

An Exceptional Civilizing Process?

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ABSTRACT The claim to a nation's 'exceptionalism' can only be assessed in relation to a specific theory. This article discusses the history of the USA in the light of Norbert Elias's theory of civilizing (and decivilizing) processes. Although, unlike many Western European countries, the USA never had a single monopoly 'model-setting elite' and had no nobility, it did have several competing aristocracies. The Northern *Bildungsbürgertum* dominates perception of the USA at the expense of the Southern *Junkers*, whose political and cultural legacy nevertheless continues to be of great significance, notably in the comparatively high level of violence that afflicts present-day America. The peculiarities of state formation processes – the formation of a (relatively) effective monopoly of the legitimate use of violence – in the USA and their continuation in empire formation are examined. Ironically, the USA has become a model-setting elite for the whole world at a time when its popular egalitarianism represents a kind of false consciousness in a factually increasingly unequal society; when the USA may be undergoing a process of de-democratization; and when American misperceptions of the wider world, together with diminishing foresight by American governments, are becoming a serious problem in world politics.

KEYWORDS American exceptionalism, civilizing processes, Elias, elites, empire, violence

Every country has its distinctive peculiarities, while sharing many common characteristics with other countries. In most cases, the peculiarities are matters for unreflective national pride, or the specialist concern of historians and social scientists. The cases where they become of wider concern, notably the questions of the German *Sonderweg* or of American exceptionalism, are those in which the debate takes on a strong *moral* flavour, negative or positive. Academic discussions of American exceptionalism by Americans still have a strong tendency to take on a

tone of collective self-congratulation (see, for instance, Schuck and Wilson, 2008). And, among the population at large, there appears to be an increasing divergence between how a large proportion of Americans view themselves and their country and how they are perceived by a large proportion of the 95 per cent of the world's population who are not Americans.

It is easy to point to 'American exceptions'.¹ But the distinctive features of American society can only be fitted into a coherent pattern if they are examined in relation to some specific theory, hypothesis, prediction or (to put it at its most basic) question. The most celebrated question was Sombart's: 'Warum gibt es in den vereinigten Staaten keinen Sozialismus?' ('Why is there no socialism in the United States?') Although various answers have continued to be put forward to the question, they have been offered within a coherent community of arguments arising essentially from the Marxist prediction of heightened class conflict in industrialized societies (Lipset and Marx, 2000).

I have attempted to look at 'American exceptionalism' in the light of a different theory, Norbert Elias's theory of civilizing (and decivilizing) processes, which he originally developed within the framework of European history (Mennell, 2007). Elias's is a very complex theory, which has been subject to as much gross oversimplification as Marx's. Elias saw himself as developing a 'process-sociology' – a term he preferred to 'figurational sociology' – which was grounded in a highly sophisticated *sociological* (anti-philosophical) theory of knowledge and the sciences (Elias, 2007a and in press). He saw Marx (as well as Darwin and others) as a precursor in the development of process-theories, and in avoiding *Zustandsreduktion* (the conceptual reduction of processes to fixed states), which he regarded as a pandemic disease of modern sociology. Elias always thought in terms of continua and balances, not polarities and absolutes. Dealing as it does with numerous intertwining long-term processes, Elias's theory yields complicated and superficially contradictory predictions: of simultaneous civilizing and decivilizing spurts, of functional democratization and de-democratization, of increasing and diminishing foresight, of widening and narrowing circles of mutual identification. Nevertheless, overall, I believe it helps to make sense of America as a land of familiar paradoxes. Is it not paradoxical that an agreeable civility habitually prevails in most everyday relations among people in America – yet the United States is factually a socially highly unequal society? That in most parts of America, the laws and social customs strongly restrain people from doing harm to themselves and others by smoking – yet the laws and social customs only weakly restrain people from doing harm to themselves and others by the use of guns, and the murder rate is about four times as high per capita as in Western Europe? That the USA is the world's remaining super-power – yet internally the American state is in some ways strikingly weak? That the USA has 'saved the world for democracy' on more than one occasion – but has itself become an aggressive militaristic society?

The Theory: A Brief Statement

Elias gave a succinct summary of his theory in a short article written near the end of his life:

Because human beings, unlike some other social organisms, do not possess innate drive and affect controls, they are wholly dependent on mobilising their natural disposition for self-regulation through the personal learning of drive and affect controls in the form of society-specific patterns of civilisation, in order to be able to live with themselves and with other human beings. ... The *social constraint towards self-constraint*,² and the learning of individual self-regulation in the form of changeable social patterns of civilisation, are *social universals*. A conversion of external constraints into self-constraints is to be found in all human societies. But even if external constraints, whether natural or social, are indispensable to the development of individual self-constraints, by no means all types of *external constraint* are suited to bringing about the development of individual agencies of self-constraint, and are even less suited to promoting them in moderation, that is, without impairing the individual's capacity for drive- and affect-based pleasure. For example, external constraint in the form of physical violence is less suited to the formation of uniform self-control agencies than patient persuasion; external constraints which frequently fluctuate between violent threats and intense attestations of love, than uniform external constraints on a reassuring basis of affective warmth.

If one surveys the development of humanity, one encounters a comprehensive, humanity-wide process of civilisation. Up to now, that is, from the Stone Age to our time, this process has remained dominant in a continuous conflict with countervailing, decivilizing processes. There is no basis for assuming that it must remain dominant. ...

Inseparable from the humanity-wide process of civilisation, but distinguishable in thought, are the particular processes of civilisation which vary from tribe to tribe, from nation to nation, in short, from survival unit to survival unit, in conjunction with the peculiarities of their social fates. Correspondingly different are the courses of the particular processes of civilisation, and therefore the particular shapes of the patterns of civilisation. The latter find one of their most tangible expressions in the common *social habitus* of the individuals who form with one another a particular survival unit, for example, a tribe or state.

(Elias, 2008b: 3–5)

Thus Elias, from early in his career, studied the links between changing standards of interpersonal behaviour, on the one hand, and state formation processes, on the other – two processes nowadays the subject of separate groups of sociological

specialists, one ‘microsociological’, the other ‘macrosociological’. In a still more succinct formulation, he observed that:

... if in this or that region the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of the affects and the standards of emotion-management are very gradually changed as well.

(Elias, 2000 [1939]: 169)

Elias said that he did not have a ‘methodology’, but perhaps he had a ‘method’, which he encapsulated in the epigram: ‘Makrostrukturen durch die Untersuchung von Mikrostrukturen sichtbar zu machen’ (‘to reveal macro structures by researching micro structures’) (Elias, 2007b: 18). So an Eliasian perspective on American exceptionalism begins with a glance at the development of behavioural standards, habitus and ‘manners’ in the USA.³

No Model-Setting Monopoly: The Exceptionalism of American Habitus

Discussing the way a country’s history leaves its impress on the social habitus, Elias wrote:

These differences are precipitated in the language and modes of thought of nations. They manifest themselves in the way in which people are attuned to one another in social intercourse, and in how they react to personal or impersonal events. In every country the forms of perception and behaviour, in their full breadth and depth, have a pronounced national tinge. Often one only becomes aware of this in one’s dealings with foreigners. In interactions with one’s compatriots, *individual* differences usually impinge so strongly on consciousness that the *common* national coloration, what distinguishes them from individuals of other nations, is often overlooked. First of all, one often expects that people everywhere will react to the same situations in the same way as people of one’s own nation. When one finds oneself in a situation in which one is compelled to observe that members of different nations often react in a quite different way to what one is accustomed to at home, one mentally attributes this to their ‘national character’.

(Elias, 2008a [1962]: 230)

Thus:

In the conduct of workers in England, for example, one can still see traces of the manners of the landed noblemen and gentry and of merchants

within a large trade network, in France the airs of courtiers and a bourgeoisie brought to power by revolution.

(Elias, 2000 [1939]: 384)

But, it could be argued, Elias focused especially on countries in Europe in whose history there had emerged a single relatively unified upper class which (relatively again) had gained monopoly over the power to set models of behaviour. In the USA there has been no such single stratum, but rather several competing model-setting elites. There is no single homogeneous American habitus; conflicting groups have served as competing reference groups, and served to some extent as a source of conflict *within* modern American individuals.

American manners have long been supposed to be distinctively egalitarian, reflecting the supposed relative equality – at least of opportunity – of American society. But that has to be heavily qualified. It is true that in the earliest days of English settlement in North America, society was relatively flat. The settlers included very few members of the upper class of the parent society in England – no aristocrats or members of the gentry to speak of. The early elite consisted of university-educated clerics and lawyers, along with merchants – people who would have perhaps been considered prosperous middle-class at home. But equally, few members of the very poorest strata made the journey across the Atlantic. In spite of that, the settlers did bring with them the acute status-consciousness of English society, and in the course of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a fairly considerable colonial gentry emerged, consciously modelling itself on the English gentry (Persons, 1973). After Independence, this gentry was largely eclipsed – except in the slave-owning South, of course. The agrarian republic that Alexis de Tocqueville visited in the early 1830s represented American society in its most egalitarian phase, the age of Jacksonian Democracy. Tocqueville pictured at length the relatively easy and informal manners to be seen in the relations between men and women, masters and servants, even officers and other ranks in the army. In a telling comparison with Britain, he wrote:

In America, where the privileges of birth never existed and where riches confer no peculiar rights on their possessors, men unacquainted with each other are very ready to frequent the same places, and find neither peril nor advantage in the free interchange of their thoughts. ... their manner is therefore natural, frank and open.

(Tocqueville, 1961 [1835–40]: Vol. I, 202–3)

In contrast, English people encountering each other by chance were typically reserved, from fear that a casual acquaintance – struck up when travelling abroad, for instance – would prove an embarrassment when they returned to the rigidly demarcated social boundaries at home.

Yet the later nineteenth century, the Gilded Age of rapid industrial growth and the formation of vast fortunes, was in America too a period of intense social competition, as waves of *nouveaux riches* battered down the gates of the old social elites. This is well depicted in the novels of Edith Wharton. Status distinctions became more marked; manners books sold in large numbers to people who wanted to emulate the ways not just of the old upper classes in America, but also of the European upper classes (Schlesinger, 1947). There were even attempts to introduce the practice of chaperoning, though not with much success – egalitarian traditions still retained some force.

This period may seem an aberration. With some fluctuations, the twentieth century saw the trend reversed, and ‘informalization’ became dominant. It is not just a matter of easy ‘have a nice day’ manners; it also extends to relations between the sexes (Wouters, 2004, 2007). It is important to stress that, although the connection is no doubt indirect and complicated, this trend of informalization ran broadly parallel to trends in the distribution of income and wealth in American society, which, from 1913 until the last decades of the twentieth century and with some fluctuations, became relatively flatter compared with the Gilded Age. Today, however, we are living in a new Gilded Age, when in America (and to a lesser extent in Britain) the income and wealth of the top one per cent particularly has increased astronomically, while the poor get poorer and the standard of living even of what the Americans call ‘the middle class’ (which includes skilled manual workers in steady employment) is static or falling.⁴ Nor are rates of social mobility as great as is commonly believed: a recent study shows them to be lower in the USA (and the UK) than in Canada, Germany and the four Scandinavian countries (Blanden et al., 2005). I have spoken of the disparity between perception and reality as ‘the curse of the American Dream’ (Mennell, 2007: 249–65).

I cannot point to any evidence that the factually gross inequality of American society is yet reflected in a distancing in everyday manners. More egalitarian manners are generally taken as an index of a widening circle of ‘mutual identification’ (Swaan, 1995; Mennell, 1994). But the late Leona Helmsley’s notorious comment that ‘paying taxes is for little people’ is only one bit of the abundant evidence of a callous disregard by the American rich for the welfare of the poor and middling sort of people.⁵ What prevails may not be a widening circle of mutual identification among all strata of the American people, but rather a kind of ‘*upwards* identification’:⁶ the American myth-dream of equality is actively promoted through the fostering of ‘patriotism’ – meaning American nationalism – among the middling and lower strata, but callous attitudes prevail among the holders of power to the large numbers of disadvantaged people. Their lot is still seen, in an attitude that we used to consider characteristic of the nineteenth century, as ‘their own fault’. Egalitarian manners are perhaps becoming an instance of what Marxists call ‘false consciousness’.

America never had a nobility, but it had in effect several competing aristocracies. Among these, Massachusetts, with a passing footnote to Quaker

Philadelphia, still looms too large in Europeans' perception of what shaped American social character. In New England, certainly, there took shape something like the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, an elite of educated professionals and merchants. To them, and to the pressures of commercial and professional life, can be attributed to a certain extent the egalitarian strain in American habitus, not showing open disdain towards their fellow citizens, even if they were inwardly confident of their superior education, understanding and feeling. Visiting the USA in the 1830s, not long after Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau (1837: Vol. III, 10) commented upon the great cautiousness that was entrenched early and deeply in Northern people; she described as 'fear of opinion' something very similar to what Elias (2000: 71) perceived as the habitual checking of behaviour in anticipation of what others might think. She thought she could distinguish Northern from Southern members of Congress simply by the way they walked:

It is in Washington that varieties of manners are conspicuous. There the Southerners appear at most advantage, and the New Englanders to the least; the ease and frank courtesy of the gentry of the South (with an occasional touch of arrogance, however), contrasting with the cautious, somewhat *gauche*, and too deferential air of the members from the North. One fancies one can tell a New England member in the open air by his deprecatory walk. He seems to bear in mind perpetually that he cannot fight a duel, while other people can.

(Martineau, 1837: Vol. I, 145)

Which brings us to the other great rival aristocracy, that of the slave-owning South. From the Constitution coming into force (1789) to the Civil War (1861), Southerners held the lion's share of political power in the Union.⁷ The reference to duelling among them is highly significant. As Norbert Elias argued, in nineteenth-century Germany the quality of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit* – being judged worthy to give satisfaction in a duel – became a principal criterion for membership of the German upper class (Elias, 1996: 44–119). And although the greatest plantation owners may have been more conscious of looking towards their counterparts in England or France, the more appropriate comparison is between them and the Prussian *Junkers* (Bowman, 1993). One similarity is that they both provided a large part of the officer corps of the national army. At home, they both ruled autocratically over a *Privatrechtstaat* – they had the right to adjudicate and enforce their judgements on their own estates, with little or no interference by agencies of the government. State authorities did not intervene in relations between white masters and blacks, whether during slavery in the antebellum period or during the long decades of the Jim Crow laws and lynching between the end of Reconstruction and the interwar period. Nor did they intervene in what is now called 'black-on-black' violence. This absence has cast a long cultural shadow to the present day.

But neither were white-on-white quarrels very much the business of state authorities. The social arrangements of the Old South were also associated with the prevalent code of 'honour' (Wyatt-Brown, 1984), and questions of honour were commonly settled by the duel. Many European travellers, from Harriet Martineau to the great geologist Sir Charles Lyell (Nevins, 1948: 239), were astonished by its prevalence: it was remarked that in New Orleans alone, in 1834, someone died in a duel on average every day (Martineau, 1837: Vol. III, 56). The code of 'honour', in its various forms in Europe and America, has been widely discussed. Roger Lane (1997: 85–6) contrasts the Southern 'man of honour' with the New England 'man of dignity', who would very likely take a quarrel to court rather than fight a duel. The propensity to litigation through the legal apparatus of the state is a function not only – not mainly, indeed – of culturally conditioned individual dispositions, but also of the degree of internal pacification and the effectiveness of the state monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in a given territory: there have to be effective courts to which to appeal. Yet the difference between the codes of 'honour' and 'dignity' is associated with different personal and emotional styles: the Southerner, like the *Satisfaktionsfähig* gentleman of the *Kaiserreich*, displayed a 'hard', unemotional style; it has been suggested that a legacy of this can be seen in the hard, speak-your-weight-machine delivery of many American military spokesmen today.

Other competing elites deserve to be mentioned – the relatively autonomous social elites of many American cities in the past, the plutocracy that arose after the Civil War and today exercises overwhelming economic and political power. Perhaps we should also mention the significance of Hollywood and the heroes and heroines of popular culture. But I want simply to return to the point that in our perceptions of America past and present, the New England model plays too large a part, and its rival from the South far too little – something that is of great importance given the massive shift in the power ratio in favour of the South since about 1970.

And there remains one great irony about American manners and habitus. If the USA has not, to the same extent as many countries of Western Europe, witnessed the formation of a monopolistic model-setting upper class, it can also be said that today America and Americans serve as just such an upper class for the rest of the world, including Europe. It was not always so. As Allan Nevins pointed out, until around 1825, British visitors to the USA were mainly working- and middle-class people, especially businessmen, who tended to speak with respect of the manners of the social equals they met. After 1825, however, more upper-class and professional visitors arrived from Britain, and there is in general a more marked note of condescension in their reports about what they saw and the people they met. Subsequently, this trick of perspective was further complicated by the changing balance of power between Britain and America. By the inter-war years of the twentieth century:

For the first time, the great majority of British visitors showed themselves distinctly respectful of the rich, powerful, and exceedingly complex nation

beyond the seas. During the period we have described as one of Tory condescension [1825–45], the travellers have tended to look down on the Americans; during the later period we have described as one of analysis [1870–1922], they tended to look at the United States with level gaze; but now they frequently tended to look up at America!

(Nevins, 1948: 403)

Today, some Americans think of the widespread appeal of American popular culture, and the constant emulation of American styles – from clothes to food to speech – as a form of ‘soft power’ wielded in the American interest. It may be as well to remember, though, that the *ancien régime* bourgeoisie desperately aped the courtiers – but that did not prevent them resenting the aristocracy. Nor did it prevent the French Revolution.

The Problem of Violence in America

Elias focused upon changes in social standards regarding matters of ‘outward bodily propriety’ because these are matters with which all human societies have to deal and about which they all have social conventions, so that changes and differences in the conventions are relatively easy to trace. Another aspect of behaviour found in all societies is violence, and in his studies of European development he tried to demonstrate that social standards concerning violence had undergone a similar pattern of long-term change. The balance in the steering of most normal people’s behaviour had gradually tilted away from *Fremdzwang* (external constraints, or constraints imposed by other people’s presence) in favour of relatively greater weight to *Selbstzwang* (more automatic, more all-round and more even habitual self-restraint). This is of great significance in the question of whether a high level of violence is a key element in America’s supposed exceptionalism.

Contrary to public perception, historical criminologists now agree that the long-term trend in violence in Western societies is downwards. In England, longer-term data are available than anywhere else, and in a celebrated piece of research Gurr (1981) showed that the chances of getting murdered were about forty times greater in thirteenth-century Oxford than in the mid twentieth century. The decline was not a smooth curve: there are shorter-term fluctuations. For instance, most countries experienced an upturn in violence from about 1960, and a renewed downturn since the 1990s. *Trends* in homicide in the USA run very much parallel to those in Western Europe and European countries overseas such as Australia and New Zealand. Data compiled by Eisner (2005) show this very strikingly.

But it is necessary to distinguish between the *trend* and the *level* of violence (Mennell, 2007: 122–54). What is distinctive about the USA is the level: there are simply *more* homicides there than in comparable countries. Although other forms of violence ought really to be considered separately, homicides per annum per 100,000 population are used as a general index of violence because a

homicide is a relatively unambiguous crime, and thus the measurement of homicide tends to yield comparable figures from one country to another, whereas lesser forms of violence are greatly affected by differences in legal definitions and indeed by legal changes over time. By this measure, the USA has something like four times as many murders as comparable countries.⁸

Here again, a popular myth comes into play: the phrase ‘crime and violence’, current among politicians and the general public, implies that the two are almost synonymous. Yet, as Zimring and Hawkins (1997) have shown, in the USA ‘crime is not the problem’. One is considerably more likely to have one’s house burgled in London than in New York. Zimring and Hawkins showed that homicides in America are not highly correlated with ordinary crimes such as burglary, theft, and so on. Murders were not to any exceptional extent committed in the course of *instrumental* crimes – those associated with the pursuit of money in particular. What accounts for the unusually high incidence of homicide in the USA is the high incidence of *affective* violence – that is, murders committed impulsively, under the influence of strong emotions. Why should Americans be less able to control their murderous emotional impulses than Europeans? One answer is that they are not, but that a fist fight outside a pub after closing time (or a domestic dispute) that generally results in cuts and bruises is more likely to end up with someone dead in a society awash with handguns. While there is most likely some truth in that, it does not tell the whole story. For in this case it is more than usually difficult to talk about ‘Americans’ in general. There are very marked geographical variations in the incidence of homicide.

The case of high rates of killing in inner-city ghettos – especially black ghettos – in the 1960s to 1990s is familiar. Loïc Waquant (2004) has attributed the ‘decivilizing process’ that took place there to two interrelated processes: on the one hand, the collapse of legitimate steady employment and its replacement by unemployment, insecure casual employment and the illicit economy notably of the drug trade; and, on the other hand, the concomitant withdrawal of the agencies of the state – from police to post offices – from the ghettos in the Reagan years and after. Correlated with this has been the replacement of a ‘welfare safety net’ with a ‘penal dragnet’, which has swept huge numbers of young American men, more especially African-American men, into jail (Pettit and Western, 2005).

Less familiar, but historically related, is the fact that a very disproportionate part of American homicide occurs in the South, and in those parts of the West that were preponderantly settled from the South (Lane, 1997: 350). The relative weakness of the institutions of the state is the common factor. I do not, of course, mean a ‘state of the Union’, except incidentally, but am using the concept of ‘state’ in the standard sociological sense formulated by Max Weber (1978 [1922]: Vol. 1, 54): an organization 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 process of monopolization was much delayed and less thorough in the South than

the North, as already implied when discussing the Southern tradition of 'honour'. The tradition of 'taking the law into one's own hands' remained strong. In many southern States, it was for a long time actually legal for a man to kill his wife's lover (Stearns, 1989). (In the 1920s, Georgia struck an early blow for women's liberation by also making it legal for a woman to kill her husband's lover.) Lynching, mainly of African-American men, declined after the 1920s, but did not die out until the 1960s; county by county in the South, there is a high correlation between the incidence of lynching in the past and that of homicide at the present day (Messner et al., 2005). It is significant that by far the greatest use of the death penalty occurs in those states and counties where vigilante activity (Brown, 1975) and lynchings were most common in the past, and a very disproportionate fraction of those executed are African Americans (Zimring, 2003: 89–118).

Pieter Spierenburg (2006) has advanced the provocative thesis that, in the history of state-formation processes in America, 'democracy came too early'. In most parts of Western Europe, there took place over many centuries gradual processes of centralization, eventuating in the concentration of the means of violence in fewer and fewer hands, and ultimately in the establishment of a relatively effective monopoly apparatus in the hands of kings. Gradual it may have been, but the struggles among a warrior elite were bloody, as more and more players were deprived of their capacity to wage war independently of the central ruler. The process was in its final stages when European colonization of North America began. Once stable and effective royal monopolies of violence had been established, as they were in general by the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the people's aim in subsequent struggles – most spectacularly in the French Revolution – was not to challenge or destroy the monopoly as such, but rather to 'co-possess' the monopoly. In other words, the aim was to assert a more broadly based control over those who exercised the monopoly, to democratize it.

In North America, however, 'there was no phase of centralization before democratization set in', and 'democracy came to America too early'. By that Spierenburg means something quite factual:

... the inhabitants had lacked the time to become accustomed to being disarmed. As a consequence, the idea remained alive that the very existence of a monopoly of force was undesirable. And it remained alive in an increasingly democratic form: not [as in medieval Europe] of regional elites carving out their private principality, but of common people claiming the right of self-defense. ... Local elites and, increasingly, common people equated democracy with the right of armed protection of their own property and interests.

(Spierenburg, 2006: 109–10)

Spierenburg acknowledges that it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the transition from struggles to destroy the monopoly apparatus to struggles to

co-possess it did not take place at all in the USA, but ‘the best one can say is that the majority of the population wanted it both ways’: they ‘accepted the reality of government institutions but at the same time they cherished an ethic of self-help’. ‘Today’, remarks Spierenburg, ‘the idea that individuals cannot and should not rely on state institutions in order to protect their homes is alive and well. Members of the Michigan Militia explicitly say so in [Michael Moore’s 2003 documentary film] *Bowling for Columbine*’ (2006: 110).

The Formation of the American State and Empire

Following Elias’s train of thought from changes in the steering of behaviour in everyday manners, and through the problem of social standards of constraint in the use of physical violence, brings us to the question of state formation in America – again in Weber’s sense of the term ‘state’.

There is a tendency to think about the United States as if it were an emanation of the human spirit, as if its existence and its constitutional arrangements were a bloodless product of the Enlightenment, John Locke, the genius of the Founding Fathers, and the pure democratic spirit of ‘No taxation without representation’.

In fact, the formation of the territorial unit that we now know as the USA was a bloody business, not at all dissimilar to the formation of states in Western Europe. If we look back a thousand years, Western Europe was fragmented into numerous tiny territories, each ruled – that is, protected *and* exploited – by some local warlord. Thinking of Afghanistan after the tender loving care of numerous foreign interventions is perhaps the closest present-day equivalent. Out of the patchwork, over a period of many centuries, there gradually emerged a smaller number of larger territories. It was a violent ‘elimination contest’ (Elias, 2000 [1939]: 263–78). It is a mistake to see the process as driven by ‘aggression’, as if the personality traits of individual warriors were the determining force. In an age when the control of land was the principal basis of power, a peace-loving local magnate could not sit idly by while his neighbours slugged it out: the winner, who gained control over a larger territory, would then be able to gobble up the little peace-loving neighbour. War and ‘aggression’ thus had a survival value. The process was Janus-faced: as larger territories became *internally* pacified, the wars *between* territories came to be fought on a steadily larger scale.

The story of state formation in North America is similar. One difference is that the struggle for territory after the beginnings of European settlement was initially driven exogenously by conflicts between the great powers back in Europe, as much as by rivalries endogenous to North America. In the early stages, the process somewhat resembled the struggle for territory in nineteenth-century Africa. Most of the early wars there were branches of contemporaneous wars in Europe, whether the Anglo-Dutch wars, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Seven Years’ War, or whatever. Through these contests, first the Swedish colonies and then the Dutch were eliminated, and later French and Spanish power was

broken. The various Indian tribes were also involved in these struggles as allies of the European powers, and were simultaneously engaged in an elimination contest amongst themselves. Gradually, however, the struggles came to be shaped much more by endogenous forces.

This is not the place to retell the story of how American Independence came about, except to say that the taxation to which the settlers did not wish to contribute without representation arose from the costs of military control over a much larger territory after the effective elimination of the French from Canada and the trans-Appalachian region. But there is another side to the story besides this familiar one. The British had intended to reserve the Ohio Valley for their Iroquois allies, but settlers were already pressing westwards. As has been recognized at least since Theodore Roosevelt wrote *The Winning of the West* (1995 [1889–99]), the War of Independence was also a war over the control of conquests. The colonials were also colonizers.

I shall not dwell upon what has been called the American Holocaust (Stannard, 1992), save to say that westward expansion at the expense of the Native Americans was driven by the pressure of land-hungry migrants pushing forward in advance of effective federal government control of the territory, in contrast with policies followed in the settlement of Canada and Siberia. The scenes with which we are familiar from the Western movies are a glamorized version of a process of conquest and internal pacification.

Americans are fond of pointing out that they *bought* much of their territory rather than conquering it by force of arms. That is certainly true of the Louisiana Purchase, which in 1803 doubled the federal territory. It arose, however, out of a particularly favourable conjunction in European power politics, when it suited Napoleon to be rid of extraneous responsibilities. It is also true that another huge acquisition of land took place when the United States paid Mexico for a vast swathe of territory. But that was only after it had impressed upon Mexico that this was an offer it could not refuse, by invading that unfortunate country and sacking its capital city. ‘Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States,’ as President Porfirio Díaz later remarked. Ulysses Grant, who served as a young officer in the Mexican War, regarded the war as ‘one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory’ (Grant, 1994 [1885]: 37).

There is no point in moralizing about this and many other episodes. My point is not to denounce ‘bad men’ for what happened; that would be to fall into the same trap of individualism that has often infected the American government’s view of the world (notably under the regime of the second President Bush). My point is rather that American development was as a whole a relatively unplanned long-term social process. It is one instance of what Norbert Elias (1991: 64) encapsulated in his couplet

From plans arising, yet unplanned
By purpose moved, yet purposeless

On the other hand, the balance between the ‘accidental’ and the ‘intended’ tilts towards the planned pole as one party gains a great power advantage within a power ratio (see Elias, 1978: Ch. 6). The interplay between the two can be seen in the acquisition of the first United States Empire in 1899 (Zimmerman, 2002), which followed neatly on from the ‘closing of the frontier’ declared in the 1891 census (Turner, 1947: 1). The United States invaded the Philippines, with British support – the American fleet sailed from Hong Kong – because both powers feared that either Germany or Japan would do so if the USA did not.

The Monroe Doctrine of American overlordship in the western hemisphere is a similar story. In 1819, the British proposed a joint declaration to oppose Spanish recolonization of South America. In the event, John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, insisted on its being in America’s name alone. But there was no question of its applying to Britain’s subsequent seizure of the Falkland Islands – the USA did not then have the power to prevent it. By the early twentieth century its power had greatly increased, and the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was used in justifying numerous American military interventions in Latin America throughout that century. By the early twenty-first, what I have called the ‘Dubya Addendum’ (Mennell, 2007: 211–12), propounded in the 2002 *National Security Strategy of the United States*, declared that the USA had the right to intervene against its opponents anywhere in the globe, and came very close to claiming for the American government a monopoly of the legitimate use of force throughout the world. In other words, in terms of Max Weber’s definition of a state, the Bush regime came close to declaring the USA a world state. In some ways, indeed, the USA does now act as a world government (Mandelbaum, 2006). It claims extra-territorial jurisdiction for its own laws in many fields, while itself refusing to be bound by the corpus of international law that most other countries accept. Its military expenditure is now as large as that of all the other countries in the world combined. It has in effect garrisoned the planet, dividing the entire globe into US military commands.⁹ It now has military bases in two-thirds of the countries of the world, including much of the former Soviet Union.¹⁰ Overall, little of ‘American exceptionalism’ can be found in the story of American state and empire formation.

Conclusion: De-democratization and Diminishing Foresight?

Norbert Elias was an optimist, and one manifestation of this is his expectation that, other things being equal, longer chains of interdependence – including what we now call globalization – would entail ‘functional democratization’ (relatively more equal balances of power between classes, sexes, ethnic groups and countries

of the world). That in turn would be associated with ‘widening circles of mutual identification’ and ‘spreading pressure for foresight and self-constraint (Elias, 2000 [1939]: 365–87).

Processes of functional democratization are certainly a feature of the modern world. But, I would argue, they are also accompanied by and entangled with movements in the opposite direction – towards *functional de-democratization*. And they may bring with them *diminishing mutual identification* (Mennell, 2007: 311–14).

This can be seen both internally to the USA and externally. Internally – at odds with the traditional images of ‘American exceptionalism’ – socio-economic inequalities are vastly increasing, and rates of social mobility are not as great as is commonly believed.

Externally, there remains the problem of American misperceptions both of themselves collectively and of the world beyond the frontiers of the USA – misperceptions which, I argue, are related to the long-term shift in the power ratio between the USA and its global neighbours. When some people have a large power advantage, the experience affects in quite specific ways how they perceive themselves and others (Mennell, 2007: 311–14). It appears to be a general characteristic of unequal power balances that the weaker party ‘understands’ the stronger better than vice versa. Billions of educated people outside the USA know an immense amount about America, its constitution, its politics, its manners and culture; all these are extremely visible to the rest of the world. But it is as if they are looking through a one-way mirror, and the Americans cannot see the outsiders watching them. All the brightly lit Americans see is their own reflection. A mass of survey evidence suggests that a large proportion of Americans do not see out at all clearly, and tend to think about the ‘outside world’, if at all, in stereotypical and indeed Manichean terms. As for their perception of themselves, well, the idea of ‘American exceptionalism’ is emotionally satisfying.

Just as much symptomatic of Elias’s overall optimism was his prediction that functional democratization would be associated with a spreading pressure to the more habitual exercise of foresight: in Goudsblom’s (1989: 722) phrase, ‘more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more and more other people’. In order to play their part at their own node in a nexus of inter-dependences, individual people have acquired the social skills to anticipate all sorts of dangers, from breaches of social codes that cause embarrassment, through the dangers of economic risk, all the way to dangers to life and limb. Here, Elias seems to be on firm ground. Every organization in the modern world appears to be enslaved to a ‘strategic plan’, complete with ‘mission statements’ and ‘vision statements’ which seek to picture the organization and its members in the future perfect tense, as (it is hoped) they will have become at some point in the future.

Yet appearances may be deceptive. The effective exercise of foresight involves trying to anticipate the unanticipated, foresee the unforeseen – to deal with the side effects or unintended consequences of intended actions. It is not

enough, however, merely to foresee them; one must also have the incentive and the power to do something about them. Or the power to ignore them (Mennell, 2007: 114–17, 307–10). As Karl Deutsch remarked, power is ‘the ability to talk instead of listen [and] the ability to afford not to learn’ (1963: 111). Its power position in the world has enabled the USA in certain respects to continue living in the 1890s.

To nothing is this more relevant than the great problem of environmental change and global warming. The USA, with 5 per cent of the world’s population but producing 25 per cent of its emissions, has the power to ignore or deny the problem, and again the one-way mirror comes into play: grossly unequal power ratios obscure perception of the broader picture and reduce rather than increase the pressure towards exercising foresight. This may prove to be the greatest legacy for the world of Americans’ common perception of themselves as ‘exceptional’.

Notes

1. This was the title of an excellent series of articles by Adam Liptak in the *New York Times* in 2007–8.
2. See Elias (2000: 365–79); my emphasis.
3. In other words, the next section corresponds to Part 2 of Elias’s *The Civilizing Process* (2000): ‘Civilization as a specific transformation of human behaviour’.
4. The work of the French economist Thomas Piketty and his collaborators (for example, Atkinson and Piketty, 2007) has been especially valuable in shedding light on long-term trends in the distribution of income and wealth in Europe and the USA (see the fuller discussion in Mennell, 2007: 249–65).
5. I am not suggesting that this is the *only* reason for the peculiarities of American welfare provision; the federal–state division, and the power of big business, also need to be taken in to account (see Mennell, 2007: 254–62).
6. My thanks are due to Johan Goudsblom for suggesting that term.
7. For more than three-quarters of that period of seventy-two years, the President had been a slave-holding southerner; after the war, no southern resident was elected President until Lyndon Johnson in 1964. In Congress, twenty-three of the thirty-six Speakers of the House and twenty-four of the thirty-six Presidents Pro Tempore of the Senate had been southerners; for half a century after the war, none was. Before the war, twenty of the thirty-five Justices of Supreme Court had been southerners, and they had been in a majority throughout the period; only five of the twenty-six justices appointed in the five decades after the war were from the South (see McPherson, 1990: 1213).
8. Not all countries: South Africa, Russia and some of the states of Eastern Europe have higher rates still, but they share the common feature of having passed through severe political and social upheaval over the last decade or so.
9. For their boundaries, see the maps in the endpapers of Kaplan (2005). They have since been modified to create a new US Africa Command.
10. In 2004, it had bases in 130 out of 194 countries (Johnson, 2004).

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