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## **The Theory of the Civilizing Process and Its Discontents**

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Paper voor de Sectie Figuratiesociologie van de Zesde  
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Voorlopige versie

## 1. Introductory overview

Since its first publication in 1939, Norbert Elias's theory of the civilizing process has been both acclaimed and criticized. In the critiques, four inter-related objections stand out. It is said that the theory a) is teleological, b) reflects a Europe-centred view, c) misrepresents the development in Europe itself, and d) is incompatible with contemporary trends which appear to disprove the very idea of continuing 'civilization'.

In order to appraise these criticisms, I shall first consider the claims the author himself made for his book The Civilizing Process. On the basis of these claims the book may either be viewed as a study of a particular episode of the civilizing process in Western Europe, or as a fundamental contribution to a general theory of social processes. I shall argue that in either case the crux of the theory lies in the observed relationship between changes in individual discipline ('behaviour') and changes in social organization ('power').

I shall further argue that, reviewed in this light, objection a) is understandable but wrong, while criticisms b), c) and d) point to limitations which can be removed by further empirical research. Once the connection between changes in behaviour and changes in power has been established, the order of research may be reversed in future investigations. Whenever there is evidence of changes in power ratios, changes in the regulation of behaviour are to be expected as well.

Some of the most outspoken objections against the theory of civilizing processes may stem from discontent with its consistently sociological (or, for some, even sociologistic) tenor. This should not avert sociologists from the theory. It confronts them (us) with a threefold challenge: a) to locate and fill in the empirical gaps in Elias's original study, b) to explicate the concepts and propositions, and c) to extend research to other areas and eras.

## 2. Shifting Claims of the Theory

It seems to me that, in presenting the first and the second edition of his book, Elias himself changed his theoretical aims and claims somewhat. The first German edition was published in 1939. In the

Preface, after briefly sketching the substantive problems addressed in the book, the author stated that his work did not spring from any specific scholarly tradition. It had its origins, rather, in

'the experiences in whose shadow we all live, experiences of the crisis of Western civilization as it had existed hitherto, and [in] the simple need to understand what this "civilization" really amounts to'.<sup>1</sup>

Accordingly, Elias saw his primary task as an attempt at 'regaining within a limited area' 'the lost perception' of the long-term 'psychical process of civilization' - a process involving changes in behaviour and feeling extending over many generations. Once a sense of this long-term process was recovered, the next step was 'to seek a certain understanding of its causes', in order finally 'to gather together such theoretical insights as have been encountered on the way'. After thus introducing his own work as a three-stage project, Elias continued:

'If I have succeeded in providing a tolerably secure foundation for further reflection and research in this direction, this study has achieved everything it set out to achieve. It will need the thought of many people and the cooperation of different branches of scholarship, which are often divided by artificial barriers today, gradually to answer the questions that have arisen in the course of this study. They concern psychology, philology, ethnology, and anthropology no less than sociology or the different branches of historical research'.<sup>2</sup>

These words were set in a relatively modest and confident tone, and were not addressed to any single academic discipline. When, thirty years later, the second German edition appeared, Elias added a new Introduction, which sounded at once more ambitious and disappointed. The source of his disappointment was specifically located in one particular discipline - sociology:

'When I was working on this book it seemed quite clear

to me that I was laying the foundation of an undogmatic, empirically based sociological theory of social processes in general and of social development in particular'.<sup>3</sup>

'It might have been expected that thirty years later this study would either have become a part of the standard knowledge of the discipline or have been more or less superseded by the work of others and laid to rest. Instead, I find that a generation later this study still has the character of a pioneering work in a problematic field which today is hardly less in need than it was thirty years ago, of the simultaneous investigation on the empirical and theoretical plane that is to be found here'.<sup>4</sup>

In the new introduction Elias contrasted his own contribution to the work of Talcott Parsons, who at the time was widely regarded as the leading theoretician of sociology. Parsons' approach, he concluded, was basically static and for that reason unsuitable for conceptualizing the dynamic relationship between 'society' and 'individual'.

By thus putting his own work over against that of Parsons, Elias underlined its significance for sociological theory, at the highest level of generality. His outspoken identification with one particular discipline seemed to imply that he gave up the more open multi-disciplinary stance taken in 1939. This, however, was only an act of reculer pour mieux sauter: for within the discipline of sociology Elias claimed a theoretical stature rivaling the major theoretician of the day.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. The Claims Combined: Changes in Behaviour and Power

In order to assess the theory of The Civilizing Process I propose that we take into account the claims made both at the level of (a) regaining 'within a limited area' the lost perception of the long-term psychical process of civilization in Western Europe, and (b) laying the foundation of a general theory of social processes.

Some tension between those two claims was evident already in the subtitles of the two volumes of The Civilizing Process as

they were originally published in Switzerland in 1939. The subtitle of Volume One was rather specific. It read: 'Changes of Behaviour in the Worldly Upper Strata of the West'. Volume Two had a much more general subtitle: 'Changes of Society. Toward of Theory of Civilization'. Unfortunately in most translations, including the English translation, both subtitles were deleted.

Perhaps the publishers found them too offputting. Yet the deletion is to be regretted, for the subtitles clearly indicate the structure of the book, and they also convey a certain ambiguity inherent in that very structure. They point to three major concerns which are highlighted in the book's subsequent parts. Volume One begins with a long introductory chapter on the sociogenesis of the concepts of culture and civilization. Then, as the first major part indicated by the subtitle, follows the celebrated 'History of Manners', concentrating upon the 'worldly upper strata', the secular aristocracies, of Western Europe. Volume Two contains the second and the third parts. Under the heading 'Changes of Society', the changes in manners among the secular nobility are shown to reflect the 'courtization of warriors' - a trend which, in turn, was directly related to the more general process of state formation which, again, was a function of changes in the power balances in society at large. The emphasis throughout both parts of the book is on changes; the setting is Western Europe in a period extending from approximately 800 (for the second part) or 1300 (for the first part) to 1800. The third part, entitled 'Toward a Theory of Civiliziation', contains a theoretical discussion referring back to the changes discussed in the two preceding parts but also relating to trends to be observed in Western Europe in the twentieth century, especially in the 'thirties.

As this brief overview shows, the three parts do not cover exactly the same ground - neither chronologically nor sociologically. Yet there is a close and cogent connection. The hinge which keeps the argument together is, I think, the pervasive relationship between behaviour and power. The changes in standards of behaviour documented in the first part are shown to be intricately related to the changes in power relations analysed in the second part. The third part draws upon this connection in order to pinpoint and explain some major trends in contemporary

society and culture. In sketching these trends, the author also developed a set of highly suggestive ideas about the intertwining of social and psychological processes.

#### 4. Huizinga, Weber, Freud

Elias wrote The Civilizing Process around the same time when Parsons wrote The Theory of Social Action.<sup>6</sup> Parsons' argument evolved around an analysis of a few great social scientists of an earlier generation: Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber. Elias was much more sparing with references to other authors; he did not wish to write 'a book about books'. Yet in the three major parts of The Civilizing Process, there were also some towering figures who were indeed specifically mentioned - respectively Johan Huizinga, Max Weber, and Sigmund Freud.

Although their names occurred only once or twice, these men served as sources of inspiration for particular ideas in The Civilizing Process.<sup>7</sup> Thus Huizinga's The Waning of the Middle Ages epitomized a tradition in historiography which put a strong imprint on Elias's view of medieval society. The influence of Max Weber was even more manifest. Elias took over his concept of the state as the organization that holds a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in a particular territory; he dropped the notion of legitimacy, however, and he redefined the monopoly as a twin monopoly of violence and taxation; moreover, in stead of discussing 'the state' as a given entity he set out to investigate the process of 'state formation'. Freud's influence, finally, was most evident and was acknowledged in so many words by Elias himself - although Elias typically could not help adding some reservations.<sup>8</sup>

Huizinga, Weber and Freud represented the three major disciplines upon which Elias drew: history, sociology, and psychoanalysis. In the successive waves of critical acclaim following the various editions and translations of The Civilizing Process the book was recommended again and again as an extraordinarily successful attempt to bridge the gaps between these disciplines. At the same time, while receiving increasingly more praise from many sides, the book also continued to elicit criticism. The tenor of this criticism has remained remarkably similar over more than half a century.

## 5. The First Wave of Critical Acclaim

As far as I know, there have been no more than a dozen reviews of the first German edition of The Civilizing Process after its publication in Switzerland in 1939.<sup>9</sup> This is not very many; therefore it is all the more remarkable that they were written in four different languages. The authors included the cultural historian and social philosopher Franz Borkenau who wrote his review in English, the psychoanalyst S.H. Foulkes who wrote in German, the French sociologist Raymond Aron, and the Dutch literary critic Menno ter Braak. Clearly the book immediately appealed to a miscellaneous circle of people in different nations.

At closer scrutiny that circle turns out to have been part of a small world. Almost without exception, the reviewers of the first edition were of the same generation as Elias himself, born around the turn of the century. Some of them shared the same fate as the author: Borkenau, Foulkes, and Aron were all Jews from continental Europe who lived in England as exiles from the Nazi regime, as Elias did. Each of these three men also knew Elias personally. This does not mean that they wrote their reviews out of favouritism; but their readiness to read the book thoroughly and to write a lengthy review undoubtedly had to do with the fact that they already knew and respected the author - and, very likely, it also reflected a sense of refugee solidarity. In Ter Braak's case, there was no direct personal link; Ter Braak had read and liked an earlier essay by Elias, however, and it is very likely that he knew people who knew Elias.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the reviewers were full of praise. Yet some of them also voiced some criticism; and in their criticism they anticipated themes which were to recur with much greater emphasis in the nineteenseventies and 'eighties. Thus, Franz Borkenau in particular complained that Elias made the process of civilization look too unilinear and compelling, that he neglected other civilizations (Borkenau mentioned Greek and Roman antiquity), and that as far as Europe was concerned he grossly underrated the part played by religion and philosophy. Foulkes voiced scepticism as to the contemporary state of European civilization. In his concluding lines he wrote: 'The author chooses as a motto: "La civilisation

... n'est pas encore terminée". It seems necessary therefore to say to the sociologist - we psychoanalysts are inclined to think it has hardly begun.'<sup>11</sup>

## 6. Teleology

A typical objection concerns the idea that in The Civilizing Process Elias subscribed to 'unilinear evolutionism' or, even worse, to 'teleology'. Thus, in an interview held in May 1993, the American historical sociologist Charles Tilly stated that he found in the book

'first of all a strong if not very well articulated teleology, which says that the civilizing process had to happen in some sense. It is teleological in the sense that later events explain earlier events, that the end explains the process. The second thing is that it is like many other unilinear histories - some of them teleological and some not - in it ignores all the counterhistories. It seems to me to be a very selective history, that imagines that everything that has happened since the 17th century is civilizing.'<sup>12</sup>

The charges of teleology and unilinearity are combined in this verdict which, I am afraid, is based upon a rather careless reading of Elias. What Elias did was not letting 'later events explain earlier events', but precisely the opposite. Presuming that certain later events (or processes) could not have occurred without certain earlier events, he set out to explore the connection. He was aware that the vantage point of the present gave him a privileged view of the past, for he knew about further developments which the people in the past could not possibly have foreseen. Working with the knowledge of hindsight, however, is clearly not tantamount to committing the fallacy of teleology.

Nor does it imply ignoring the possibility of 'counterhistories'. On the contrary. Both in The Civilizing Process and, later, in What is Sociology? Elias discussed at length the problem of the 'inevitability' of social development. Especially the chapter in What is Sociology? can be read as an anticipatory

rebuttal of Tilly's charges:

'In many if not all cases, the figurations formed by interdependent people are so plastic that the figuration at any later stage of the figurational flow is in fact only one of the many possible transformations of an earlier figuration. But as a particular figuration changes into another, a very wide scatter of possible transformations narrows down to a single outcome. In retrospect it is just as feasible to examine the range of potential outcomes as it is to discover the particular constellation of factors responsible for the emergence of this one figuration rather than any other of the possible alternatives.'<sup>13</sup>

## 7. Eurocentrism

The fact that the book is about Europe does not in itself make it Eurocentric. It would be Eurocentric if the author, using only European evidence, had drawn conclusions pertaining to human history or human society at large.

This is debatable. It is not so much that Elias used the European case as exemplary for humanity in general, but rather that he presented it as unique and singular - without making any detailed comparisons. Thus, in a characteristic passage he noted:

'What lends the civilizing process in the West its special and unique character is the fact that here the division of functions has attained a level, the monopolies of force and taxation a solidity, and interdependence and competition an extent, both in terms of physical space and numbers of people involved, unequalled in world history'.<sup>14</sup>

In a way the argument is very plausible and seems hardly in need of any further corroboration. The division of functions has indeed proceeded further in 'the West' than anywhere else previously. This, however, raises several problems. First, to what degree have people of various social background in 'the West' been affected

by the process of functional differentiation; what has it 'done' to their personalities? And second, no less importantly, how are we to conceive of the huge residual category of people past and present who have not taken part in the unique development of 'the West'? Are they all to be lumped together as being 'less civilized'? Or are we better advised to distinguish different trajectories in the civilizing process, each of which equally deserves to be studied by the sociogenetic method?

The question has a rhetoric ring, and that is intentional. In The Civilizing Process we occasionally find brief references to civilizing processes in other parts of the world, most notably China. Such references remain cursory at best. However, there is nothing in Elias's theory that precludes applying it to other societies. Indeed, if the second volume of The Civilizing Process focuses on the pivotal connection between state formation and civilization, the question inevitably arises of how civilizing processes have proceeded in societies with different political structures.

We are thus challenged to develop a programme of applying the sociogenetic method as designed by Elias to the empirical world of cultural anthropology and sociology. The idea is not very far fetched. Few anthropologists today stick to the views of Franz Boas and Ruth Benedict that they should confine their studies to the avowedly 'ahistorical' description of quasi-autonomous 'patterns of culture'.<sup>15</sup> The culture of the Kwakiutl with its celebrated institution of potlatch, one of Benedict's most impressive examples of a genuine 'cultural configuration', is now generally recognized as a transitional adaptation to the infiltration of modern American society.<sup>16</sup>

Following such insights, anthropologists are more ready today than they were one or two generations ago to regard 'cultures' as historical phenomena. At the same time, however, most of them are very wary of accepting a theory of long-term development. They seem to fear allegations of the kind brought forward by Tilly to the effect that any comprehensive model of long-term development reflects teleology and unilinear evolutionism.

I think we should not let these allegations discourage us from the combined empirical and theoretical study of civilizing processes. There is no cause to lapse into what Karl Wittfogel

aptly called 'developmental agnosticism'.<sup>17</sup> On the contrary. We are now in a better position to put the developments studied by Elias in The Civilizing Process in the much wider comparative perspective of the civilizing process of humanity at large. This encompassing process forms part of the more general trend of increasing differences in behaviour and power, first, between human groups and related animals, and, after the rise of agriculture some 400 generations ago, among and within human societies.<sup>18</sup> This general perspective may also sharpen our view of the various trajectories of the civilizing process in Europe itself.

#### 8. Strands in the European Civilizing Process

One of the most often heard criticisms is that Elias gave a lopsided view of the civilizing process in Western Europe by concentrating on the secular upper strata and their transformation from a warrior into a courtly class. He underrated especially, it is argued, the part played by religion, by Christianity, by the Church. The British historian Dilwyn Knox in a recent well-documented and learned paper even goes so far as to defend the thesis

'that polite comportment in Western Europe stems not from courts but from Latin Christianity; that like comportment in, say, China, Japan, India and Islam, it derives from religious or cultural, rather than political circumstances.'<sup>19</sup>

Knox quotes numerous medieval texts to show that religious orders put great store on disciplined comportment and conduct. Manuals for novices in particular abounded with precepts on gesture, body posture, etc. Many of those precepts were taken over almost literally by Erasmus in his book on manners for young people - a book used extensively by Elias as marking a turning point in the European civilizing process.

Elias clearly recognized the fact that Erasmus was steeped in clerical traditions and drew on these traditions in his writings. He also realized, however, that the refinement of manners

which set in in the early sixteenth century was most likely to have received its main impetus, not at the writing tables of clerics, but in the actual social intercourse of aristocrats. In order to account for this new 'spurt' in the civilizing process Elias therefore decided to look into the changing social figurations in which the aristocrats lived:

'What slowly begins to form at the end of the Middle Ages is (...) a courtly aristocracy embracing Western Europe with its centre in Paris, its dependencies in all the other courts, and offshoots in all the other social circles which claimed to belong to "Society". (...) In seeking the social traditions which provide the common basis and deeper unity of the various national traditions in the West, we should think not only of the Christian Church, the common Roman-Latin heritage, but also of this last great pre-national social formation which, already partly in the shadow of the national divergences within Western society, rose above the lower and middle strata in different linguistic areas'.<sup>20</sup>

Focusing on the aristocratic courts did not mean that these were to be seen as isolated social islands. The wealth and privileges which the aristocrats enjoyed as well as the constraints under which they lived were a function of the power relations and the corresponding tensions in society at large. Their increasing self-restraint may be seen as reflecting the social fate of a gradual diminishment of power vis-à-vis the Third Estate, the bourgeoisie, which they, the Second Estate, shared with the First Estate, the clergy.

Just as we may enlarge the canvass and picture the civilizing process in early modern Europe within the context of more encompassing trends in human history, we may also take a more detailed look at the various strands in the civilizing process in Europe itself. In many accounts of that process the people who formed the largest section of the population at the time are virtually absent: the peasants. There can be no doubt that they, the Fourth Estate, lived under many severe constraints. They had to bear the brunt of the struggle with nature. In tending their

fields and taking care of their livestock they directly felt the continuous pressures of the 'ecological regime' under which they lived. At the same time they had to accommodate to the demands and threats of people in more privileged social positions.

The established members of the First, Second, and Third Estate were not as directly exposed to the ecological regime. The constraints they felt were primarily social, emanating from people rather than from non-human forces. This makes it understandable why in The Civilizing Process ecological issues were largely absent: they did not rank highly among the daily concerns of the aristocracy. At the risk of simplification we might say that, at the time when European court society was at its peak, the regimes which the first three Estates experienced as the most stringent were, in a word, respectively ethics, etiquette, and economy.

As long as there have been theories about the European civilizing process, these have reflected a bias toward one of these three regimes. The dominant tendency has been, ever since St. Augustine wrote The City of God, to stress the moral influence of the Church. The very fact that the clergy has become known as the First Estate shows how effective it has been in shaping opinion. The part played by the Second Estate, as carriers of 'the sword', has been brought to the fore by secular political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes.<sup>21</sup> Ideas about the civilizing effects of the trading and industrial activities of the Third Estate have gained intellectual prestige since the late eighteenth century, with Adam Smith as the most famous theorist.<sup>22</sup>

## 9. Contemporary Trends

Several critics have argued that the theory developed in The Civilizing Process was at odds with some major trends and events of the twentieth century. Some even asserted that Elias was writing an account of the progress of civilization at a time when civilization was actually breaking down. In the words of the anthropologist Edmund Leach: at the very time that Elias was formulating his thesis, 'Hitler was refuting the argument at the grandest scale.'<sup>23</sup>

These critics, of whom Leach is only one, seem to have committed two errors at once. First, they bluntly interpreted the

theory of the civilizing process as a theory of progress - which is debatable, to say the least. Second, they ascribed to Elias a measure of naivety bordering on callousness. One wonders what these critics thought of the dedication in the second German edition, taken over in all translations: 'to the memory of my parents Hermann Elias, d. Breslau 1940, Sophie Elias, d. Auschwitz 1941 (?)'.

Elias knew only too well about Nazism. He also knew about Freud, including Freud's ideas on 'war and death' and on 'civilization and its discontents'. It was precisely this, the experiences of his own time and the gloomy reflections by Freud and kindred spirits, that made him regard civilization as a problem, in need of sociogenetic and psychogenetic investigations.

The theory advanced in The Civilizing Process does not give us an explanation of Nazism. We may well doubt whether thus far anyone has come up with a satisfactory explanation. It seems to be beyond dispute, however, that Elias's ideas, including those which he later developed in his Studien über die Deutschen, provide important insights into the conditions under which Nazism arose.<sup>24</sup>

Nazism was not the only example of an upsurge of intra-state violence in twentieth century Europe. In theoretical discussions of such trends we seem to have little choice but to revert to terms which have strong emotional and evaluative overtones but are empirically not very specific. The terms that come to mind most easily are 'barbarism' and 'barbarization'. Elias himself used these words; he also spoke of 'a breakdown of civilization' and of 'decivilizing processes'.<sup>25</sup>

The diffuse and highly normative associations of the concepts of barbarization and decivilization restrict their usefulness. Perhaps the term 'brutalization' is to be preferred. Whatever word we choose, we should not immediately assume that such processes are somehow more 'natural' than civilizing processes which tend toward diminishing violence. In both cases we are dealing with changes of behaviour related to changes in power. The remarkable thing is that, once a social figuration starts moving (or 'sliding') in the direction of brutalization, the process may soon gain a momentum of its own (as in Bosnia after 1991). As the balance of power changes, people see themselves forced to adjust their behaviour to the changing circumstances which, as Elias reminded

us, are nothing but 'the relationships between people themselves'.<sup>26</sup>

The same figurational dynamics apply to another recent trend which is often singled out as refuting Elias's theory: the trend toward greater permissiveness, conceptualized by Cas Wouters and others as 'informalization'.<sup>27</sup> It is generally agreed upon that, from the nineteen sixties till the early eighties there was in Western Europe a dominant trend toward relaxation of manners in many areas. This trend could only be used as evidence against the theory of the civilizing process, however, if that theory were assumed to imply that the civilizing process (1) boils down to increasing self control, and (2) will steadily continue in that same direction.

Both assumptions are unfounded. First we should realize that in the original version the theory was designed mainly to apply to a particular phase in the civilizing process in Western Europe. This phase was marked not just by 'increased self control' but, more subtly, by the adjustment of self control to the changing social conditions. In one of the briefest formulations: 'as the social fabric grows more intricate, the sociogenic apparatus of self control also becomes more differentiated, more all-round and more stable'.<sup>28</sup>

Perhaps in this last sentence the past tense, 'grew' and 'became', would have done more justice to the fact that the author was referring to a particular episode. A clear indication that he was characterizing a specific historical trend might have precluded the second misunderstanding to the effect that 'diagnosis of a long-term developmental trend in the past necessarily implies that the same trend must continue, automatically and inevitably, into the future'.<sup>29</sup> Nothing could be more erroneous. Trends depend on conditions; these conditions are shaped by other trends. If changes in behaviour have shown to be related to changes in power, all we may postulate about further trends is that any fundamental changes in power relationships are likely to engender changes in behaviour and, accordingly, in self control.

## 10. Concluding remarks

In the 1969 Introduction Elias pointed out that the theory of the civilizing process, even if applied only in the specific setting

of European history, had far more general implications. The image of human beings it implied meant a radical departure from more conventional views which were basically static and individualistic:

'So long as we see the individual human being as by nature a closed container with an outer shell and a core concealed within it, we cannot comprehend how a civilizing process embracing many generations is possible, in the course of which the personality structure of the individual human being changes without the nature of human beings changing.'<sup>30</sup>

Seeing human beings in the context of the manifold social figurations they form means that we abandon the image of 'man' in the singular - whether it be the image of the individual as a self-contained reservoir of drives and urges in search of an outlet, or as a calculating agent (or 'actor') basing all his actions on 'rational choice'. Both images are artificial constructs, hypostatizing particular experiences which may be 'real' without being 'realistic'.

The individualizing image of 'man' tends to be ahistoric in that it lifts certain attributes of the human personality out of their socio-cultural (i.e. historically conditioned) context and elevates them to the status of unchanging universals. These may be conceived of as 'instincts' and 'drives' or, as the case may be, the inclination to make 'rational choices'. In either case, particular aspects of the personality, which people themselves in various historical circumstances may experience as more or less essential, are treated by social theorists as if they are the single immutable pass-key to an understanding of human conduct.

Besides being ahistoric such images also tend to be strongly normative. These two tendencies combined may give rise to such statements as that 'the human animal cannot be tamed by civilization'<sup>31</sup> - a statement which seems to derive its appeal from a condemnation of the apparently immutable 'human animal' in the light of an equally immutable ideal of 'civilization'.

In Elias's view, by contrast, human beings appear as engaged in civilizing processes. These processes are universal features of human societies. In order to survive in the ecological and

social niches in which they find themselves, people have to acquire certain skills. A repertory of such skills may be called a regime; civilizing processes then consist of the formation and transmission of these regimes.

Regimes give rise to a mixture of aptitudes and inaptitudes. Out of the virtually unlimited range of possible forms of conduct people everywhere learn to realize a few. The skills and habits which help them to survive in one niche, be it a royal court or a university, may be of no value or even detrimental in other niches. Thus civilizing processes generate trained incapacities as well as capacities.

Viewed in a historical perspective, civilizing processes are like a stream. Continuity is as much a part of their flow as is change. What we perceive as 'continuity' also is a process: a process of continuing reinforcement of ways of doing things - a rehearsal over and over again of the repertory of skills which were once learned for the first time and were then transmitted to new generations.

Basic to survival of any human group is a measure of controlled adjustment to ecological conditions. During most of human history, therefore, the ecological regime has taken pride of place in all groups. It comprised a great variety of skills, one of which was the capacity to keep a fire burning. Control over fire clearly was a learned form of behaviour (a 'cultural mutation') imposing certain constraints but also yielding advantages, such as an increased power vis-à-vis other animals which were swifter and stronger than humans.<sup>32</sup>

The chances of survival for humans have never ceased to depend on the ecological conditions in which they lived. In this respect we can only accept the perspective of cultural materialism advanced by Marvin Harris.<sup>33</sup> As pointed out above, however, the impact of ecological constraints came to be less directly felt when in advanced agrarian societies elites arose whose life chances depended primarily on the capacity to command other people's services. For those elites, regimes of a more strictly 'social' nature took precedence over the ecological regime. It was in the context of such conditions in a military-agrarian society that the changes in behaviour and power took place which formed the subject matter of The Civilizing Process.

In the last decades of the twentieth century, awareness of the importance of ecological conditions has been increasing. This seems to be part of a more general trend toward widening the range of foresight and consideration.<sup>34</sup> Apparently the human potential for destruction, intended or unintended, has become so great and threatening that more and more the need is felt for organized efforts to check this potential. Again and again people try to evade these pressures, individually or collectively; again and again the consequences are fatal: from traffic accidents to wars and environmental disasters.

## Notes

1. Elias 1994, p. xvi.
2. Elias 1994, p. xvi.
3. Elias 1994, pp. 183-4.
4. Elias 1994, p. 185.
5. Cf. Taschwer 1994.
6. Cf. Goudsblom 1977, p. 76.
7. Cf. Goudsblom 1984. See also Maso (1992) who argues that the philosopher Ernst Cassirer was also influential in shaping Elias's ideas.
8. Elias 1994, p. 249.
9. Cf. Goudsblom 1977 and, for supplements, 1984 and 1987. See also Korte 1988, p. 13, and Taschwer 1994.
10. Three of the reviewers were Swiss. It would be interesting to find out whether they knew the publisher, Fritz Karger, personally.
11. Foulkes 1941, p. 319.
12. Koopmans and De Schaepdrijver 1993, p. 55.
13. Elias 1978, p. 161.
14. Elias 1994, p. 457.
15. Cf. Benedict 1935, p. 15
16. Cf. Harris 1968, pp. 306-314.
17. Wittfogel 1957, p. 7.
18. Cf. Goudsblom 1992.
19. Knox 1991, p. 109.
20. Elias 1994, p. 268.
21. For a comparison of state formation processes in Western Europe and Russia along the lines of Elias see Arnason 1993, pp. 34-42.
22. For some more recent reflections in this tradition see Hirschman 1982 and Haskell 1985.
23. Cf. Mennell 1989, p. 228
24. Elias 1989, pp. 391-516.
25. Cf. Fletcher forthcoming.

26. Elias 1994, p. 480.
27. Wouters 1992.
28. Elias 1994, p. 447.
29. Elias 1978b, p. 158.
30. Elias 1994, p. 212.
31. Mestrovic 1992, p. x. See also Verrips 1992.
32. Cf. Goudsblom 1992.
33. Harris 1968, pp. 643-687.
34. Cf. De Swaan 1994.

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