The Paradox of Pacification

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Summary

Insights into the monopolization of violence developed by Norbert Elias in *The Civilizing Process* are applied to human history at large. It is argued that organized violence tends to entail the paradox of pacification because, in order to be effective, it generally requires a high degree of internal pacification. Two sorts of pacification processes are distinguished: recurrent short-term ‘peace making’ such as also occurs among chimpanzees, and-long term ‘pacification’ at an increasingly larger scale. The latter process, which is uniquely human, is shown to be related to stages in the monopolization of organized violence: successively by adult males, warrior elites, and states.

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1

> 'Through the formation of monopolies of force, the threat which one man represents for another is subject to stricter control and becomes more calculable. Everyday life is freer of sudden reversals of fortune. Physical violence is confined to barracks; and from this store-house it breaks out only in extreme cases, in times of war or social upheaval, into individual life. As the monopoly of certain specialist groups it is normally excluded from the life of others; and these specialists, the whole monopoly organization of force, now stands guard only in the margin of social life as a control on individual conduct' (Elias 1994:450).

'Physical violence is confined to barracks'. That is a powerful image which sums up some of the main elements of Norbert Elias's theory about the monopolization of organized violence and its social-psychological implications.

At the same time these words may also make us wonder to what extent Elias's conclusions apply to the world as we know it today. In a country such as The Netherlands, large-scale organized violence is indeed effectively confined to barracks - though this does not imply that every form of physical violence has disappeared. In quite a few other countries, however, the state is far from possessing an uncontested monopoly of large-scale organized violence. In those countries, the image of violence confined to barracks does not apply.

Does this mean that we have to regard Elias's theory as falsified and obsolete? I don't think so. The fact of the matter is that the scope of his inquiry as reported in <u>The Civilizing Process</u> was limited. Therefore the scope of his conclusions was limited as well. This does not detract from the value of his method and perspective, however. As I hope to show in this paper, that very same perspective points the way to a larger context in which we

can relate Elias's original conclusions to other empirical findings and thus expand the scope of the theory.

2

First of all a few words about words are in order. The concept of violence is a tricky one which is used in various, often confusing ways. A clear distinction should be made between 'acts of violence' and 'means of violence'. In this paper I shall mean by 'acts of violence' any human deed that is directed at killing or wounding other human beings, or at destroying or damaging human property; the ultimate act of violence is killing. 'Means of violence' obviously refers to the means available to people for committing acts of violence. The most effective means of violence are means of orqanized violence, combining the human and material means of destruction of many people. The supreme form of organized violence is military force, exercised by a group possessing weapons and being prepared to use them collectively.

Although Elias himself did not use 'organized violence' as a technical term, it can easily be fitted into his general approach. This approach differs significantly from that of, for instance, the evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and Margo Wilson (1988) who in their book Homicide, an excellently documented and clearly argued study of human killing, follow a socio-biological line of thought. Their argument is illuminating with regard to differences in violent behaviour according to individual characteristics of age and sex, but it has little to say about the development of large-scale organized violence.

Daly and Wilson are quite right in stating that the incidence of violence is not random but displays a structure. In trying to account for that structure they rely too exclusively on evolutionary psychology, however. Evolutionary theory is helpful in explaining, one particularly striking fact - the fact that in the great majority of cases in which violence occurs, young men are directly involved. It does not throw much light, however, either upon the development of the destructive potential of various societies, nor upon the actual forms and frequency in which that potential is actually used. There is ample reason, therefore, to take into account, in addition

to sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, other viewpoints as well which do justice to the organization of violence.

In The Civilizing Process Elias studied a specific stage in the development of organized violence: the period of incipient state formation in medieval and early modern Europe. He discovered a mechanism, the mechanism of monopolization, the operation of which he demonstrated for that particular era. I think that by following Elias's own approach we can extend his ideas to arrive at a more comprehensive model designed at the scope of human history at large. In its simplest form, that model enables us to distinguish some rather clearcut stages in the monopolization of organized violence as a long-term process while, at the same time, it helps to bring to notice an often recurring short-term tendency which we may recognize as the 'paradox of pacification' .

3

An old adage says Si vis pacem para bellum - 'if you want peace, prepare for war'. This adage exposes one side of the paradox of pacification. For the other side, we might coin the maxim Si vis bellum cura pacem - if you wish to wage war (with some chance of winning), you have to see to peace (within your own ranks). The paradox arises from the civilizing constraints that the organization of violence inevitably entails. In a sense the very concept of organized violence is inherently paradoxical, for there is an insoluble tension between the two constituent terms. Organization points to coordination and cooperation; it suggests something constructive. Violence refers to the very opposite: it is by its very nature destructive; it destroys higher forms of organization. The tension is obvious; and so is the actual tendency for 'organization' and 'violence' to merge, to be drawn together as positive and negative poles. Organized violence is generally far more effective than unorganized violence. To be effective, however, it requires a high degree of internal pacification. Those who participate exercising it, must not fight each other. Moreover, any group organized for applying violence needs support from other people who are engaged in more productive activities such as food supply. In order to carryon their work those people

need protection against violence. The forces of production and the forces of destruction are thus bou~d together in what may be called a 'fatal configuration' (Goudsblom 1992: 58-65).

4

The historical period highlighted by Elias in The Civilizinq Process concerned 'the taming of the warriors' in medieval and early modern Europe. Focusing on the development in France, he showed how a society dominated by a dispersed castle nobility was gradually transformed into a society dominated by a central court nobility residing in close vicinity to the king.

Elias described this development as a process of state formation which implied, first and foremost, the formation of a relatively stable monopoly of force and taxation. He showed how previously more or less autonomous warrior elites were forced to give up the monopoly of violence which they held in their sway and to yield that monopoly to the expanding central state organizations. As this formulation implies, already at the beginning of the period studied by Elias there was a monopoly of organized violence. This monopoly was far less strongly centralized; it was held by warrior elites ('nobles') residing in fortified houses and able to command armies or bands of armed men. The members of this warrior elite could fight each other in armed combat; no less important was the exercise of their military force in subduing all other people who were barred from access to organized violence: peasants and their families in the first place, but artisans and tradesmen and clergymen as well.

Monopolies of violence held by an upper stratum of warriors calling themselves nobles or aristocrats were not confined to medieval Europe. We encounter similar conditions in different historical guises and with varying degrees of centralization in various epochs in many parts of the world, including Asia, Africa and the Americas, and even Oceania. The term military-agrarian society may serve as a common denominator indicating the social conditions which prevailed in a world dominated by such a stratum of warlords controlling a monopoly of organized violence (cf.

Goudsblom, Jones and Mennell 1996: 50-61).

But then, again, the stage when a military nobility held the monopoly of violence was also not the first stage in the monopolization of organized violence. It emerged out of an earlier stage, during which the majority of adult males in a community exercised a monopoly of violence to the exclusion of women and children (cf. Glassman 1986). We may therefore distinguish at least three stages:

1. a stage in which organized violence was the monopoly of adult males, who excluded women and children from the use of weapons. Initiation rites and taboos served to uphold the adult males' monopoly.

2. a stage in which organized violence was the monopoly of specialists, the warriors, to the exclusion not only of women and children but of other adult males as well. This may be called the stage of military-agrarian societies, of which medieval Europe is an example.

3. a stage during which organized violence was no longer monopolized by relatively autonomous warrior elites but by central states. The process of state formation in early modern Europe as decribed by Elias marked a transition to this third stage.

The three stages are part of a process model which is not intended as the formulation of definitive conclusions but rather as a heuristic principle, a search scheme. Nor do I wish to suggest that at any given time a process of monopolization has been 'completed'. On the contrary, it makes more sense to assume that throughout human history the monopolization processes have been accompanied by counter-tendencies veering toward undermining the established monopolies (cf. Goudsblom 1996, Jones and Mennell: 15-30). Similarly, there is every reason to assume that the third stage will not be the last.

No matter how many stages may follow in the future, however, one rule of 'phaseology' will continue to hold: with the onset of a later stage, the tendencies of an earlier stage have not altogether ceased to exist. Cyril Connolly made the famous quip: 'Imprisoned in every fat man a thin one is wildly signalling to be let out' (1951:58). In a similar manner we may say that imprisoned in every

later stage earlier ones never cease to make themselves felt. Wherever a central monopoly of violence has been established, there will be people with an interest in escaping that monopoly.

5

A theory about the monopolization of organized violence would be incomplete if it completely passed by the relations between humans and other, related animals. One of the most important weapons which people have had at their disposal for many thousands of generations is fire. Remarkably, the earliest stages in the development of the control over fire can be described as a process of monopoly formation - as the establishment of a human 'species monopoly' on the use of fire, to the exclusion of all other animal species (cf. Goudsblom 1992: 20-23).

The establishment of the monopoly over fire was an early episode in a process that is still continuing today: the increase of differences in behaviour, power, and habitus between humans on the one hand and other large animals on the other. As the balance of power became tilted ever more favourably for humans, open struggles between humans and other animals became less frequent. Some animal species were exterminated, others were domesticated, while still others continued to live 'in the wild', more and more under human protection, and with many co-specifics living in zoos. In zoos our closest relatives, the chimpanzees, share the same fate as the giraffes and the wolves and all the other large animals: they spend their lives behind bars.

Dogs and cats are cherished as pets, cattle and sheep find their end in the slaughterhouse. It is characteristic of the relations of humans to all these domesticated species that only relatively rarely do they give cause to open struggle. Domestication can be regarded as a form of pacification. Just as among humans themselves, pacification has not put an end once and for all to conflict; but the collective power relations between the species have become unequal to such a degree that at every major confrontation the outcome is predictable: the human side will win. Given that condition, the relations are nowadays by and large peaceful. The

long-term history, however, from which the present relations have resulted, is marked by many violent moments. Pacification is by no means always a peaceful process.

6

The predominance of humans over other animals, many of which are physically much stronger, is to a large extent a function of organized violence. Some form of such organized violence is probably as old as human group life (and, therefore, as humanity itself); the organization of violence is likely to have been one of the primaeval forces of social bonding. This is also what Norbert Elias had in mind when he referred to the elementary ‘units of attack and defence’ or, more briefly, ‘survival units’ (cf. Mennell 1989: 217-20).

As in other primate groups observed by ethologists in our own time, the primary functions of organized violence seem to have been warding off and attacking enemies from outside and putting an end to acts of violence within the group. Thus already at this early stage we meet the paradox of pacification: organized violence appears as a means of keeping external violence at bay and curtailing internal acts of violence. The observations by Frans de Waal and other students of chimpanzees and bonobos, our closest relatives in the animal kingdom, point in the same direction (De Waal 1996). The tendencies toward the paradox of pacification are not even restricted to our own species.

There is, however, at least one principal difference between the pacification processes among chimpanzees and among humans. Among chimpanzees only short-term processes occur, which follow again and again more or less the same course. A conflict breaks out, there is fighting, the conflict is settled, and peace is restored - a peace which lasts until the next conflict breaks out. Humans go through similar short cycles of fighting and peace making. In addition, however, there is (parallel to the development of monopolies of violence) a long-term process of pacification at an increasingly larger scale - a process interrupted by recurrent conflicts, also at an increasingly larger scale.

The earliest stage in the monopolization of organized violence was the establishment of the adult male monopoly. The anthropological literature contains a great deal of evidence suggesting that in many foraging and agrarian societies the manufacture, and even more the use, of weapons has been an exclusively male affair (cf. Glassman 1986). If we seek to explain this observation, the obvious first factor to be considered is the superior physical strength of adult men - a biological given. Another original precondition may well have been a tendency toward male bonding, developed in collective hunting of big game, which also appears to have been widespread. The advantages gained through these two features were no doubt reinforced considerably once men began to use tools designed especially for killing - weapons.

The development of the monopoly of organized violence has been more, however, than the mere enlargement of essentially unchanging gender characteristics. Since its earliest beginnings, it has been part of the much more encompassing process, referred to above, in which the differences in behaviour, power, and habitus between humans and their closest relatives in the animal kingdom, notably the other primates, increased. The clue to this process of differentiation was the great human capacity for mutual learning, for culture. This enabled our early ancestors to act upon the Lamarckian principle, so to speak, and to preserve acquired characteristics that were considered successful by handing down those characteristics to following generations. The control over fire mentioned above is an example. It was a new form of behaviour (a ‘mutation’), from which those who adopted it could derive a new form of power, and which also involved a change of habitus - a new attitude toward fire in the first place, but toward the entire environment and toward other people as well.

Fire could be used as a means of violence - just as other weapons such as rocks and sticks. Increasingly men began to use specially manufactured missiles and clubs. As weapons thus became more specialized, access to them generally was made more restricted. Women and children were not allowed to touch weapons - a practice of

social exclusion, where positions once attained formed the basis from which the unequal power relations could be maintained and intensified.

8

The question of how male monopolies of violence first arose is still an issue that can only be discussed with a large measure of conjecture. We are on firmer empirical ground with the problem of how those monopolies, once they were established, were maintained. At first sight, the former question, about the origins, may seem more intriguing. The latter question - about what we might call the social reproduction of the monopoly - is at least as interesting, however, both substantively and methodologically.

Substantively, the persistence of the male monopoly over numerous generations is an issue which touches upon practically every aspect of social life. It is also interesting from a methodological point of view since it illustrates the general rule that social life consists of processes. Social continuity is just as much a process as social change. As a process, the persistence of a monopoly of violence constitues a problem no less than its formation or breakdown: a practical problem for those who either wish to maintain their own position or to challenge the position held by others, and a scientific problem for those who wish to gain a better understanding of power struggles as social processes.

In The Civilizing Process Elias clearly demonstrated how certain changes in behaviour (manners) and habitus (personality structure) were related to changing power relations. In terms of the model of stages in the monopolization of violence, he studied a transition from the second to the third stage - a transition during which more or less autonomous warrior elites were forced to give up their monopoly and to join a more strongly centralized organization. At the royal court where ‘the taming of the warriors’ took place, these men were subjected to a new regime. Having lost the privilege of conducting war on their own, they found themselves compelled to accommodate to a strongly hierarchical order in which they continued to compete with each other - but only within the

limits of bounded competition which left little room for violence. The royal courts exercised strong pressures toward both pacification and stratification.

9

The monopolization of organized violence has always been - almost by definition - a process of differentiation. While some people adult males, warriors, military men - became experts in handling means of violence, others - the majority - were deprived of any training and experience in military attack and defence.

The resulting military incompetence has become the normal condition for a large part of the population today in many countries. Most of them - children, women, and men - live their lives behind invisible lines of defence shielding them from violence. Just as townspeople in military agrarian societies built physical walls around their cities, to keep violence at bay, so most inhabitants of modern industrial countries try to ban violence from their lives.

In The Netherlands, the most formidable means of violence have completely disappeared from public view. If we see a manifestation of the state-controlled monopoly of violence in our streets (in the form of an armed policeman or, at most, a small semi-military brigade), it is only a small reflection of the full armoury of means of violence available to the state. It is the ‘tip of the iceberg’; most people have no idea of what is hidden underneath. For a long time conscription somehow initiated the majority of the male population into the world of organized violence; but since conscription was abolished in 1990, this link has also been severed.

Most of us nowadays have learned to shun violence, not to engage in it individually, to abhor and avoid it, to condemn it on moral grounds. Instead of having recourse to it ourselves, by paying taxes we support an apparatus that upholds the central monopoly. We have reasons to fear the threat of violence becoming rampant if the central monopoly looses its grip. At the same time we also have reasons to fear the central monopolies developing into an uncontrollable independent force. And we sense that large monopolies

of organized violence pitted against each other form today the greatest threat to human survival. Unfortunately it would be going too far to say that the parties at this level exercise mutually assured self-restraint; we shall have to rely on their mutually expected self-restraint.

In the meantime, again and again organized violence comes out of the barracks in various places. We can then witness (or, in the worst case, experience) its formidable destructive powers, and realize how helpless we are against it, as individuals. Such situations confront us directly with the paradox of pacification. They may well lead us to reflect that the larger evil is necessary to protect us from the lesser evil - and we can only hope that the larger evil will be kept in check.

The word ‘evil’ belongs to the vocabulary of morality. ‘Monopoly of violence’ is more in line with sociology. It may be useful to confront the two types of discourse and to realize that they relate to the same empirical world. At the same time it is important to continue observing the distinction.

In sketching the model of stages in the monopolization of organized violence I have restricted myself to a rough outline. Although I have not gone into the issue of the size and the destructive potential of means of violence, that issue cannot be disregarded. At first sight, the present situation in some countries such as Colombia or Afghanistan may resemble the second stage: the monopolization of violence by war lords. That would be misleading, however, inasmuch as these countries form part of a contemporary world which probably finds itself in a period of transition from the third into an as yet unclearly delineated fourth stage. The transition is marked by the development and spread of new weapons with a capacity for destruction at an unprecedentedly large scale.

Even amidst these far-reaching dynamics of social development the paradox of pacification remains perceivable as a recurrent principle of ‘social statics’. As Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh argues, an unintended effect of the development of nuclear arms has been ‘that they make war between the great powers impossible and force them to prevent escalation by security cooperation, even as their relations become more tense’ (1997: 194). I fear that the word

'impossible' is a bit too strong, and could better be replaced by 'highly improbable'. That does not detract from the observation, however, that during the first fifty years when there were several competing nuclear powers, their mutual fear of total destruction kept them from waging war against each other.

Toward the end of the Cold War Norbert Elias remarked that, while humans are unable to abolish death, there is no binding reason why they should be unable to abolish mutual killing (Elias 1985: 90). Before dismissing this statement as naively utopian, we should realize that although organized violence has been writ large over human history (cf. Keeley 1996), it has never been a permanent condition and actual fighting has always been limited to brief episodes (cf. Collins 1990). Completely in accordance with the paradox of pacification, even the most aggressive warriors have always exercised some restraint, and have spent more time not fighting than fighting. One of the tasks for the social sciences is to penetrate deeper into the workings and the possible further applications of this paradox.

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