernel of social conflicts between the generations' (243-44). Elias felt that although the processes of succession of generations can to some extent be managed by established older groups, the overall opportunity structure for rising generations was largely unplanned and resistant to conscious control. For example, periods of peace are in fact times when 'the circulation of generations becomes more sluggish' (243), whereas periods of war tend to open up new opportunities for the younger generation. Indeed, Elias suggested that one of the bases of Hitler's success among young Germans was the fact that his particular mobilisation of the nationalist ideology of the German *Volke* opened up a number of paths to greater life chances than had been possible under the Weimar Republic, so that the conflicts between the Weimar regime and both the *Freikorps* and the National Socialists more generally were closely related to an inter-generational conflict.

What the youth groups in the 1930s and the 1960s had in common was the fact that they found their search for a meaningful life blocked by the social order held in place by the older generation. Their definition of what constituted a meaningful life was, of course, very different. However, 'the basic motivation was the same: the feeling of being trapped in a social system which made it very hard for the younger generations to find chances for a meaningful future' (198). The differences emerge from the different kind of 'generation units' which experienced this blockage of perceived opportunity: in the 1920s and early 1930s the young people who felt frustrated by the Weimar regime were largely of middle-class background, whereas in the 1960s and 1970s there was a larger mixture of middle-class and working-class youth feeling oppressed by the apparent meaninglessness and lack of purpose in modern society. Ideologies of national identity also operated in quite different ways in the two periods, and in the 1960s it was experienced more as part of the establishment's attempts to contain the aspirations of all youth. The fact that large numbers of people had been so very recently been murdered in the name of nationhood had made it virtually impossible for any young person to support any form of nationalism.

Elias argued, then, that a left-wing position informed by Marxist conceptions of social and economic inequality had four functions for young Germans in the 1960s and 1970s:

they served them as a means of purification from the curse of National Socialism; as a means of orientation through which to interpret the social character of the Nazi period as well as of contemporary society; as a vehicle for fighting against the older, established generations, against their fathers, the bourgeoisie; and as a model of an alternative society, a meaning-giving utopia against which one could critically expose one's own society's defects. (253-254)

He went on to suggest that part of the opposition to their parents' self-assured confidence in the superiority of European civilization, arising from the growing critical understanding of European colonialism and imperialism, was a particular ethical stance in which the younger generations 'were in many cases inclined to regard just those groups who are oppressed as better and more worthy in human terms' (261), so that demonstrable oppression automatically made any given group more or less immune from moral criticism unless it came from within.

In general terms, *The Germans* constitutes an important development in Elias's thinking, clarifying a number of aspects of his understanding of the relationship between civilization and barbarism. He pointed out that a large part of his motivation in writing *The Civilizing Process* was precisely to come to a better understanding of the brutality of the Nazi regime, since 'one cannot understand the breakdown of civilized behaviour and feeling as long as one cannot understand and explain how civilized behaviour and feeling came to be constructed and developed in European societies in the first place' (1994: 445).

For Elias, then, barbarism and civilization are part of the same analytical problem, namely how and under what conditions human beings satisfy their individual or group needs 'without reciprocally destroying, frustrating, demeaning or in other ways harming each other time and time again in their search for this satisfaction' (31). The problem for Elias was both to make events such

as the Holocaust - and one could add any number of other examples of 'modern barbarism' - understandable as the outcome of particular social figurations and processes of socio-historical development, and also to explain what it was about the development of modern state-societies which generated organized *critical* responses to such large-scale genocide.

The question remains, however, as to whether Elias succeeds in this task, and many readers will come away from the book feeling ambivalent on this score. Indeed, without a very careful reading of the book itself as well as the whole corpus of Elias's work, it is easy to remain unconvinced. A central criticism of Elias has always been his neglect of the possibility of simultaneous but contradictory social processes. Until he started analysing processes of decivilization, it was fair to say that he neglected the 'dark' side of civilisation, and his inclination towards elegant simplicity made it difficult to see the *dialectical* nature of civilisation and the possibility of different, perhaps opposing, processes developing at different levels of any given social figuration. Breuer (1991), for example, draws attention to the 'negative side of functional differentiation', the effects of the organisation of capitalist societies around the logic of the market. Although longer chains of interdependence may demand greater foresight and calculation as Elias suggests, markets also display 'a dimension of coincidence and anarchy, which undermines the calculability of individual action' (Breuer 1991: 405). Market competition does not simply produce ever-larger and better integrated 'survival units', argues Breuer, it also generates 'the atomization of the social, the increasing density and negation of all ties - asocial sociability' (Breuer 1991: 407).

Although in some senses Elias responds to this criticism, Breuer finds that it does not go far enough, because he believes that Elias still sees processes of decivilization as *distinct* from civilizing processes, and at least some readers of this book will be inclined to agree. Following Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' Breuer suggests a more dialectical conception of civilization as *itself* producing its own dark side, of civilization and decivilization as different sides of the same coin, always developing hand in hand (1991: 414). There still seems to be a need for a more *dialectical* understanding of social relations and historical development, one which grasps the often contradictory character of social and psychic life. This applies both in relation to social relations and the conflicting consequences of state societies organized around the logic of the market, as well as in relation to psychic processes and the contradictory dynamics between our affects, desires and impulses and the requirements of social relationships.

This is particularly significant in coming to an adequate understanding of 'civilised barbarism', of how it is possible for dehumanising violence to continue at the very same time that we appear to be becoming increasingly civilised. It is significant, for example, that 'civilisation' was possible the more central concept around which all colonial endeavours were organised. An important question, then, which *The Germans* leaves unexplored, is the extent to which civilisation, even in Elias's sense, actually *generates* barbaric conduct, rather than simply being its opposite, and this may be one of the more significant ways in which the analytical framework developed in *The Germans* can be developed, extended or perhaps significantly altered, both in relation to the German case and in relation to different national, historical and cultural contexts.

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Note

* Review of Norbert Elias 1996 *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* Michael Schröter (ed.), translated and with a Preface by Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell Cambridge Polity Press 1996 xvi + 494 pp.

***Ibid.*, p. 7.

****Ibid.*, p. 15.