

CIVILISATION AND DECIVILISATION, CIVIL SOCIETY AND VIOLENCE

by

Stephen Mennell

*Professor of Sociology
in the National University of Ireland*

An Inaugural Lecture

delivered at University College Dublin

on 6 April 1995

The Professorship of Sociology

The Faculty of Arts of University College Dublin is proud to honour the filling of the Chair of Sociology by the publication of the Inaugural Lecture of the first holder of this Chair under that title, Professor Stephen Mennell.

While this Professorship of Sociology is new, the discipline has had a long, honourable, and somewhat complicated history in University College Dublin. The Faculty of Philosophy and Sociology was one of the Foundation Faculties of the NUI and UCD in 1908. That was quite unusual and very avant-garde at the turn of the century; but we know from the writings of the Professors of the time that they used Sociology in a broad sense covering what nowadays would be called Sociology, Social Administration and Social Work, with a smattering of Statistics and National Economics. It was not until a quarter of a century later that UCD instituted Social Science courses, with a wide-ranging, rigorous and demanding programme of practical training for a Diploma under the direction of Mrs Agnes McGuire. Twenty years later, in 1953, there began an evening degree course in Social Science, again broad and interdisciplinary. In 1959 and 1960 were appointed two subsequently prominent members of staff, Dr Conor Ward and Dr Helen Burke, later Professor and Associate Professor respectively. But a Department of Social Science was not formally established until 1962, when the evening degree was replaced by a daytime one, and Dr James Kavanagh was appointed to head the department as a Statutory Lecturer and shortly afterwards as first Professor of Social Science. He saw the Department through an important period of growth until his own appointment as R.C. Auxiliary Bishop of Dublin in 1974, whereupon he was succeeded as Professor by Dr Conor Ward.

After extensive consultation in the late 1980s, Professor Ward secured agreement for the division of Social Science into the Department of Sociology and the Department of Social Policy and Social Work. This harmonious division, and Professor Ward's own retirement in 1991 to take up pastoral duties, made the way for the coming of Professor Mennell as our first Professor of Sociology.

Professor Mennell came to this Chair by a long and distinguished route. Having read Economics at Cambridge, where he was a Scholar of St Catharine's College, he spent the year 1966-67 as Frank Knox Memorial Fellow in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, where he studied with Talcott Parsons, George Homans and Seymour Martin Lipset. He then took up a position as Assistant Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Exeter, where he later became Reader in Sociology and Comparative European Studies. In the 1970s he wrote his first books, including *Cultural Policy in Towns* which was the product of the Council of Europe's Fourteen Towns Project; his European interests were reflected in his becoming joint founding Director of the Western European Studies Centre at Exeter.

His major book is *All Manners of Food: Eating and Taste in England and France from the Middle Ages to the Present*, which first appeared in 1985. For this he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Social Sciences by the University of Amsterdam. The work received international recognition through two prestigious awards and by translation into Dutch, French, German and

Japanese.

Concurrently with this concern Stephen Mennell developed a special interest in the work of Norbert Elias, resulting in his 1989 book *Norbert Elias: Civilization and the Human Self-Image*, written while he was a Fellow of the Netherlands Institute of Advanced Studies, Wassenaar. The following year he was appointed Professor at Monash University, Melbourne, where he was Head of the Department of Anthropology and Sociology until 1993. During that time and since then he has continued his concern with the ideas of Elias, and is about to publish (with Professor Eric Dunning) a translation of Elias's *Studien über die Deutschen*.

He comes to University College Dublin with an established international reputation and experience, to take up responsibilities as its first Professor of Sociology, in which capacity he presents his Inaugural Address on "Civilization and Decivilization, Civil Society and Violence".

Fergus D'Arcy
Dean, Faculty of Arts
University College Dublin
13 June 1995

Three decades ago, C. Wright Mills inspired a generation of sociologists with his vision of the place of "the sociological imagination" in modern society. Ordinary people, he wrote:

do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. ... Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. (Mills, 1959: 3-4)¹

But, Mills contended, people were becoming more aware of their inability to draw these connections. It was not only information they needed. Information often swamped their attention and overwhelmed their capacity to assimilate it. (If that were true in 1959, how much truer is it in 1995, in the age of the Internet?) No, Mills continued, what they needed, and what they increasingly *felt* they needed, was a quality of mind which helped them to *use* information and to understand what was going on in the world, and also what might be happening *within themselves*. This quality of mind he called the sociological imagination. "The sociological imagination", he wrote, "enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise." (1959: 5-6)

It would be entirely misleading to pretend that - no matter how impressed they are by Mills's vision - the majority of the world's sociologists, in their day-to-day research, spend much of their time brooding about the great sweep of history. If they did, I suspect that governments would not be prepared to pay the university salaries of quite so many of us as they do now. The majority of us always have done, still do, and probably ought to continue to do, work which is to a greater or lesser extent useful in practical ways - often to governments, but often also to the plurality of competing and overlapping associations, clubs, parties, unions, pressure groups and agencies which constitute "civil society". We discover information about contemporary society on which the formulation of policy can be based. We examine demographic trends and make predictions which help governments and others to anticipate and make better provision for the future. We bring to light social problems, often arousing public opinion and stimulating government to take action to solve them. For a large proportion of professional sociologists, the aspiration to help, directly or indirectly, to improve the lot of their fellow human beings was among the reasons they were drawn to the discipline. Bound up with that in rather complex ways, it has to be admitted, can often be a leaning towards moralising: the attribution of blame can also serve as a means of orientation in the social sciences (Van Benthem van den Bergh, 1980). From whichever motivation, a good deal of good sociological research is, directly or indirectly, policy-orientated. We have a very strong tradition of such research in the Department of Sociology at UCD, and in our sister Department of Social Policy and Social Work. A cynic might suggest that one reason for the strength of this tradition in Ireland is that there has until this very year been nothing resembling a Social Science Research Council to finance other kinds of research - part of a wider picture in which our government spends less *per capita* on "pure" research in the sciences generally even than Greece and Portugal. But that would not be quite fair; the meliorist and policy-orientated tradition has been a powerful element in the growth of sociology not just in Ireland, but more widely in these islands and many other countries.

Civil Society, History and Sociology

What I wish to draw attention to more generally is the extent to which the practice of meliorist sociology presupposes and takes for granted the existence of a strong "civil society". That term goes back to Hegel and to Adam Ferguson, but it regained its historic significance in the last years of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe. Groups like Civic Forum in Czechoslovakia ("Civil Forum" would have been a more accurate translation) demanded the re-establishment of a "public sphere" (Habermas, 1989), in which groups and ideas could compete freely in the formation of public opinion autonomously from the state. *Re-establish* in the case of what is now the Czech Republic; but if we turn our gaze further east, to most of the successor states of the USSR, or south-east to the Balkans, there is no "*re*" about it. Events there remind us that civil society is a creation of historical circumstance, and the circumstances never did arise before in those lands. Events there also remind us that "civil society" is not just a matter of the free competition of groups and ideas autonomously from the state; the competition must also, crucially, be under the *protection* of the state. In other words, "civil society" presupposes *peace*, a relatively highly pacified territory. We take that far too much for granted. Ernest Gellner has recently written:

Atlantic society is endowed with Civil Society, and on the whole, at any rate since 1945, it has enjoyed it without giving it much thought. Much contemporary social theory takes it for granted in an almost comical manner: it simply starts out with the assumption of an unconstrained and secular individual, unhampered by social or theological bonds, freely choosing his aims, and reaching some agreement concerning social order with his fellows. In this manner, Civil Society is simply presupposed as some kind of attribute of the human condition. (Gellner, 1994: 13)

Sociology's development as an academic discipline almost exactly coincides with that of large-scale bureaucratic government apparatuses capable of implementing social policies throughout their territories. Equally, the effectiveness of such apparatuses has maintained a level of internal peace which has allowed sociology to take that aspect of its own historical context largely for granted, and permitted sociologists a long "retreat into the present" (Elias, 1987a).

I said "permitted", not "caused"; there are indeed many and complex reasons why the sociological profession came in large part to measure its achievements against the yardstick of usefulness to contemporary society, and why - in most day-to-day research - there was less interest in the questions of long-term social development that had been central to the work of the classical sociologists. Intellectual justification in the post-war years for sociologists' retreat into the present was provided by several notable writers, among whom I shall mention the philosophers Sir Karl Popper (1945, 1957) and Sir Isaiah Berlin (1954), and the American sociologist Robert Nisbet (1969).

The kernel of Popper's argument was that, because the course of history is influenced by the growth of human knowledge, and because we cannot predict future knowledge (otherwise we would already know it), history cannot be predicted, and therefore no "laws" can be discovered governing general historical processes.² Popper's books were intended to constitute a logical, moral and political knockout blow against any belief - especially Marxist and nationalist belief - in "inexorable laws of historical destiny", or indeed any form of "inevitability" in long-term social development.³ Berlin, who appeared to advocate the writing of history in terms of the intentions of individuals, revived ancient arguments about human "free will" and its

incompatibility with any broader explanation of historical trends. Nisbet in turn revived the arguments about "social evolution", attacking what he called "developmentalism" and any principle of "immanence" in social change. He opposed any belief - the Marxist belief most obviously - in sequential "stages" of development, where the seeds of a later stage are immanent in an earlier stage.⁴

The question of whether a sequence of social development can ever be said to be "inevitable" has tended to become entangled with the philosophers' metaphysical antithesis of "determinism" and "free will". The muddle is then further compounded when, as in Berlin's arguments, "free will" is linked to "freedom" in the sense of social and political liberty, and "determinism" to the lack of liberty. Philosophical discussions of "free will" and "determinism" have always tended to overlook the simple fact that "there are always simultaneously many mutually dependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one's scope for action" (Elias, 1978: 167). Both Berlin's freely choosing individual and its opposite, French structuralism's *Träger* utterly devoid of choice ("There are no subjects except by and for their subjection" - Althusser, 1971: 169), are metaphysical abstractions constructed by philosophers, and nowhere to be met with in the real social world.

On the whole, historical sociologists and sociological historians have now set aside such philosophical disputation. Over the last two decades, there has been a resurgence of important studies of long term processes of social development. Their authors are drawn from several disciplines: philosophy, anthropology, history and economic history as well as sociology. The central problem in the study of long-term social processes, however, is essentially a *sociological* problem. It is the problem of understanding how the intentional activities of individual people interweave to produce more or less *unintended* long-term social processes. People act in pursuit of their own particular objectives - objectives that are in part shaped through their experience in interdependence with other people from birth (but not rigidly *determined* in any way that sociologists can demonstrate empirically), and which they pursue by means that are more or less constrained by their interdependence. These individual activities, each of them in some sense planned and intended, often interweave to produce social processes which no-one has planned or intended. A familiar example is the long-term division of labour. No-one has planned a process like this, but it has a structure and direction of its own. It compels and constrains the individuals caught up in it. Once there are factories in which a dozen people divide among themselves the labour of making pins, no-one will be able to make a living from producing the individually hand-crafted pin, however much they want to. In the face of such processes, it is rather futile - but hard not - to indulge in the impulse to attribute blame. The increased productivity in pin production had unintended consequences which its initiators could not foresee; and once a few had adopted it, market forces compelled others to do so, and no doubt drove still others into unemployment. These "blind", unplanned processes build up a momentum of their own (Mennell, 1992b), but they remain contingent, not "inevitable": if they encounter obstacles or other processes with sufficient momentum of their own, they can be stopped, deflected or reversed. Mere human suffering is rarely enough to achieve this on its own.

Habitus

The long-term process in which I have a particular interest is the formation of what is now fashionably called "habitus".⁵ The meaning of the jargon-word "habitus" is not very different from *mentalités*, as used by the *Annales* historians. Its meaning is more exactly described by the

everyday expression "second nature".⁶ It refers to those layers of our personality make-up which are not inherent or innate but are very deeply *habituated* in us by learning through social experience from birth onwards - so deeply habituated, in fact, that they feel "natural" or inherent even to ourselves. Studying the formation of habitus responds directly to C. Wright Mills's demand that we "grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society". And the aspect of human habitus to which I want to pay particular attention - people's cruelty and use of violence towards other people - is central to the whole problem of civil society.

The problem of violence and aggression used to be debated in a static and philosophical way, in terms of the outmoded concept of "human nature". People used to ask "Is Man inherently aggressive?" (Montagu, 1968; Storr, 1968) - and "man" was usually the correct word in those discussions, not just a "sexist" slip of the tongue. Sociobiologists, ethologists and some psychoanalysts have believed that there is in human beings (especially in male human beings, according to some) an *unlearned* aggressive drive or "instinct". Without going into the whole debate, I want to argue that such a universal "instinct" does not exist, but that there is equally no inbuilt mechanism, such as exists in many animals, that instinctively controls aggression and limits violence.⁷ The very variability in the forms and degrees of aggressiveness historically and cross-culturally shows clearly that, whatever physiological roots it may have, it is fundamentally dependent on *learned* controls, and patterned according to many different social standards which change over time.

It may clarify my argument if I quote a useful dictum of Clyde Kluckhohn and Henry Murray (1948: 35):

- Every man is in certain respects
- (a) like *all* other men
 - (b) like *some* other men
 - (c) like *no* other man

In other words, there are (Level (a)) many characteristics that human beings share in common with all other members of the species. All normal human beings, for instance, are capable of using a language. There are also (Level (c)) ways in which every individual human personality is unique - if only because, as Alfred Schutz contended, each of us has a unique biographical situation and a unique permutation of experience sedimented into a unique stock of knowledge. But most of sociology is concerned with Level (b), the characteristics human beings share with *certain* other humans - in practice those groups to which they belong and with which they identify. This is the level at which the social incidence of violence needs to be studied. Human groups have varied a good deal, and continue to vary, in the extent and patterning of aggressiveness and violence which they permit and which they foster in their members.

Norbert Elias (1994: 446) used a vivid image to draw attention to how people's habitus has changed, in particular the social standards of aggressiveness. Picture the muddy roads of a simple agrarian society, with a sparse population and a mainly barter economy. There is little traffic. The few travellers along these roads are constantly on the watch, constantly alert to the risk posed to them by other people (and by wild animals: the landscape generally is far less tamed). But the risk of collision with other travellers is small. The main risk is that they will be attacked, robbed, even killed. They have to be constantly prepared to defend themselves violently from violent attack; and that means *temperamentally* as well as physically prepared. A volatile temperament, a constant readiness to fight, and free play of the emotions in defence of

one's life and possessions is actually an advantage and necessity in these circumstances. On the roads of modern society, the dangers from other people are very different. The danger of physical attack is comparatively low. But the flow of cars and pedestrians in all directions is very dense. There are road signs, traffic lights and police to control the traffic. This external control, however, is founded on the assumption that every individual is regulating his or her own behaviour very exactly in accordance with the flow of traffic. Constant vigilance, foresight and self-control is needed whether driving or on foot. An error of judgment in foreseeing some movement can kill. Impetuosity, lack of foresight, and loss of self-control are now principal sources of the dangers that people pose to themselves and to each other. The frustrations of the traffic can lead someone to lose control, vent his or her aggression on another driver, or in any way "do something stupid".

This points to how, in the course of social development, some skills and aptitudes are gained and others lost as, over the generations, they become more appropriate or less appropriate to the situations people have regularly to confront in their interdependence with other people.⁸ On medieval battlefields, for instance, it was an advantage to be fearless and to give vent to aggression in a relatively unbridled way in the *joys* of battle. Even impetuosity could be more an advantage, less a disadvantage than in modern conflicts. This is not to say that medieval warriors were entirely unconstrained in the expression of emotions - no human being is. There is plenty of evidence of their extreme self-constraint, by comparison with modern people, in their tolerance of physical agony, their endurance of cruelty inflicted on themselves by their enemies - as a counterpart to their propensity themselves to inflict cruelty. Modern armies, at least in relatively pacified, relatively democratic industrial societies, are very different. Recruits have to be trained to kill, it is true. Indeed they have to be trained to overcome, in certain precise circumstances, the normal civilised repugnance that they, like most of us, feel towards killing and maiming our fellow humans. But if some restraints have to be loosened through training, other encompassing restraints have to be made very strong.⁹ Impetuosity long since ceased to be an advantage on the battlefield.¹⁰ And the last thing that the armies of modern democratic states want is to recruit people who enjoy killing; in fact, they take some trouble to root them out. The more general point I am making is that regimes (or regimens) of emotion management form and change hand in hand with changes in social organisation. And, unlike biological evolution, social development is reversible.

Let us return to the European Middle Ages, around the end of the first millennium. The warriors who dominated numerous small patches of territory simply could not avoid fighting each other. This is not to be explained in terms of individual psychology. Their personality may have been adapted to their situation, but it was not the prime motive force in their fighting. That was rather the consequence of the particular form of their interdependence with each other. A magnate's power was very closely correlated with the amount of land and population he dominated. His situation *vis-à-vis* neighbouring magnates therefore resembled a situation of monopolistic competition between firms in the modern economy.¹¹ Given three magnates with roughly equal power and adjacent territory, one of them could not easily sit peacefully by while the other two slugged it out. If one of those two were conquered and eliminated from the contest, the other would end up with twice the territory and power of the third - the would-be spectator - who would thus be easy meat in the next round of the contest. Looked at in very long-term perspective, the history of warfare between competing territorial units in Europe over nearly a thousand years rather resembles the Wimbledon Tennis Championships: one starts with many

dozens of players in the first round, but the final rounds involve only a small number who have survived (often with a strong element of chance) through many tussles. In the real wars of European history, those defeated in the early rounds, or their descendants, ended up playing a subordinate role to the major players - as courtiers, or as officers in the royal armies. But they were never subordinated without repeated struggles. In agrarian societies, warriors pacified the peasants - more or less - but how were the warriors to be pacified? The taming of warriors is a universal problem in the establishment of a more peaceful, less violent social order - a problem that has obviously not been universally or permanently solved by kings, by dictators, or even by democratic governments today.

How does this affect the habitus, the personality make-up, of members of society at large? Norbert Elias contended that "if in this or that region the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area people are *forced* to live at peace with one another, the moulding of affects and the standards of the demands made upon emotional management are very gradually changed as well" (1994: 165, my emphasis; published translation modified to reflect Elias's later terminology). It seems in accordance with common sense that the longer people live peacefully with each other, the more deeply habitual will peaceful modes of behaviour become for them. It is not just a matter of the growth of central authority alone, however - not *just* a question of the strengthening of a state apparatus's success in upholding a monopoly of the use of violence within a territory.¹² State formation is only one process which has interwoven with others to enmesh individual people in increasingly complex, dense and extensive networks of interdependence. It interwove with the division of labour, the growth of trade and towns, the increasing use of money and expanding administrative apparatuses, as well as increasing population, in a spiral process. Taking the long view, internal pacification of territory facilitated trade, which facilitated the growth of towns and division of labour, and generated taxes which supported larger administrative and military organisations, which in turn facilitated the pacification of larger territories, and so on - a cumulative process experienced as a compelling force by people caught up in it. Along the way, but with varying degrees of success in different states, there gradually also developed the complex of institutions which since the eighteenth century we have called "civil society". A strong "civil society" was most likely to emerge in states within which the outcome of power struggles, including cycles of violence, had eventuated in a relatively equal power balance between the major social interests contending for political dominance.¹³ This circumstance is most favourable to the growth of the dense web of cross-cutting group affiliations, where an opponent in one context can be an ally in another, which serve to mute and constrain people's feelings of enmity. And, about the same time, upper-class European people began to describe themselves as "civilised", a term of self-appraisal denoting (among many other things) their relatively peaceful modes of habitual behaviour towards each other.¹⁴

That greatest of sociologists of civil society, Alexis de Tocqueville (1961 [1840]: II, 195-200; cf. Stone and Mennell, 1980: 1-46), long ago pointed out "that manners are softened as social conditions become more equal". He cited the flippant attitude of Mme de Sévigné in the late seventeenth century towards peasants being broken on the wheel after a local tax revolt. From a later standpoint, her comments seem strikingly callous, especially when we know from her diaries that she was a kind and affectionate person within her own social circle. In relatively more equal societies, Tocqueville suggests, people more readily identify with the sufferings of fellow human beings in general.¹⁵

This points to a more general principle. The more are people caught up in longer and denser networks of interdependence with each other, the more (*ceteris paribus*) do individual people constantly have to attune their actions to those of more and more others. The habit of foresight over longer chains grows. In Goudsblom's neat phrase, "more people are forced more often to pay more and more attention to more and more other people" (1989: 722). This involves a process of transition in mutual identification. Taking more conscious account of how one's behaviour will be interpreted by others can also be described as a higher level of identification with others. In highly unequal societies like the absolutist states of *ancien régime* Europe, the boundaries within which identification was felt were quite narrow. That is the significance of Mme de Sévigné's jokes about the execution of peasants, or of Voltaire's being horsewhipped by a nobleman's servants - one did not habitually put oneself in the place of the lower orders. There remained - there still remains - much room for expansion in the scope of mutual identification between fellow human beings. At the present day, with people right across the globe increasingly entangled in a single world-wide network of communications, and with the webs of political and economic interdependence increasingly binding people together across the boundaries of nation-states - as in the European Union, for instance - one might be tempted to wonder how close we are, at last, to humanity as a whole constituting the one single community imagined by Kant two centuries ago in his *Idea of a Universal History from the Point of View of a Citizen of the World* (1790 [1784]).

But I am far from prophesying any outbreak of universal sweetness and light. Anyone who troubles to read the newspapers and to watch television would find any such prophecy quite counter-intuitive.

Among the reasons why we are *not* witnessing an inevitable progression towards an all-embracing mutual identification is that the same processes which foster tendencies in that direction also serve to produce counter-currents. For instance, in the twentieth century, cheap transport and increased mobility over long distances have made it even more common throughout the world for displaced groups to impinge on older-established ones. In this new *Volkerwanderungszeit*, groups of people whose skins are of different colours, or who have been brought up in different ways of life are increasingly thrust together; in the short term at least, the result is likely to be more conflict and friction, hatred and even violence.

Thus we must recognise that paradise may be indefinitely postponed. Yet it is equally important not to accept uncritically any myth of a past golden age. The small, relatively isolated rural community of the past was not all cosy homesteads and comely maidens. We too often look back admiringly at the intense solidarity and strong emotional identification found in such communities, but fail to remember the equally strong but less admirable hostility to outsiders that went with it. We also often fail to take account also of the intense rivalries and hatreds which could be engendered *within* such social pressure cookers. This is no contradiction; they are two sides of the same coin.¹⁶ What tends to happen as smaller, relatively isolated communities become enmeshed in wider social networks - as we move, in the terminology of Toennies still so beloved of sociologists, from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft* - is that both kinds of affects are muted. That is to say, both the intense emotional identification with a limited group, and the intense internal rivalries which often go hand in hand with it, stand a good chance of diminishing as affects generally become subject to a more even and more all-round regime.

In the modern world, where people belong to groups within groups within groups, their sense of identity is always multi-layered. They do not have just a simple self-conception or self-image of themselves. Incorporated into their self-image are many layers of we-images. It is possible that in the very early stages of human social development, when people lived in very small and isolated hunter-gatherer bands, people's we-image had only a single layer; when people said "we", it always referred to the same specific group of people (Elias, 1991: 182-3, 202). In more complex societies there are always many layers of we-image: one is a Yorkshire-born English European resident of Ireland who is also enmeshed in a world-wide network of academics.

These layers of we-identity, however, are not a matter of cognition alone, but also of powerful emotions. We-images are always tied to they-images, and the more powerful the emotional attachment to one's own group, the more likely is it to have as its counterpart hostility towards, and fear of, others who do not belong to it. Indeed the emotional attachment to one's own group is likely to have formed in the face of factual dangers posed by other groups, but may well persist when the factual danger no longer exists. Over time, the emotional centre of gravity can move "upwards" to more inclusive layers of we-identity; it can also, in certain circumstances, move "downwards" to less inclusive, more localised layers. There is a certain asymmetry between civilising and decivilising processes.¹⁷ When people live together relatively more peacefully, the resulting changes in habitus - a more inclusive measure of mutual identification and greater habitual demands upon emotion management - come about only slowly, through gradual changes in the socialisation process from generation to generation. But the reverse process is able to happen much more quickly. As Elias warned, The armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as once it was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today.¹⁸

And once aggression and violence have broken out between two or more groups of humans, the emotional double-bind process can easily become self-perpetuating and self-escalating. Cycles of violence are never easy to break.

Nationalism

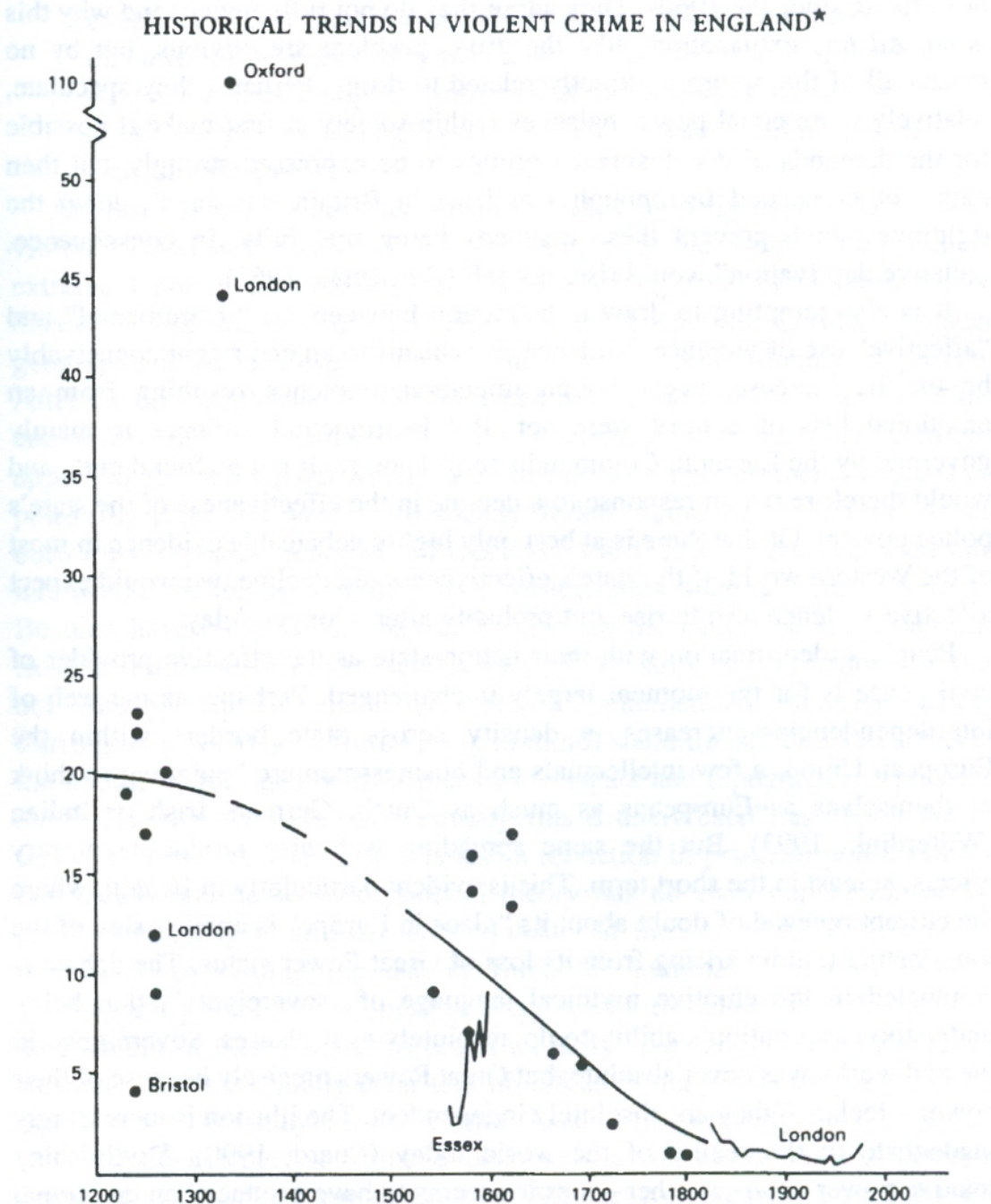
The level of we-identity which has been most discussed in recent years is the sense of identification with the nation-state, and the associated issue of nationalism. It is often overlooked how recently, for most people in most countries, the nation-state has come to rival family and local community as a primary emotional focus (cf. Greenfeld, 1992). Eugen Weber, in his classic study *Peasants into Frenchmen* (1976), shows how, even as late as the second half of the nineteenth century in one of Europe's longest and most firmly established states, there was a surprisingly weak sense of Frenchness in the minds of people in the remoter areas of territory that had long been within the boundaries of France. And he shows how, partly through the intentional use of the expanding educational system, but mainly through unplanned consequences of processes like improved communications, urbanisation, industrialisation, migration and military conscription, the peasantry was integrated into the French state, and simultaneously subjected to civilising or disciplinary pressures in their manners, customs and beliefs. Weber's emphasis on denser networks and improved communications is paralleled in Benedict Anderson's (1983) account of how nationalist élites in colonial societies have been able to create "imagined communities" through their use of the print and other media in shaping accepted narratives of national history and identity.

In the past, rulers often succeeded (though not always) in incorporating the people of a region into a state by means of a mixture of time, inertia and force. That is less easy to do in an age of mass education. But now, especially, it is often in the interests of leaders seeking to weld a people together to promote the sense of nationhood as something primordial. No nation *is* primordial; they are all socially constructed. The myth of primordiality is associated with many of the worst instances of racism and xenophobia. There are, however, more mundane and practical reasons why people in so many countries take their nation so much for granted and at the same time identify emotionally so strongly with it. Gellner puts it vividly:

For the average person, the limits of his culture are, if not quite the limits of the world, at any rate the limits of his employability, social acceptability, dignity, effective participation and citizenship. They define the limits of the use of his conceptual intuitions, access to the rules of the game, and to the intelligibility of the social world; beyond these limits, he becomes gaffe-prone, inept, subject to derision and contempt, and seriously handicapped in any endeavour. Hence his educationally acquired culture is by far his most important possession and investment, for it alone gives him access to all else; and the existence of a secure, preferably extensive political unit identified with that culture and committed to its protection and enforcement is his most pressing and powerful political concern. His deepest identity is determined neither by his bank balance nor by his kin nor by his status, but by his literate culture. He is not a nationalist out of atavism (quite the reverse), but rather from a perfectly sound though seldom lucid and conscious appreciation of his own true interests. He needs a politically protected *Gesellschaft*, though he talks of it in the idiom of a spontaneously engendered *Gemeinschaft*. The rhetoric of nationalism is inversely related to its social reality: it speaks of *Gemeinschaft* and is rooted in a semantically and often phonetically standardised *Gesellschaft*. (Gellner, 1994: 107)

The strength of people's we-identity with their nation-state, in short, is related to its effectiveness in providing a relatively secure and peaceful civil society within which they can pursue their own peaceful activities and live out their lives together. Ironically, it is often very difficult to convince people today how relatively effectively their states provide this necessary security. There is a widespread perception that "law and order" is breaking down in the cities of the Western world, and that the level of danger in everyday life is rising, not falling. The perception cannot be taken at face value. In Britain, for instance, for hundreds of years successive generations have voiced similar fears of escalating violence, moral decline, and the destruction of "the British way of life" (Pearson, 1983). Certainly, there seem to be short-term fluctuations in violence, in response to rising and falling social tensions. Yet there is very little hard evidence for a rising curve of violence over terms longer than one or two generations. Admittedly, trends are difficult to study even in the short-term, since a rise in officially recorded or publicly reported incidents of violence may at least partly reflect an increase in the effectiveness of the police, or indeed a diminished tolerance of minor violence. However, such evidence as we have of long-term trends in violent crime over many generations appears to show a long-term decline. Figure 1, from the historian Lawrence Stone's discussion of interpersonal violence in English society from 1300 to 1980 (1985), is based on statistics analysed by the political scientist Ted Robert Gurr (1983). Gurr's data for the USA, Australia, Germany, France and Scandinavia also show a stable or gently falling rate of homicide since the early nineteenth century, though the trend is obscured in the USA by three great upsurges of violent crime beginning around 1850, 1900 and 1960.

Figure 1



* Note and source: T. R. Gurr, "Historical Trends in Violent Crime: A Critical Review of the Evidence", *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, iii (1981), p. 313, fig. 1: "Indicators of Homicides per 100,000 population in England, thirteenth to twentieth centuries. Each dot represents the estimated homicide rate for a city or county for periods ranging from several years to several decades . . .".

As against that, it has to be said that there is also some evidence that the long-term decline has in some countries been reversed over the last two or three decades - whether permanently or temporarily reversed we cannot say. Thus, the data of Eric Dunning and his colleagues (1987) suggest broadly that in England the incidence of violence declined for most of this century, but has been rising since the 1960s. They admit they do not fully understand why this is so. *Ad hoc* explanations like the drugs problem are obvious, but by no means all of the upturn is directly related to drugs. Perhaps, they speculate, relatively more equal power balances within society at first make it possible for the demands of disadvantaged groups to be expressed strongly, but then have not proceeded far enough - at least in Britain - to break down the rigidities which prevent these demands being met fully. In consequence, "relative deprivation" would rise, not fall (Runciman, 1966).

It is also tempting to draw a distinction between the "instrumental" and "affective" use of violence. Violence as a means to an end might conceivably be on the increase, even though impetuous violence resulting from an emotional loss of control were not. But instrumental violence is mainly governed by the Eleventh Commandment, "Thou shalt not be found out", and would therefore rise in response to a decline in the effectiveness of the state's police powers. Of that there is at best only highly debateable evidence in most of the Western world; if the state's effectiveness did decline, we would expect affective violence also to rise, but probably after a longer delay.

People's identification with their nation-state as the effective provider of civil peace is for the moment largely unchallenged. Perhaps, as the web of interdependencies increases in density across state borders within the European Union, a few intellectuals and businessmen are beginning to think of themselves as Europeans as much as Dutch, German, Irish or Italian (Wilterdink, 1993). But the same spreading web also produces contrary effects, at least in the short term. This is evident particularly in Britain, where the current renewal of doubt about its "place in Europe" is another sign of the long-lasting trauma arising from its loss of Great Power status. The debate is conducted in the emotive mythical language of "sovereignty", that being understood as a nation's ability to do absolutely as it pleases. Sovereignty, in the real world, was never absolute, but Great Powers - precisely because of their power - feel *as if* they are absolutely independent. The illusion is increasingly inadequate to the reality of the world today (Luard, 1990). Diminishing relative power *vis-à-vis* other countries seems to have produced an emotional illusion that everyone else in the playground is ganging up against them. Elias, in *The Germans* (forthcoming), comments:

the fortunes of a nation over the centuries become sedimented into the habitus of its individual members. Sociologists face a task here which distantly recalls the task which Freud tackled. He attempted to show the connection between the outcome of the conflict-ridden channelling of drives in a person's development and his or her resulting habitus. But there are also analogous connections between a people's long-term fortunes and experiences and their social habitus at any subsequent time. At this layer of the personality structure - let us ... call it the "we-layer" - there are often complex symptoms of disturbance at work which are scarcely less in strength and in capacity to cause suffering than the individual neuroses.

At least the British national ordeal is highly unlikely to lead to renewed violence between the states of Western Europe, as the comparable but more extreme German national trauma after Versailles contributed both to the Second World War and the genocide of the Nazi period. Taking a broader geographical view, however, the world outlook seems gloomy at present. After the brief euphoria of 1989-90, when both a "new world order" and "the end of history" (Fukuyama, 1992) were proclaimed, wars and ethnic conflicts appear to be breaking out widely. We have no world government. There is no politically-protected world civil society. Indeed some territorial units which outwardly appeared peaceful - Yugoslavia, the USSR - have dissolved into internecine strife, as *less* inclusive we-identities such as Croat, Serb or Bosnian have risen to dominance.¹⁹ Although the parallel is not exact, the Bosnian war in some ways resembles a medieval struggle for territory. So it is not wholly surprising if a succession of international statesmen (Lord Carrington and Douglas Hurd spring to mind) stand transfixed like rabbits in the middle of the road, with grimaces of disgust and repugnance expressing the feeling that "this isn't gentlemanly, this is uncivilised", as the oncoming tanks roll forward. Their plight is also a reflection in practical politics of the fact that liberal democratic political theory has no clear conception of the place - especially in an inter-state context - of the use of force for humane reasons in preventing the use of force for inhumane reasons. From a sociological point of view, there is every reason to believe that the decisive deployment of international forces at an early stage could have averted the Bosnian war. It is equally clear that no effective machinery as yet exists for that purpose. We may for some time look back ironically on the nuclear standoff between the two former superpowers as something like a golden age. Godfried van Benthem van de Bergh (1992) has convincingly argued that the morally repulsive strategy of Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD) provided a powerful external constraint towards self-constraint on the part of the superpowers, and on many of their clients in more local conflicts across the globe.²⁰ In the absence of any worldwide "organisation which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence", MAD in effect served as a functional alternative to the non-existent world government.

Yet in the longer term it may be that centripetal, integrating forces will come out on top, just as they have in Western Europe. What we are witnessing in the European Union appears to be the continuation by peaceful means of long-term processes which in the past unfolded with a great deal of violence. Wimbledon, serving up its strawberries and cream off court, may now be a better analogy than it was before. For state-formation is not primarily, in the end, a process driven by political will. It is mainly driven by largely unplanned social and economic processes of integration. There has been much talk lately of "globalisation" and "global society", and with the signs all around us of the all-encompassing web of global communications and trade, it is not very fanciful to think that corresponding political arrangements may eventually emerge in response to problems of regulation and co-ordination. Not in our lifetimes, though.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I return to where I started, with C. Wright Mills's vision of the sociological imagination. I hope that the large but sketchily painted canvass I have displayed before you will at least serve to illustrate some of the ways in which we may "grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society". Let me end by stressing that, in pleading for a greater historical awareness on the part of sociologists I am not just advocating an historical sociology in the sense of a mere "sociology of the past" (Mennell, 1990b) - the application of

modern sociological knowledge to the investigation of past societies for its own sake, interesting though that may be. No, what I advocate is the investigation of structured processes of development. That can lend scale and perspective to the *present* and how we understand it. And, although it is not quite true to say *tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner*, better understanding of the long-term roots of contemporary social problems can often diminish any preoccupation with the attribution of blame, and lead to more detached, more realistic modes of policy-making. An historically-informed sociology can influence the way people see the world, shaking them out of old perceptions and into new. But it is a slow business. That too, in its own right, is a long-term, structured process of social development.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Althusser, Louis 1971 "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses", in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. London, NLB.

Anderson, Benedict 1983: *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso.

van Benthem van den Bergh, Godfried 1980 "De schuldenvraag als oriëntatiemiddel", pp. 7-46 in *De staat van geweld en andere essays*. Amsterdam, Meulenhoff.

----- 1992 *The Nuclear Revolution and the End of the Cold War: Forced Restraint*. London, Macmillan.

Berlin, Isaiah 1954 *Historical Inevitability*. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Dunning, Eric 1977 "In Defence of Developmental Sociology: A Critique of Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* with special reference to the theory of Auguste Comte". *Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift*, 4: 327-49.

Dunning, E., P. Murphy, T. Newburn, and I. Waddington 1987 "Violent disorders in twentieth-century Britain", pp. 19-75 in G. Gaskell and R. Benewick, eds., *The Crowd in Contemporary Britain*. London, Sage.

Elias, Norbert 1974 "Towards a Theory of Communities", Foreword to Colin Bell and Howard Newby, eds., *The Sociology of Community*. London, Frank Cass, pp. ix-xxi.

----- 1978 *What is Sociology?*, translated by Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey. New York, Columbia University Press.

----- 1983 *The Court Society*. Oxford, Blackwell.

----- 1987a "The Retreat of Sociologists into the Present", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (2-3): 223-47.

----- 1987b "On Human Beings and their Emotions", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 4 (2-3): 339-61.

----- 1991 *The Society of Individuals*. Oxford, Polity Press.

----- 1994 [originally 1939] *The Civilising Process*. One-volume edition, Oxford, Blackwell.

----- forthcoming *The Germans: Studies of Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, translated by Eric Dunning and Stephen Mennell. Oxford, Polity Press.

- Elias, Norbert and Eric Dunning 1986 *Quest for Excitement*. Oxford, Blackwell.
- Foucault, Michel 1977: *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon.
- Fukuyama, Francis 1992 *The End of History and the Last Man*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- Gellner, Ernest 1994 *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals*. London, Hamish Hamilton.
- Goldthorpe, John H. "The Uses of History in Sociology: Reflections on some Recent Tendencies", *British Journal of Sociology* 42 (2): 211-30.
- Goudsblom, Johan 1989: "Stijlen en beschavingen", *De Gids* 152: 720-2.
- 1992 *Fire and Civilisation*. London, Allen Lane The Penguin Press.
- Goudsblom, Johan, E.L. Jones and Stephen Mennell 1989 *Human History and Social Process*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press.
- Greenfeld, Liah 1992 *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Gurr, Ted Robert 1981 "Historical trends in violent crime: a critical review of the evidence". *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, 3: 295-353.
- Habermas, Jürgen 1989 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Oxford, Polity Press.
- Hockey, John 1986 *Squaddies: Portrait of a Subculture*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press.
- Kluckhohn, Clyde and Henry A. Murray, eds. 1948 *Personality in Nature, Society and Culture*. New York, Knopf.
- Kant, Immanuel 1790 [orig. 1784]: "Idea of a Universal History from the Point of View of a Citizen of the World", in *Kant's Political Writings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Lewis, Oscar 1951 *Life in a Mexican Village*. Urbana, Ill., University of Illinois Press.
- Luard, Evan 1990 *The Globalisation of Politics*. London, Macmillan.
- Mennell, Stephen 1990a "Decivilising Processes: Theoretical Significance and Some Lines for Research". *International Sociology*, 5 (2) 1990: 205-23.
- 1990b "The Sociological Study of History: Institutions and Social Development", in C.G.A. Bryant and H. Becker, eds., *What has Sociology Achieved?*. London, Macmillan, 1990, pp. 54-68.

----- 1992a *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*. Oxford, Blackwell. [First edition published 1989 under the title *Norbert Elias: Civilisation and the Human Self-Image*.]

----- 1992b "Momentum and History", pp. 28-46 in Joseph Melling and Jonathan Barry, eds., *Culture in History: Production, Consumption and Values in Historical Perspective*. Exeter, University of Exeter Press.

----- 1994 "The Formation of We-Images: A Process Theory", pp. 175-97 in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1994.

Mills, C. Wright 1959 *The Sociological Imagination*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Montagu, M.F. Ashley ed. 1968 *Man and Aggression*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Nisbet, Robert A. 1969 *Social Change and History*. New York, Oxford University Press.

Pearson, G. 1983 *Hooliganism: A History of Respectable Fears*. London, Macmillan.

Popper, Karl R. 1945 *The Open Society and Its Enemies*. 2 vols., London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

----- 1957 *The Poverty of Historicism*. London, Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Redfield, Robert 1930 *Tepoztlán: A Mexican Village*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

Runciman, W.G. 1966 *Relative Deprivation and Social Justice*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Sanderson, Stephen K. 1990 *Social Evolutionism: A Critical History*. Oxford, Blackwell.

----- 1994 "Evolutionary Materialism: A Theoretical Strategy for the Study of Social Evolution". *Sociological Perspectives*, 37 (1): 47-73.

Stone, John and Stephen Mennell, eds., 1980: *Alexis de Tocqueville on Democracy, Revolution and Society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Stone, Lawrence 1985 "Interpersonal Violence in English Society, 1300-1980." *Past and Present*, 85: 3-24.

Storr, Anthony 1968 *Human Aggression*. Harmondsworth, Penguin.

de Swaan, Abram 1994 "The Sociological Study of Transnational Society". *Werk in Uitvoering* 46, Amsterdam, Amsterdam School for Social Science Research.

Tocqueville, Alexis de 1961 [orig. 1840]: *Democracy in America*, 2 vols., New York, Schocken.

Weber, Eugen 1976: *Peasants into Frenchmen: the Modernisation of Rural France, 1870-1914*.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Wilterdink, Nico 1993 "An examination of European and national identity", *Archives européennes de sociologie*, 34: 119-36.

NOTES

1. Mills was writing before people were as conscious as we are now of the need for gender-neutral vocabulary. In the spoken version of this lecture I changed "men" in various quotations to "people", so as not to distract attention from the substance of the quoted remarks.
2. For a more recent statement of Popperian views by one of Britain's most distinguished sociologists, see John H. Goldthorpe (1991), and the debate about his article in the *British Journal of Sociology* 45 (1) 1994.
3. See Eric Dunning's critique (1977) of Popper, from the point of view of a developmental sociology.
4. See Goudsblom's processual rethinking of "stages" of development through a combination of chronology and "phaseology" (Goudsblom, Jones and Mennell, 1989: 11-26). See also Stephen Sanderson's careful rethinking of the principles of social evolutionary theory (1990, 1994). (Goudsblom and I, following Elias, prefer to speak of processes of "social development" rather than "social evolution", on the grounds that the differences between social and biological processes - including the potential reversibility of social processes but not biological ones - are too great.)
5. The term has been popularised by Pierre Bourdieu, who probably adopted it from Norbert Elias who used it in *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, which appeared in French translation in the early 1970s. The published English translation of a decade later renders the German *Habitus* as "personality make-up", although "habitus" is an old word which passed out of use in English in the seventeenth century. It was apparently in common use among German sociologists between the two World Wars.
6. This point was made in conversation by Norbert Elias.
7. Cf. Norbert Elias, "On Human Beings and their Emotions" (1987).

8. For vivid examples of this principle in the course of changing fire control regimes over the entire course of human social and biological development, see J. Goudsblom, *Fire and Civilisation* (1992).
9. For an interesting sociological study of British army training, culminating in participant observation in the "bandit country" around Crossmaglen in south Armagh, see Hockey (1986).
10. Elias (1994: 482-3; 1983: 195) illustrated this point with the story of the Duc de Montmorency who, in his rebellion of 1632, threw away a strategic advantage over the King's forces through an impulsive charge.
11. For a fuller discussion, see Mennell (1992: 66ff.). See also De Swaan (1994) for a particularly succinct use of the idea of monopolistic competition implicit in Elias's theory of state-formation.
12. Of course, I am here alluding to Max Weber's famous definition of a state (1978 [1922]: I, 54), which in full reads: "an organisation which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence". The word "legitimate", as I have argued elsewhere, is rather a red herring and the source of much theoretical confusion in the literature.
13. See N. Elias, Introduction to N. Elias and E. Dunning, *Quest for Excitement*, 1986, pp. 26-40.
14. Cf. Elias's discussion of the sociogenesis of the concepts of "civilisation" and "culture" in the first two chapters of *The Civilising Process* (1994: 1-41); Elias emphasises that, in Germany, *Zivilisation* came to be associated with the francocentric courtly class, while *Kultur* signified the self-ascribed virtues of the peaceful (but later increasingly nationalist) commercial and intellectual *Bürgertum*.
15. Much more recently, Michel Foucault (1977) also documented the change that has taken place in attitudes towards suffering, although without offering as much in the way of sociological explanations as did Tocqueville.

16. Anthropologists and sociologists were for some time intrigued by the famous contradiction between Robert Redfield's (1930) account of Tepoztlán as highly consensual and Oscar Lewis's (1951) account of the same community as riven with conflicts and hatreds. However, as for example Elias (1974) pointed out, an adequate ethnography would probably show that both sets of traits are commonly present at one and the same time in small communities; both are symptoms of relatively unmuted emotions.
17. See Mennell, 1990a for a fuller discussion of decivilising processes.
18. Elias, 1994, *op. cit.*, p. 253.
19. For my fuller discussion of nationalism in a process-sociological context, see Mennell 1994.
20. The phrase "external constraint towards self-constraint" is an allusion to Elias's theory of the changing balance between *Fremdzwang* and *Selbstzwang*; see Elias, *The Civilising Process, op. cit.*, pp. 443-56 and *passim*. For a fuller account of Elias's concern with the threat of nuclear war and his disagreement with Van Benthem van den Bergh, see Mennell, 1992, pp. 217-23.