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Source: *The British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Sep., 1998), pp. 339-357

Published by: [Blackwell Publishing](#) on behalf of [The London School of Economics and Political Science](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/591387>

Accessed: 21/09/2010 15:03

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Elias on Germany, Nazism and the Holocaust: on the balance between 'civilizing' and 'decivilizing' trends in the social development of Western Europe*

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with aspects of the work of Elias: how he dealt with the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, and how they fit into the general context of his theory of 'civilizing processes'. In response to critics such as Bauman and Burkitt, we seek to clarify what Elias argued in his theory; and to show how, particularly in his book on *The Germans* (1996), Elias was able, using this theory, to shed light on the origins and growth of Nazism and its consequences for Germany and the world at large.

KEYWORDS: Culture; civilization; civilizing process; decivilizing; Holocaust; Nazism

INTRODUCTION

This paper treats aspects of the work of Norbert Elias, more particularly how he dealt with the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust, endeavouring to theorize these monstrous events using the theory of 'civilizing processes' (Elias 1994(a), originally 1939).¹ The discussion has two principal aims. Firstly, to clarify what Elias did and did not argue; secondly, to show how, particularly in his book on *The Germans* (1996), Elias was able to use this theory to shed light on the origins and growth of Nazism. We shall start by examining two critical reactions.

CRITICAL AND COUNTER-CRITICAL COMMENTS ON THE THEORY OF
'CIVILIZING PROCESSES'

(i) *Zygmunt Bauman*

In *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), Bauman mounts an attack on sociology for its failure to deal with events like the Holocaust. Bauman thus shares with Elias a critical stance towards currently dominant paradigms. Nevertheless, he reads the theory of civilizing processes as little more than an outdated 'modernization' theory, a form of 'Western triumphalism' which masquerades as 'science'. He writes

The . . . myth deeply imprinted in the self-consciousness of our Western society is the morally elevating story of humanity emerging from pre-social barbarity. This myth lent stimulus and popularity to, and in turn was given learned and sophisticated support by, quite a few influential sociological theories and historical narratives; the link most recently illustrated by the burst of prominence and overnight success of Elias's presentation of the 'civilizing process'. (1989: 12; cf 224)

According to Bauman, genocide is endemic in the modern world. The core of his case is that 'modern' societies involve power-concentrations which are not under effective control and can be used for good or evil.² They also produce conditions under which the effects of individual action are removed beyond the limits of morality. According to Bauman, when making choices social actors in complex nation-states are seldom able to foresee their ramifications. One result is that moral responsibility for taking part in acts such as mass extermination can be attenuated through the division of functions employed to carry them out: none of the individual persons involved along the chain of tasks are – or see themselves as – individually responsible.

Bauman's argument is underpinned by *philosophical* rather than sociological premises. They derive from the work of phenomenologist Emmanuel Levinas (1982). The argument is that moral behaviour – identification with, and feeling for, other humans – is 'natural', deriving from the ontological conditions of life rather than processes of socialization. If people could see the outcomes of their actions – that is the nub of Bauman's case – they would act 'morally' towards one another. This thesis of innateness is one of the presuppositions which Elias's study of civilizing processes was designed to refute. That is, according to Elias, what we have come to call 'morality' is not 'innate' but socially produced and variable through time and space.

One of the most original aspects of Elias's theory is the connection he makes between state-formation processes on the 'macro' level, and changes in the habitus of individuals on the 'micro' level. (By 'habitus' – a word which he used before its popularization by Bourdieu (1979) – Elias meant

‘second nature’ or ‘embodied social learning’ (Elias 1939: xi)). Elias’s key proposition is that

... if in a particular 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 their affects and the standard of their drive-economy (*Triebhaushalt*) are very gradually changed as well. (Elias 1994(a): 278: our translation)

The habitus of people in Western Europe is held by Elias to have changed as part of a long-term process in parallel with the monopolization of violence by the state. This, in turn, is held to have occurred interdependently with the monopolization of taxation. Expressed simply, Elias contends that monopolies of violence and taxation are the major means of ruling and that, in their development in Western Europe since the Middle Ages, they have been mutually reinforcing. But *pace* Bauman (1989: 2), Elias did not argue that, in Europe as part of this process, violence has been ‘eliminated from daily life’; rather, it has been ‘pushed increasingly behind the scenes’. This means, for example that – and we are talking of *intra*-societal relations at the moment – except in times of violent emergencies such as revolutions or serious public disorder, states have tended to keep their armies confined to barracks, preferring to rely on the less heavily armed police whose right to use violence is more restricted. It also means that, with the special exception of sport where forms of physical violence are deemed legitimate (Elias and Dunning 1986), violence in general has become restricted increasingly to domestic as opposed to public social settings, and associated more with the arousal of feelings of repugnance, guilt and shame. Elias *never* argued that all need for external constraint and force in making it possible for people to live peaceably together has been eliminated in what he speculated future historians may call the ‘late-barbarian’ societies of today (Elias 1991: 146–7). Ignoring differences between nations for the moment, the *balance* in the habitus of the ‘late-barbarian’ peoples of present-day Europe between internal constraints and external constraints has tilted, according to Elias, towards internal constraints; but such constraints have never come to be the sole influence in steering people’s conduct. The need for external constraint, including forcible constraint, also varies, *inter alia*, between the different stages of the socialization (civilizing) processes of individuals. Furthermore, according to Elias

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. (Elias 1994(a): 253n)

It is also important to recognize that Elias’s theory, again *pace* Bauman (1989: 224), does not rest on assumptions such as ‘pre-social barbarity’, ‘natural’ or ‘pre-social drives’ which are held to ‘burst out’ under specific

conditions. Elias argued that *Homo sapiens* has been social from the beginning, that the species evolved biologically as such (Elias 1991). The nearest to a pre-social human would be a baby at the moment of birth but, from that point, its bodily processes undergo a process of social moulding which varies, of course, between societies, their constituent groupings and historical periods.

In contrast, Bauman works from general propositions about 'human nature' and 'the nature of modernity', and from them derives the proposition that episodes such as the Holocaust are inherent in the modern world. In Bauman's view, the Holocaust had nothing specifically to do with the peculiarities of German development. This is a view with which Elias would have profoundly disagreed: the Holocaust may not be the only instance of genocide, past or present, but neither, according to Elias, is the German historical experience irrelevant to explaining its occurrence or peculiar features.

In *The Germans*, Elias agrees in part with Bauman when he writes

Just like scientifically conducted mass wars, the highly organized and scientifically planned extermination of whole population groups in specially constructed death camps and sealed-off ghettos by starvation, gassing or shooting does not appear to be entirely out of place in highly technicized mass societies. (Elias 1996: 303)

But in contradiction of Bauman, Elias also sought to show that the theory of civilizing processes can be used in explaining decivilizing processes of the kind which eventuated in Nazism. It does so by setting these processes in long-term perspective and suggesting, by means of comparative research, why they occurred in Germany rather than, for example, Britain or France. In short, it is wrong, according to Elias, to attribute them to some general 'epidemic disease' of the modern world at large.

(ii) Ian Burkitt

In his 'Civilization and Ambivalence' (1996), Burkitt seeks, by means of a synthesis of Elias's theory with aspects of Bauman's work (1989; 1991) to push the understanding of civilizing and decivilizing processes beyond the level bequeathed by Elias. Burkitt's arguments are insightful. However, his case is arguably marred, firstly, by too great a dependency on the philosophical arguments of Bauman, and secondly by a failure properly to understand Elias's theory in crucial respects.

Burkitt summarizes his argument by saying that

... because of the ambivalent nature of the 'civilizing' process, its central features can become mechanisms which actually suppress mutual identification and can lead to a form of 'civilized' violence and terror. To fully draw out the irony and ambivalence in Elias's account it needs to be shown how processes of modernization and 'civilization' have created a

potential for *both* the development of internal pacification *and* for more destructive and amoral institutions. The 'civilizing' process is double-sided. (Burkitt 1996: 149)

A problem here is that Burkitt collapses Elias's analysis (1994(a): 3–41) of the popular concept of 'civilization', which is inherently dualistic, into his (Elias's) technical concept of 'civilizing processes' which is orientated towards the empirical-theoretical study of the nuances of long-term processes which, far from being merely 'double-sided', are multi-levelled, involving a balance of movements and counter-movements. In his teaching, Elias sometimes used the metaphor of a symphony as an illustration. Perhaps more importantly, however, although there clearly is some substance to Burkitt's suggestion that 'processes of modernisation and "civilization" have created a potential for *both* the development of internal pacification *and* for more destructive and amoral institutions', he reaches this judgment by misinterpreting Elias as arguing something different. In particular, Burkitt construes the theory of civilizing processes as unilinear and fails to understand the stress laid by Elias on conflict between the aristocracy and middle classes in this connection. For example, Burkitt contends that, according to Elias

Changes in peoples' behaviour were linked to the changing power relations of various social classes and groups and their relative dominance or subordination. The process of the internal pacification of the population, including both social and economic relations, accelerated with the rise to power of the aristocracy and the centralization of the nation-state around the absolute ruler. (Burkitt 1996: 137)

This misreading enables Burkitt falsely to represent Elias as claiming 'that what we call "barbarism" is something *other* than "civilization"' (Burkitt 1996: 141) and to interpret Elias's model of a complex, multi-directional and multi-layered process in terms of that static dichotomy.

Elias's argument is that, starting around the twelfth century, long-term processes of state-formation and internal pacification in Europe contributed to the gradual monetarization and commercialization of social relations. This, in turn, augmented the power *both* of the greater feudal lords who formed larger and larger courts, *and* of emergent bourgeois groups who inhabited the growing towns, sections of them in countries such as France being subsequently drawn into the courts. There was conflict between these groups but, according to Elias, aristocracy and bourgeoisie were sociogenetically closely connected. As this process continued, power shifted *away* from the former and *towards* the latter, and monarchs became able to make a claim to 'absolute rule' at the point where the power-chances of declining aristocratic groups and ascending bourgeois groups became approximately equal.

This is a point on which Elias has sometimes been misunderstood, for example by Robinson (1987). Elias further argues that the social

development of England – he should have said Britain or the UK – was not conducive to the consolidation of absolutist rule. Using terminology on which he later cast doubt, he suggests that in both France and Britain, the ‘monopoly mechanism’ led to the monopolization by the state of violence and taxation. In France, however – and in some other continental countries, too, though in conjunction with in some ways different social constellations – the ‘royal mechanism’ enabled monarchs to make an effective claim to absolute power. By the ‘royal mechanism’, Elias meant the consolidation of power in royal hands, a process which occurred because the declining aristocracy and the rising bourgeoisie could neither defeat one another nor reach a decisive compromise, thus enabling kings – where the power ratio between these groups was approximately equal – to play off one against the other, and thus to enhance their own (the kings’) power chances (Elias 1994(a): 397). In Britain by contrast, partly because, as an island, it was dependent for attack and defence more on a navy than a land army, claims to absolute rule proved impossible to sustain (Elias 1950). Nevertheless, in both countries, the monopoly mechanism was conducive to the further monetarization and commercialization of social relations. This led over time – in both cases partly via revolution – to more public, including parliamentary and, especially in the French case, bureaucratic forms of rule.

The key point for present purposes is the part played by middle-class groups in this process, which Elias conceptualized partly as ‘functional democratization’ (Elias 1994(a): 503). His model was multilinear and took account of differences between countries. Nevertheless he stressed the part played by middle-class – and later working-class – groups in the emergence of parliamentary forms of democratic rule. There were differences between Britain and France but, according to Elias, the similarities between their developments outweighed the differences relative to the German path. In the case of Germany, Elias argues, there were deep-rooted obstacles to state-centralization, to the emergence of a relatively independent middle class, and hence to the development of democratic values, attitudes and institutions. This became deeply rooted in the traditions and habitus of a majority of Germans, contributing to the central part played by their country in the origins of the First and Second World Wars, and leading eventually to the rise of Nazism. Elias described this as a ‘breakdown of civilization’ (Elias 1996: 299–402), but his approach was relational and involved him in taking account of the widest relevant field of ‘social forces’. It is thus clear that he was referring not simply to events in Germany and the countries which it conquered but to a war which involved, among other things, the carpet bombing of German cities. It was, moreover, a breakdown – not a total collapse as Burkitt’s understanding seems to imply: using the metaphor of a symphony, the humanist trends in German development were not obliterated by the rise of Nazism but pushed into the position of a minor theme. This breakdown, Elias shows, was not an inevitable concomitant of Germany’s developmental path but, for identifiable reasons,

more likely to have occurred in Germany than in Britain or France. Let us turn to Elias's analysis of the specificities of German history and social development³ and how it sheds light – Elias never pretended to offer a total explanation – on the rise of Nazism.

SOME SPECIFICITIES OF GERMAN HISTORY AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

In English, one problem which critics have with Elias's theory of civilizing processes may be connected with the word 'civilization'. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias started by considering its meaning, concluding that, since any aspect of human behaviour can be judged as 'civilized' or 'uncivilized', providing such a definition is difficult. It is easier, according to Elias, to specify its function. 'Civilization' has, he says, come to express the self-image of the most powerful western nations and thus acquired derogatory and racist connotations not only in relation to what westerners call the 'primitive' or 'barbaric' non-western societies they have colonized but also in relation to 'less advanced' societies and outsider groups in the West. In this, Elias substantially anticipated the arguments of writers such as Said (1978). Interestingly, Elias shows how the First World War was fought by Britain and France against Germany in the name of 'civilization', and how, in the eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Germans became ambivalent about the term, preferring to express their self-image through the more particularistic concept of *Kultur* (Elias 1994(a): 3–41).

In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias also wrote an 'Excursus on Some Differences in the Paths of Development of England, France and Germany' (1994(a): 339–44), which seems not to have been noticed by those critics who see Elias's theory as 'unilinear'. His point is that the ease with which centralized states emerged in Europe depended, *ceteris paribus*, on the size of the social formations involved and thus on the extent of the geographical and social divergences within them. He wrote

The task implied in the struggle for dominance, i.e. for both centralization and rule, was . . . different in England and France from that in the German-Roman empire. The latter . . . was very different in size to the other two; geographical and social divergences within it were also much greater. This gave the local, centrifugal forces much greater energy, and made the task of attaining hegemony and thus centralization incomparably more difficult. The ruling house would have needed a far greater territorial area and power than in France or England to master the centrifugal forces of the German-Roman empire and forge it into a durable whole. There is good reason to suppose, that, given the level of division of labour and integration, and the military, transportational and administrative techniques of the time, the task of holding centrifugal tendencies in so vast an area permanently in check was probably insoluble. (Elias 1994(a): 339)

Elias goes on to show how the 'Holy Roman' Empire crumbled away for centuries at its borders, a process only partly compensated by expansion to the East. If one examines the long-term trend, he says, one gains an impression of 'the Empire's constant attrition and diminution, accompanied by a slow shift in the direction of expansion, and a drift of the centre of gravity from west to east' (Elias 1994(a): 343).

Germany's territory diminished after 1866 because the Holy Roman Empire, and the Confederation which briefly succeeded it in the early nineteenth century, were unable to accommodate the tensions between the Hohenzollern and Habsburg dynasties; this led to the split between Germany and Austria. There was a further diminution after 1918 in consequence of the territorial losses suffered by Germany following defeat in the First World War. In *The Germans*, Elias goes on to show how a major consequence of Germany's defeat in the Second World War was a continuation of this trend: yet another split occurred, this time between the Federal and Democratic Republics.

Elias contends, then, that the large territory occupied by the German-speaking peoples and the size of their population led them to encounter greater difficulties regarding unification and state-centralization than the English and French, the size of whose territories and populations was considerably smaller. This led to stronger centrifugal tendencies and a more discontinuous pattern of history and social development. One mark of this was the comparative recency of Berlin as a capital in comparison with London and Paris which had grown relatively continuously for approaching one thousand years. Vienna and even Prague had sometimes served as capital of the Holy Roman Empire; Berlin only became capital with the rise of Prussia. Another mark of discontinuity was the fragmented character of the German middle classes whose power chances relative to the aristocracy were, as a result, less than those of their counterparts in England and France. The weakness of the German bourgeoisie was reinforced by the fact that the old empire lacked a generally acknowledged capital which could have served as a focus for revolutionary action. As a result, they were relatively easy to defeat in the revolution of 1848.

The fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire also meant that no court society such as emerged in France, and no 'great Society' such as grew up in England centred on London, could arise and 'courtize' the German aristocracy. As a result, for longer than the aristocracies of France and England, the latter retained a militaristic ethos. They also excluded the middle classes from their scattered courts, ensuring that middle-class elites obtained little experience of participation in the business of ruling.⁴ According to Elias, this was one of the roots of the originally humanistic ethos of the German middle classes, whose orientation was towards philosophy, science and the arts rather than politics and economics. How does this help to account for the long-term process which, on balance, went in a 'barbarizing' direction, ultimately leading to Nazism?

Elias points to numerous ways in which the features of German habitus,

social structure and behaviour which combined to produce the rise of Hitler can be traced to Germany's past. Elias's point is not that Nazi rule grew *inevitably* out of such structural and psychological sources but rather that these events occurred as a result of decisions made in a context of national crisis by ruling groups which enjoyed widespread, especially middle-class, support and were acting in terms of what were more deeply sedimented aspects of habitus, social structure and behaviour in Germany than is the case in Britain or France. Elias pays particular attention to several features which influenced Germany's history and social development, among them the early struggles which resulted from the socio-geographic position of the speakers of Germanic relative to Slavonic and Latinate languages; the fact that members of these different language groups tended to be hostile towards one another, perceiving one another reciprocally as threatening, but that the others shared a fear of becoming subject to the hegemony of the numerically superior Germans (Elias 1996: 2–3); and the relative discontinuity of history and social development which resulted from the dominance of centrifugal over centripetal pressures in the Holy Roman Empire. Let us look more closely at Elias's diagnosis of Germany's trajectory of history and social development, ignoring for present purposes what he has to say about the earliest stages.

RELATIVE DISCONTINUITY AND THE EMERGENCE OF THE *KAISERREICH* AS A
SATISFAKTIONSFÄHIGE GESELLSCHAFT

Throughout the twentieth century, the dominant outside image of the Germans has been as a warlike people. From the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, however, the Germans were viewed as non-militaristic and weak. Madame de Staël, for example, wrote of them in 1814 that: 'the nation is by nature literary and philosophical; . . . the realm of the seas belongs to the English; the realm of the earth to the French; the realm of the air to the Germans' (De Staël 1985: 28–9). Germany experienced a massive power loss in the sixteenth century when, largely in conjunction with wars between Catholic and Protestant princes, the medieval empire broke up. As a result, in the seventeenth century – remembered by the English and French as a century of glorious achievements – Germany became the 'cockpit of Europe' (Elias 1996: 322). This was marked by the devastating Thirty Years War in which it is estimated that Germany lost a third of its population (Elias 1996: 6). Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Germany was invaded once again, this time by Louis XIV, a process repeated by Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. As a result, according to Elias, the Germans became painfully aware of their low status in the rank-hierarchy of European states and developed chronic doubts regarding their own self-worth. It led the Germans sentimentally to idealize the greatness of their past and to yearn for the creation of a new Reich. Elias also points out that the word *Reich* has connotations which are

different from 'empire' in English and French. It is heavily imbued with romantic yearnings for a lost and greater past, and involved the fantasy of an empire in Europe as opposed to overseas (Elias 1996: 367).

Compared with Britain and France, Germany did not unify until the second half of the nineteenth century when this process occurred through a series of wars under the leadership of the Prussian king and military caste. In its course, the balance between 'humanist' and 'anti-humanist' values among the dominant sections of the middle classes changed decisively in favour of the latter. According to Elias, Germany's victory in 1871 in the Franco-Prussian war played a decisive part in this. The liberal *Bürgertum* had aspired towards the achievement of national unification by peaceful means. That, in the event, unification was achieved through war under the leadership of the warrior class made such an impression on a majority of the middle classes that it was militaristic values which increasingly permeated their ranks. As Elias expressed it: 'the victory of the German armies over France was at the same time a victory of the German nobility over the German middle class' (Elias 1996). In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, German middle-class culture had been dominated by the work of people like Goethe, Kant and Schiller; after 1871, it was the work of authors such as Nietzsche and Ernst Jünger which came to express and reinforce the dominant view (Elias 1996: 115–19; 207–13).

Germany's unification occurred concomitantly with, and reinforced, processes of industrialization and urbanization. As a result, the power of the middle classes – including, for the first time, substantial entrepreneurial and industrial sections – grew. So did the power of the industrial working class. The power-increment of the working class was experienced as threatening by the middle class, pushing many middle-class Germans even more firmly into identification with the military-aristocratic camp (Elias 1996: 60). Despite these power-shifts, the major levers of state power, especially relating to foreign policy and military matters, were nevertheless retained by the Kaiser and the nobility; the middle class continued to be largely excluded from participation in ruling. Indeed, such was the extent to which they had absorbed the values of the hegemonic Prussians, that large sections of the German middle classes – and of the peasantry and working classes, too – were in favour of absolutist rule.⁵

Elias describes Germany's Second Empire – the more unified *Kaiserreich* of 1871–1918 – as a *satisfaktionsfähige Gesellschaft*, a term which cannot be translated directly into English but means a society orientated around a code of honour in which duelling and the demanding and giving of 'satisfaction' occupied pride of place. According to Elias, Germany's unification thus involved a 'brutalization' of the leading sections of the middle classes, a process in which the student fraternities in the universities played a crucial role. Just like the public schools in England, the German universities were institutions where a process of partial unification between the aristocracy and the middle classes occurred. Membership of a fraternity became a *sine qua non* for being regarded as *satisfaktionsfähig* – worthy of being challenged

to a duel – and thus for being admitted to the local ‘good societies’ throughout the *Kaiserreich*. In this context, according to Elias, the middle classes were even more ‘brutalized’ than their aristocratic rulers because the latter were subject to greater restraint through the honorific ethos of their warrior code.

Kalberg succinctly summarizes Elias’s treatment of the ethos of the *satisfaktionsfähiges Kaiserreich* as follows

The military component in the ethos of this aristocracy-bourgeoisie remained unmistakable. Discipline, honour and an unbending sense of duty must be manifest among members of this leading stratum. Strength of character is demonstrated by inflexibility and relentlessness (*Unerbittlichkeit*) as well as severity and rigour in the pursuit of a goal. Hierarchy, reserve, social distance and formality infuse relationships. A certain harshness of bearing and deportment was idealized, as well as unfailing self-control. An ‘iron-will’ must be maintained and, if employed on behalf of noble [and that meant national – ED/SJM] goals, acts of violence and brutality were not surrounded by ambivalence; indeed, meaning was bestowed upon them . . . The normative power of this ethos of strength spread well beyond its carrier stratum, even penetrating significantly into the working class and influencing its work ethic. (Kalberg 1992)

Elias’s contention is that this ethos of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit* played an important part in the rise of Nazism. As he expressed it

I have treated the expansion of military models into parts of the German middle class somewhat more precisely because I believe that National Socialism and the decivilizing spurt which it embodied cannot be completely understood without reference to this context. A simple example of the appropriation and then coarsening of aristocratic models is the requirement that every ‘Aryan’ had to prove himself or herself as such through a specific number of ‘Aryan’ ancestors. Above all, however, the unbridled resort to acts of violence as the only realistic and decisive vehicle of politics, which was at the centre of Hitler’s doctrine and the strategy used already in his rise to power, can be explained only against this background. (Elias 1996: 15)

THE DECLINE OF THE STATE’S MONOPOLY OF POWER IN THE WEIMAR REPUBLIC

The brutalization of leading sections of the German middle classes and their absorption of a militaristic code thus formed, according to Elias, one of the preconditions for the process of barbarization in Germany which helped pave the way for Nazism. In short, Elias stresses how a peculiar conjuncture of circumstances arose in German history and social development, combining to produce a resurgence of warrior values when a more

unilinear theory – of the kind which Bauman and Burkitt wrongly interpret Elias as having proposed – might have led to an expectation of their decline.

Another precondition for the rise of Nazism was provided by the German experience of the First World War. As is always the case with wars since they are decivilizing by definition, decivilizing consequences were experienced to a greater or lesser degree by *all* the combatants. In the German case, however, they were continued after the war in a double-bind of escalating extra-state violence which led to a decay of the state monopoly of force (Elias 1996: 214–23). International as well as German developments played a part. Reaction inside and outside Germany to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia in 1917 was decisive. So were the terms of the Versailles Treaty, especially the fact that Hindenburg and the German army leadership were able to pass off the treaty as the sole responsibility of the Weimar regime, thus giving rise to the myth of ‘the stab in the back’ (Elias 1996: 194–5).

Elias notes how, in Germany after the First World War as elsewhere, workers’ movements divided between pro-Soviet factions which favoured the use of extra-parliamentary violence and anti-Soviet factions which were pacifist and pro-parliament (Elias 1996: 215–7). In Germany, the latter were supported by members of the liberal intelligentsia and Jews. A majority of those who had belonged to the Wilhelmine establishment, however, were strongly opposed to the Weimar Republic, referring to the parliament as a ‘talking shop’ and the Republic as a ‘pig-sty’ (Elias 1996: 189). They regarded democracy as ‘un-German’ and longed for the return of absolutist rule (Mann 1919, quoted in Waite 1977: 282). Behind these sentiments, according to Elias, lay their inability to come to terms, firstly with Germany’s defeat in a war which their values had played an important part in bringing about, and secondly, with the fact that the defeat had led to a shift in the balance of power in Germany against them and towards the working class. Above all, they hated the fact that, in the Weimar Republic, they were ruled by people whom they despised as ‘rabble’. Moreover, given the restrictions imposed on the size of Germany’s armed forces by the Versailles Treaty, opportunities for the military career to which so many aspired were severely restricted. Deeply disillusioned, many joined *Freikorps* in order to fight ‘the Bolshevik menace’. Thus was set in motion an escalating double-bind of violence and counter-violence which ended in Hitler’s rise (Elias 1996: 188ff).⁶

While the victorious allies were committed to policing the Versailles settlement, the chances of these violent far-right groups achieving their aims were restricted. However, fear of the spread of Bolshevism soon led the vigilance of the allies to decrease: their leaders regarded the far left as a more serious threat. As the double-bind of escalating violence unfolded, according to Elias a typical far-right ‘career’ began to emerge. Starting with being an officer in the Wilhelmine army or a cadet in the Prussian cadet corps, such a man graduated to membership of a *Freikorps*, very likely participating in their unsuccessful Baltic campaign. Then he became a

member of a conspiratorial, secret terrorist organization such as 'Consul' – Elias estimates that there were around one thousand terrorist murders of politicians and Republican sympathizers in the Weimar years – ultimately joining the Nazi party (Elias 1996: 191–2). In this situation, according to Elias

Hitler succeeded where the *Freikorps* leaders did not: in actually destroying the Weimar parliamentary regime. He was successful largely because he made the effort to mobilize wide sections of the masses through the use of extraparliamentary propaganda. The *Freikorps* were among his most important precursors, paving his way. Their goals were in many respects identical to his. But despite all the barbarization process their attitudes and mentality had undergone, they remained rooted in the elite officers' tradition – the tradition of the old, noble and middle-class *satisfaktionsfähige Gesellschaft*. Hitler, the lance-corporal, broke through the elite barriers of the officer and student movement and transformed it into a broad populist movement without the elitist restrictions which stood in the way of its spreading to the masses. Being a member of the 'German race' opened the door for many more people than membership of the 'good' noble and middle-class society, and, in their youth, of the officer corps or the student associations. (Elias 1996: 197)

Hitler's rise thus involved 'democratization' of a sort. It also involved increasing violence, and the Weimar state lacked the power effectively to oppose it. As Elias put it: 'The violence of the National Socialist movement, with the aid of privately organized defence associations, . . . brought about the almost complete dissolution of the monopoly of force – without which a state, in the long term, cannot function – and destroyed the Weimar Republic from within' (Elias 1996: 228).

THE RISE OF THE NAZIS

Among the further consequences which followed, according to Elias, from the fact that the German processes of state-unification and industrialization did not grow out of structurally generated pressure from below but, rather, under the aegis of absolutism, was the fact that Germans in general did not develop a habitus and conscience attuned to the give-and-take of parliamentary rule (Elias 1996: 288–97). On the contrary, they developed a pattern dependent on external, authoritarian control expressed through such concepts as *Kadavergehorsam* – 'corpse-like obedience' (Elias 1996: 382). Hans Frank, the *Reichsminister* and Governor-General of occupied Poland, for example, recast Kant when he wrote that: 'The categorical imperative of action in the Third Reich is this: act in such a way that the *Führer*, if he knew of your action, would approve of it' (Elias 1996: 383). Consistent with this was the metaphor of the *Radfahrermechanismus* – the 'cyclist mechanism' (Elias 1996: 380) – which referred to a lust for

submission to those in power and the displacement of the resultant hostilities onto those below. It was one of many indications of how deep-rooted features of German habitus and culture fostered identification with the oppressor and led, under the Nazis, to results which became clearly visible in the concentration camps.

Elias also introduced a distinction – based on that between ‘white’ and ‘black magic’ – between ‘black’ and ‘white’ ideologies. The Nazi doctrine, he argues, was a ‘black ideology, full of ideas more appropriate to a pre-industrial than an industrial world’ (Elias 1996: 380). In addition, Elias suggested that

Hitler was . . . an innovative political medicine man . . . (He) had a function and characteristics similar to those of a rainmaker . . . in simpler tribal groupings. He reassured a . . . suffering people that he would give them all . . . they wanted most, just as a rainmaker promises a people threatened with hunger and thirst by a long period of drought that he will make it rain. (Elias 1996: 389)

The Nazis also gave the Germans an ego-enhancing prestige boost by decreeing them to be members of the ‘superior’ ‘Aryan race’. The Holocaust, Elias argues, grew directly out of the Nazis’ racial ideology (Elias 1996: 311–12). However, whilst Nazism and the Holocaust derived in part from social and psychological processes which were specifically German, in other respects, according to Elias, they stemmed from trends which were not in any way unique. As Elias expressed it

Many contemporary events suggest that National Socialism revealed, perhaps in an especially blatant form, what are common conditions of contemporary societies, tendencies of acting and thinking which can also be found elsewhere. (Elias 1996: 303)⁷

Most modern societies contain groups with beliefs similar to the Nazis. We have already explained how Elias accounts for the latter’s rise to power as part of a process in which de-civilizing tendencies gained precedence over civilizing trends. How does he explain their attempt to exterminate the Jews? According to Elias, in the course of their rise to power the Nazis obtained limited advantages by using Jews as scapegoats. They also obtained limited economic gains from expropriating and exterminating them (Elias 1996: 304). But it is Elias’s contention that such economic and strategic considerations cannot explain ‘the Final Solution’. Central to understanding the Holocaust, according to Elias, is that it had all along been one of Hitler’s overriding aims, that it was shared by the SS leaders and that neither Hitler nor his SS cohorts made a secret of their plans. Thus, millions of Jews were murdered because Hitler and the leading National Socialists fervently believed the Jews to be an ‘inferior race’ whose presence in Germany and the ‘Third Reich’ constituted a threat to ‘race purity’. So when, in the course of the war they no longer had to take foreign opinion seriously into account, they used their power to realize a fervently held belief. As Elias put it

The question why, in 1939,⁸ the path was taken to the murdering of all Jews is . . . not difficult to answer. The decision itself and its implementation followed directly from a central doctrine of the Nazi belief-system. Hitler and his followers had never made a secret of their total and irrevocable enmity towards the Jews or of their wish to destroy them. It is not surprising that, when the risk no longer seemed too great, they finally began to translate their destruction-wish into fact. (Elias 1996: 311–12)

The point then, according to Elias, is that the Nazi racial ideology was not designed to mask supposedly 'rational' aims but formed a cornerstone of their plan to establish a 'racially pure' 'thousand year Reich'. Who were the people who held such ideas? According to Elias

The majority of party leaders were . . . 'half-educated'. They were . . . outsiders or failures in the older order, often filled with a burning ambition which made it impossible for them to bear their inadequacies . . . The Nazi belief system with its pseudo-scientific varnish spread thinly over a primitive, barbaric national mythology was one of the more extreme symptoms of the moral and intellectual twilight in which they lived. That it could not withstand the judgement of more educated people, and with few exceptions had no appeal for them, was probably one of the reasons why such people often underestimated the seriousness of the belief itself and the genuineness of the feelings invested in it. Few of the social and, especially, the national myths of our age are free of similar falsehoods and barbarisms. The National Socialist doctrine shows, as if in a distorting mirror, some of their common features in a glaring form. (Elias 1996: 315)

Thus the Nazi belief system was an extreme example of a sort of ideology which is not uncommon in modern societies. As such, it appealed primarily to the sorts of 'half-educated' people who have placed their stamp on much of what is characteristic of twentieth-century societies. However, of all the western countries it was Germany, which had undergone the series of, on balance, barbarizing developments we have discussed, which was the one where, faced with a mounting internal and external crisis, such groups were most likely to gain state power.

CONCLUSION

We have sought to show here that the attempts of authors like Bauman to dismiss Elias's theory founder because they seriously misread it. They are also mistaken in the sense of not taking into account the fact that the theory is multilinear, designed to account for the different trajectories of state-formation of Britain, France and Germany, and to explain the long-term and on balance de-civilizing developments which led to Nazism in the German case.

One thing, though, has to be said in favour of Bauman compared with Elias: he does develop a stimulating explanation of why the Holocaust was directed mainly against Jews (Bauman 1989: 31ff). Despite his own Jewish origins, that is an issue on which Elias was relatively silent.⁹ It follows that, for a more comprehensive explanation of the Holocaust, it would be useful to attempt a synthesis of these aspects of Bauman's arguments with those of Elias on why the German trajectory of development followed, on balance, a de-civilizing course.

Burkitt's arguments are more persuasive. By grafting aspects of Bauman's theory of modernity onto Elias's theory of civilizing processes, he develops some challenging insights. Ultimately, however, his attempt to transcend Elias fails because he does not realize how crucial the concept of 'functional democratization' is to Elias's theory. Nor does he appreciate the fundamental role attributed by Elias to middle-class groups. Moreover, he pays insufficient attention to how Elias sought to show that the brutalization of dominant bourgeois groups in the *Kaiserreich*, during the First World War and in the course of the escalating double-bind of violence and counter-violence in the Weimar Republic when there occurred a decay in the state's monopoly of force, all took place as part of a longer-term process which was on balance decivilizing and which ultimately led to the Nazis' rise. It also led to the Second World War in which, not only Germans but all the combatants, became caught up in a cycle of violence in which atrocities were committed by both sides, but primarily by the Germans, and which produced ramifications which are still having effects world-wide today.

In a recent essay, Kuzmics has suggested that: 'In some respects, Elias's interpretation seems to be biased – Prusso-centric, '*kleindeutsch*' and Protestant', (Kuzmics 1994: 11, 12). Such a judgment is worthy of further research. It might help to explain lacunae in Elias's work such as his failure to seek an explanation for the fact that the Nazi Party originated primarily in Munich and that its leader was an Austrian. The plausibility of Kuzmics's judgment is reinforced by the fact that it is based on a thorough understanding of Elias's contribution and deep knowledge of German history and social development. It grows, that is, out of original research and is not expressive of the philosophical/ideological 'quick-fix' which, if we are right, mars Bauman's work and, to a lesser extent, that of Burkitt.

It is appropriate to give the last word in this essay to Elias to make it crystal clear that he was fully aware of what Bauman and Burkitt call the 'ambivalence' of modern civilization. According to Elias

In spite of all the doubts which have been cast on the belief in progress, [the] self-image [of people in the West] remains pervaded by it. Yet their feelings are contradictory, a blend of self-love and self-hate, pride and despair – pride in the extraordinary capacity for discovery and daring of their age and the humanising advances it has seen, despair about their own senseless barbarities. Numerous experiences convey to them the idea that they are the highest stage of civilization. Others, among them

the endless series of wars, nourish their doubts. The Eichmann trial, with everything it brought to the surface, belonged to this second category. Facts which had been available for a long time were made conspicuous by it and brought to light in a personal and authoritative manner. People could no longer look away. (Elias 1996: 302–3)

We hope that, in this essay, we have made a case for regarding Elias's work on the balance between civilizing and decivilizing processes in European social development as worthy of serious attention, not least regarding the understanding of monstrous events such as the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. In our opinion, Sica got it right when he wrote that: '... Elias stands alone, even today, among the social theorists. The challenge will be to surpass him, but only after taking in and understanding his genuine originality for what it means' (1984).

(Date accepted: June 1997)

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NOTES

* We are grateful to Don Bennett, Joop Goudsblom, Richard Kilminster, Michael Krüger, Helmut Kuzmics, Eoin O'Mahony and Bero Rigauer for their helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay.

1. Although in the title of his main book, *The Civilizing Process*, Elias used the term in the singular, in his later work he distinguished between the civilizing processes of particular societies and also spoke of the civilizing processes of individuals and humanity as a whole. Used on an individual level the term is similar to the standard concept of socialization, though perhaps drawing more attention to emotions.

2. Elias wrote an essay called 'Violence and Civilization: the State Monopoly of Physical Violence and its Infringement' (in Keane 1988) in which he argued that: '... monopolies of physical violence ... are, like so many human inventions, highly equivocal. Just as the taming of fire favoured civilized progress in the cooking

of food as well as the barbarian burning down of huts and houses; just as atomic energy is both a plentiful source of energy and a frightening weapon, the social invention of the monopoly of physical violence is equally ambiguous. It is a dangerous instrument. From the ancient pharaohs down to present-day dictatorships, the power of disposal of the monopoly of violence is used for the benefit of certain small groups. But the function it has for its monopolists is not its sole function. The state monopoly of force also has a highly significant function for people living together in a state. Our pacification – the relatively peaceful collective life of large masses of people – is in good part based on this institution, which is closely connected with the state's fiscal monopoly' (pp.179–80).

3. Elias suggested the need to distinguish not only between biological evolution and social development but also between social development and history.

'Social development' refers to the emergence and transformation of relatively enduring structures, 'history' to the level of more transient events. See Elias (1969), esp. Ch.1, 'Introduction: Sociology and History', pp.1–34; and Elias (1991).

4. A partial exception was provided by Goethe who became an official in the small Weimar Court.

5. Though he later regretted it, Thomas Mann wrote in 1919 in his 'Reflections of an Unpolitical Man' that democracy was profoundly 'unGerman' and alien to *Kultur*. And asked by General Ludendorff in 1918 to define 'democracy', Max Weber wrote: 'In a democracy, the people choose a leader in whom they trust. Then the chosen leader says, "Shut up and obey me". The masses and political parties are then no longer free to interfere with the leader'. Both quoted in Waite 1977: 282–83.

6. In the concept of a double bind figuration, Elias was offering a sociological equivalent of the popular ideas of 'vicious' and 'virtuous' circles. Perhaps the most extensive discussion of this is provided in Elias (1987: 48–9; 72–4; 96ff).

7. Similar insights are developed by Scheff (1994) in his theory of 'shame-rage spirals'.

8. Elias wrote this in the 1960s, and would therefore not have been aware that the decision to implement a total extermination was taken in the summer of 1941.

9. Elias does briefly discuss the problems of the Jews in Germany in *Reflections on a Life*, (1994(b)) and, of course, his established-outsiders theory probably grew in part out of his experiences (Elias and Scotson 1994). See also Steven Russell, *Jewish Identity and Civilising Processes* (1996.)

After we had sent this paper to the *BJS*, an article by Elias on antisemitism, published in 1929, came to light. It is entitled 'Zur Soziologie des deutschen Antisemitismus' and was published in the *Israelitisches Gemeindeblatt* 12(13 December 1929): 3–6. The journal is described as the 'Offizielles Organ der Israelitischen Gemeinden Mannheim und Ludwigshafen' (Official Organ of the Israelite communities of Mannheim and Ludwigshafen).

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