

DECIVILISING PROCESSES: THEORETICAL SIGNIFICANCE AND SOME LINES OF RESEARCH*

Stephen Mennell

Abstract Decivilising processes are what happens when civilising processes go into reverse; both terms are used here in a specific technical sense derived from the work of Norbert Elias (*The Civilising Process*, 2 vols., 1978/1982, orig. 1939). The first part of the paper briefly sketches aspects of the theory of civilising processes necessary for identifying symptoms of their reversal. It is inferred that true decivilising processes would be marked by breaking links and shorter chains of social interdependence, associated with higher levels of danger and incalculability in everyday life, the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere and a decline in mutual identification, reduced pressures on individuals to restrain the expression of impulses (including the freer expression of aggressiveness), changes in socialisation and personality formation, and increasing fantasy-content of modes of knowledge.

The second part of the paper examines evidence relating to four candidates for the label 'decivilising process'. The debate about the 'permissive society' suggests that this was 'decivilising' in a very limited sense: it involved a 'highly controlled decontrolling of emotional controls'. Evidence of an upturn in violence in contemporary United States and British society is examined next; the data of Gurr, Stone and Dunning suggest the long-term trend was until recently downwards. The Holocaust and other instances of mass murder are discussed next. Finally, it is proposed that the clearest cases of decivilising processes would be those where trends could be observed over at least three generations; evidence should be sought in the collapse of complex societies (such as the Roman Empire) and episodes such as the Thirty Years War and its aftermath, and the so-called 'Wild West'.

Decivilising processes are what happens when civilising processes go into reverse. When I use the term 'civilising process', and by extension 'decivilising process', I am using it in the specific technical sense developed by Norbert Elias. I am *not* using the term 'civilisation' with all its popular meanings, nor in the very general sense of large-scale complex society or culture area employed by writers like Spengler and Toynbee.

I shall therefore have to say a good deal about Elias's theory of civilising processes in order to explain the theoretical significance of decivilising processes and what kind of evidence is required to detect them. The main points are presented in the summary table.

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Table 1

EUROPEAN CIVILISING PROCESS	POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF DECIVILISING PROCESSES
STRUCTURAL PROCESSES	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ State-formation: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monopolisation of means of violence and taxation ↑ Division of Labour/Social Functions/Heterogeneity ↑ Trade, towns, money, markets, population <i>All interweaving to produce longer chains, denser webs of interdependence, with consequences:</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Breaking links, shorter chains of interdependence ↑ Homogeneity, cellular structure ↑ danger level, incalculability
CHANGES IN MANNERS/CULTURE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Movement 'behind the scenes' (bodily functions etc., and violence) ↑ Diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties ↑ Mutual identification (inc. ↓ cruelty to humans, animals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Re-emergence of violence, etc., into public sphere ↓ mutual identification, ↑ cruelty
CHANGES IN SOCIAL HABITUS	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Pressures towards foresight: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Psychologisation – Rationalisation – Advancing thresholds of shame and embarrassment ↑ distance between child's and adult standards No zero-point in self-constraint, but becomes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ more automatic ↑ more even and continuous ↑ more all-round, all-embracing Taming of aggressiveness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↓ Pressures restraining expression of impulses ↓ gap child/adult standards ↑ reliance on external constraints <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ impulsive ↓ uniformity ↑ exceptions Freer expression of aggressiveness
CHANGES IN MODES OF KNOWLEDGE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Detachment, ↓ Involvement ↓ fantasy content, ↑ 'reality-congruence' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ↑ Involvement, ↓ Detachment ↑ fantasy content, ↓ 'reality congruence'

Civilising processes

Elias speaks of civilising processes on two levels.¹ The first is the *individual level*, and is rather uncontroversial. Infants and children have to acquire through learning the adult standards of behaviour and feeling prevalent in their society; to speak of this as a civilising process is more or less to use another term for 'socialisation', and that this process has a typical structure and sequence is not disputed. But the second level is more controversial. Where did these standards come from? They have not always existed, nor always been the same. Elias argues it is possible to identify long-term civilising processes in the shaping of standards of behaviour and feeling over many generations within particular cultures. Again, the idea that these standards *change* is not controversial; what generates controversy is that the changes take the form of *structured processes* of change with a discernible – though unplanned – *direction* over time. This problem of direction is crucial, for my interest is in reversals in civilising processes on these two levels, and the notion of reversal only makes sense if one can be confident that the process was previously moving in a structured way in a recognisable direction.² Many of the symptoms of civilising and decivilising processes are not so easily measured as – though they are not unconnected with – other structured processes such as the division of labour or the growth of population.

Despite his very extensive publications in the 1970s and 1980s, Elias is still best known for the two volumes of *The Civilising Process* (1978/1982), first published obscurely in 1939 but not available in English until more than forty years later, and they remain the central point of reference for his work. The first volume is the better known, dealing with the history of manners in Western Europe from the late Middle Ages to the Victorian period. The second is a detailed study of the process of state formation, again in Europe, since the Dark Ages.

The basic idea, and the basic link between the two halves, is that there is a connection between the long-term structural development of societies and long-term changes in people's social character or typical personality make-up (what Pierre Bourdieu, 1984, would call their social *habitus* – which was in fact the word Elias used in German back in 1939). In other words, as the structure of societies becomes more complex, manners, culture and personality also change in a particular and discernible direction, first among élite groups, then gradually more widely. This is worked out with great subtlety for Western Europe since the Middle Ages. But it is a weakness that *The Civilising Process* is based entirely on European evidence. It is not so much that it is *Eurocentric* as that it is *about* Europe, and specifically about the process of development through which Europeans – by the time they began to use 'civilisation' as a badge of what they supposed to be their superiority over other, non-European peoples – had almost entirely forgotten their own ancestors had passed. But inevitably it is not always perfectly clear which aspects of Elias's theory apply to Europe alone, and which are of more general validity.

Doubts about how generalisable are various aspects of the theory centre especially on Elias's theory of state formation. Implicitly Elias begins from

Max Weber's definition of the state as an organisation which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence (Weber 1922/1978 I: 54), but he is more interested in the *process* through which a monopoly of the means of violence (and taxation) is established and extended. A particularly vivid feature of his theory of state-formation is his model of the 'elimination contest' between numerous rival territorial magnates, a competitive process with a compelling sequential dynamic through which successively larger territorial units emerge with more effective central monopoly apparatuses.

It is well known that the pattern of relatively small and relatively effective states which emerged in Europe differs in quite significant ways from that of the regimes elsewhere which in their various aspects are referred to as agrarian empires, oriental despotisms and revenue pumps. Elias's account of the state-formation process in Europe emphasises the initially relatively small disparities between many small territories, and subsequently the relatively even though fluctuating balances between contending elements within the emerging states (cf. Jones 1981; Hall 1985). These conditions were probably not widely met elsewhere. I want to argue, however, that even if Elias's model of state formation fits the European case best and is not perfectly generalisable elsewhere, that does not invalidate his more general theory of civilising processes. Nor, for my own purposes, does it invalidate the comparative investigation of *decivilising* processes. There are two reasons for that. First, it could be argued that *how* the monopolisation of violence comes about is less important to Elias's argument than the fact of its being achieved. That is because one of Elias's central arguments is that:

if in a particular region, the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area people are *forced* to live at peace with one another, the moulding of the affects and the standards of the demands made upon emotional management are very gradually changed as well.

(1939 I: 201, my emphasis; translation modified to reflect Elias's later terminology)

The second reason is that Elias does not put *all* his eggs in the state formation basket. State formation, he argues, is only one process interweaving with others to enmesh individuals in increasingly complex webs of interdependence. It interweaves with the division of labour, the growth of trade, towns, the use of money and administrative apparatuses, and increasing population in a spiral process. Internal pacification of territory facilitates trade, which facilitates the growth of towns and division of labour and generates taxes which support larger administrative and military organisations, which in turn facilitate the internal pacification of larger territories, and so on – a cumulative process experienced as a compelling force by people caught up in it. Furthermore, according to Elias, the gradually higher standards of habitual self-restraint engendered in people contribute in turn to the upward spiral – being necessary, for example to the formation of gradually more effective and calculable administration. Equally, the loss of certain *learned* 'psychological' capacities could contribute to a downward spiral. But it is not so much a matter of identifying single causal factors as of

tracing how various causal strands interweave over time to produce an overall process with increasing momentum. In the same way, when turning to decivilising processes, and looking at a case like the Roman Empire, it is less necessary to point to a single factor – barbarian invasions, Christianity, lead pipes or whatever – than to build a ‘process theory’ (Mennell 1989 : 177 ff.) showing how various strands interweave to reinforce a downward spiral.

It should be borne in mind here that, in contrast with Western Europe, ancient empires or oriental despotisms have often been depicted as monopoly apparatuses floating like a raft on a largely unchanging, largely autarkic agrarian economy. In that case the interweaving with the division of labour, etc., would be much weaker, and most likely weaker in its psychological effects. That could well make a downward spiral easier to set in motion.

What about the manners side of the argument? If violence is so central to Elias’s underlying problematic, why does his book begin by looking at all those instances of disgusting medieval manners for which he is most famous – the development of conventions about eating, washing, spitting, blowing one’s nose, urinating and defecating, undressing? He focused particularly on these most basic, ‘natural’ or ‘animalic’ of human functions because these are things human beings cannot biologically avoid doing, no matter what society, culture or age they live in. Moreover, infants are born in the same emotional condition everywhere, so that the *lifetime* point of departure is always the same. Therefore if change occurs in the way these functions are handled, it can be seen rather clearly. But his underlying concern is with topics more central to the interests of social theorists then and now: violence and aggressiveness. In Europe at least, these became more tamed and more hidden behind the scenes of social life along with defecation, nakedness and the rest.

Elias puts forward an elaborate theory of changing personality formation. He argues that as webs of interdependence become denser and more extensive, there gradually takes place a shift in the *balance* between external constraints (*Fremdzwänge* – constraints by other people) and self-constraints (*Selbstzwänge*), in favour of the latter. His book on time and timing (1984) brings out particularly clearly the link between social and personality changes arising from the necessity of coordinating more and more complicated sequences of activities. The pressures on individuals to exercise greater *foresight* take various forms: Elias discusses especially the processes of rationalisation, ‘psychologisation’, and the advance of thresholds of shame and embarrassment.³

Psychologisation is linked to the idea that spreading webs of interdependence tend to be associated with *relatively* more equal power ratios and ‘functional democratisation’, meaning more and more reciprocal controls between more and more social groups. Less abstractly: ‘more people are forced more often to pay more attention to more other people’ (Goudsblom 1989a : 722). This produces pressures towards greater consideration of the consequences of one’s own actions for other people on whom one is more or less dependent, and there tends in consequence to be an increase in ‘mutual identification’. This idea is not new to Elias – it was expressed very clearly by Alexis de Tocqueville⁴ – but it has a very direct bearing on matters of violence

and cruelty. *The advance of thresholds of shame and embarrassment* also involves increased foresight, in the sense of greater vigilance in anticipating social dangers, especially the transgression of various social prohibitions.

Rationalisation, warns Elias, has no absolute beginning in human history. Just as there was no point at which human beings suddenly began to possess a 'conscience', there is none before which they were completely 'irrational'. Still more misleading is it to think of rationality as some kind of property of individual minds in isolation from each other. "There is not actually a 'ratio', there is at most 'rationalisation'" (1939 II : 277). What actually changes is the way people are bonded with each other in society, and in consequence the moulding of personality structure. Elias's argument is that the forms of behaviour we call 'rationality' are produced within a social figuration in which extensive transformation of external compulsions into internal compulsions takes place:

The complementary concepts of 'rationality' and 'irrationality' refer to the relative parts played by short-term affects and long-term conceptual models of observable reality in individual behaviour. The greater the importance of the latter in the delicate balance between affective and reality-orientated commands, the more 'rational' is behaviour.

(1969 : 92)

There is not space here to discuss Elias's complex theory of the development of modes of knowledge and their relations to civilising processes and other cultural trends (see Elias 1987; Mennell 1989 : 159-99), but mention needs to be made of one aspect of it relevant to decivilising processes. In a sophisticated reworking of ideas, some of which can be traced back as far as Comte and the Victorian anthropologist Edward Tylor, Elias makes a connection between, on the one hand, the prevailing level of danger (and, conversely, the level of control which people have over the forces which affect their lives) and, on the other hand, the relative degree of detachment (and, conversely, the degree of emotional involvement and fantasy-loading) in their modes of knowledge. He stresses the interdependence between trends in any society in (a) control over extra-human forces ('nature'), (b) control over interpersonal or social forces, and (c) people's control over themselves as individuals ('psychological' controls). Although in *very* long-term perspective all three may have tended to grow, he emphasises how difficult initial advances are, given that for example advances in control over natural dangers may bring with them changes in social relations (e.g. longer chains of interdependence) which then become *more* difficult to control, increasing the danger which people pose *for each other*, and making it more difficult to achieve more detached and less fantasy-laden forms of knowledge.

Overall, Elias's work has often been understood as a kind of Victorian progress theory. I don't think it is. He often stresses that the process is reversible. He also stresses that there are many counter-spurts within the process, so that the main trend is visible only in the long view. For example, while part of the old warrior class in Western Europe was being tamed and transformed into courtiers, other elements of the same class who were not caught up in courts actually became in the late Middle Ages *more* violent and

aggressive in their lifestyle under the pressure of the erosion of their social base (Maso 1982; Mennell 1989 : 80).

What Elias does assert is that in the *very* long term integration processes have predominated over disintegration processes. The 'survival units' in which humans live – inside which levels of violence are relatively low compared with violence between survival units – have become larger. For all their prejudices against 'progress theories', sociologists rarely doubt that on the whole more complex societies have arisen out of less complex. Among economic historians, Eric Jones (1988, 1989) has pointed to the significance of a possibly inherent and certainly widespread tendency towards *extensive* growth – economic growth involving growth of population though without any increase in *per capita* incomes. And Taagepera (1978) has shown how, after the collapse of each of the great empires in the Old World, the next succeeding one managed to integrate a larger geographical area than its precursor. So Elias is probably right to pay more attention to civilising than decivilising trends. Decivilising processes presuppose civilising processes. But they also raise interesting theoretical questions in themselves.

Decivilising processes: some candidates for the label

Nothing appears to undermine the plausibility of the 'civilising process' thesis more than the widespread perception that, whatever may have been the trend in Europe from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century, the present century has seen a reversal in many of those trends. In my view, evidence over at least three generations is necessary to diagnose a decivilising process, but the following cases include both long- and short-term episodes and are chosen to clarify the issues involved. They are in no sense intended as a *typology* of decivilising processes.

1. *The 'permissive society'*. For centuries, writers who have meditated on the causes of the downfall of states and empires have dwelt on symptoms of 'moral decline' as they saw it. In such cases as that of Ancient Rome, modern historians would at least want to ask whether their predecessors did not confuse cause and effect. But the matter has some contemporary resonance, because of popular (and sociological) discussions of the various tendencies which were collectively labelled 'the permissive society' – the relaxation of controls, even 'loosening of morals' as many saw it, and a pervasive informalisation of social behaviour apparent in the 1960s and 1970s in many countries. I have described elsewhere (Mennell 1989 : 241–6) how sociologists in the Netherlands asked whether that meant that the civilising process had gone into reverse. Since the increasing complexity of the web of social interdependencies in which people are caught up has manifestly not gone into reverse, does the emergence of the 'permissive society' invalidate Elias's whole notion of the connection between structural development and the civilising of behaviour? Might it, for example, suggest that the link between structural complexity and 'civilising controls' on people's behaviour is curvilinear – that perhaps beyond a certain point it generates pockets of metropolitan

anonymity within which the external constraints on impulses (from the sexual to the violent), and in time also the effectiveness of pressures towards self-constraint, are diminished?

Elias was well aware of this when he was writing in the 1930s. He discussed the apparent 'relaxation of morals' which had taken place since the First World War (1939 I: 186-7; cf. II: 324). It was not, he pointed out, the first time such apparent reversals of the civilising process had occurred. In very long-term perspective, the overall trend was clear, especially among the upper classes, but on closer examination there had always been criss-cross movements, shifts and spurts in various directions. The informalisation of the inter-war years was probably just another such fluctuation.

On the other hand, he also pointed out that some of the symptoms of an apparent relaxation of the constraints imposed on the individual by social life actually took place within the framework of very high social standards of self-constraint – standards possibly higher even than formerly. He gave the example of bathing costumes and the relatively greater exposure of the body (especially the female body) in many modern sports. This development, Elias had already argued in 1939, could only take place 'in a society in which a high degree of restraint is taken for granted, and in which women are, like men, absolutely sure that each individual is curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette' (1939 I: 187).

From a debate between Brinkgreve, Wouters and others (Brinkgreve 1980; Brinkgreve and Korzec 1976, 1979; Wouters 1976, 1977, 1986, 1987; Kapteyn 1980, 1985) sprang a good deal of research on contemporary trends in manners and morals. Wouters catalogued the manifestations of informalisation processes in the increased use of the familiar second person (*tutoyer*, *duzen* and so on in European languages other than English), the increasing use of Christian names (for example, by subordinates to superiors in offices, and by children to their parents), the decreasing insistence upon titles, the less formal regulation of the written and spoken languages, of clothing, hair-styles, forms of music and dancing, in addition to the changes in the key field of marriage, divorce and sexual relationships. These last were the particular focus of Brinkgreve and Korzec's study of advice columns in a Dutch women's magazine between 1938 and 1978. Apart from the far more open discussion of problems of sexuality, they found that the expectation that teenagers submit unprotestingly to their parents' wishes, or wives to their husbands', diminished dramatically between the 1950s and 1970s, in consequence of more equal balances of power. For instance, when women did not have jobs of their own, their lack of financial leeway made them utterly dependent on their husbands and limited their alternatives. As this dependence diminished, the ideal of marriage came to be expressed less in terms of complete unity and harmony; the relationship was seen more in terms of competing interests, in which negotiations played a more decisive part than fixed roles. Blanket rules were no longer given for what was right and what was wrong. Brinkgreve and Korzec summed up the changes as shift from 'moralising' to 'psychologising'. It was less a matter of judging and censuring, and more one of considering a situation from all angles.

The question was, though, how these changes were to be interpreted in relation to the theory of civilising processes. Briefly, one can say that Brinkgreve initially thought that 'permissiveness' did represent some reversal of the civilising process, and that Wouters followed Elias in interpreting it as a 'highly controlled decontrolling of emotional controls', and therefore as in some respects a *continuation* of the main trend. Brinkgreve accused him of trying to immunise Elias's theory from falsification. After much empirical research, however, the upshot was a measure of consensus, slightly in Wouter's favour. The demands of the 'new freedom' are in fact quite high, and the level of 'mutually expected self-restraint' has risen.

It emerges that some careful distinctions have to be drawn. Elias frequently stresses that the civilising process is not a matter simply of 'more' self-control. He speaks in terms of the changing balance between external and self-constraints, and of the changing pattern of controls. In particular, he speaks of controls becoming 'more even', 'more automatic' and 'more all-round', as well as of a movement towards 'diminishing contrasts and increasing varieties'. By 'more even' and 'more automatic' self-constraints, Elias means 'psychological' changes: individuals' oscillations of mood become less extreme, and the controls over emotional expression become more reliable and calculable. 'More all-round' ('more all-embracing' would be a better translation) refers to a decline in the differences between various 'spheres' of life, such as contrasts between what is allowed in public and in private, between conduct in relation to one category of people as against another, or between 'normal' behaviour and that permissible on special occasions like carnivals which are seen as exceptions to the rules. Finally, 'diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties' refers to social contrasts – reduced inequalities between social groups but a wider choice of permissible models of behaviour.

Bearing these distinctions in mind, it can be seen that the informalisation processes in general represent a definite continuation of the latter two components – diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties, and more 'all-roundedness'. What is more ambiguous is whether they also represent a movement towards more evenness and greater automaticity. Because they involve a less tyrannical form of conscience-formation and more conscious deliberation, it is easy to overlook how far the new more liberal standards presuppose an extremely reliable capacity for controlling one's impulses and a still greater level of mutual identification. They do not, in general, appear to involve a switch backwards in the balance from *Selbstzwänge* towards *Fremdzwänge*, and so seem not to be 'true decivilising processes'.

One concluding point on the 'permissive society', however: if it is so difficult to make these subtle distinctions from the abundant historical evidence of recent decades, how much more difficult are they to draw from the evidence of the more distant past?

2. *Is contemporary society becoming more violent?* Highly involved in the practical problems of their own everyday lives, people today often find it difficult not to believe that they are living in a world which is 'more violent' than a generation or two ago. And the image of a peaceful agrarian

society in the more remote past (e.g. 'Merrie England') also persists strongly.

The perception that 'law and order' are breaking down in the cities of the Western world, and that the level of danger in everyday life there is rising, cannot be taken at face value. In the case of Britain, for example, Pearson (1983) has shown how, for hundreds of years, successive generations have voiced similar fears of escalating violence, moral decline, and the destruction of 'the British way of life'. At the same time, the perception cannot be dismissed out of hand. Certainly there seem to be short-term fluctuations in violence, in response to rising and falling tensions. Yet there is very little hard historical evidence for a rising curve of violence over terms longer than one or two generations. Admittedly, trends are difficult to study even in the short term, since a rise in officially recorded or publicly reported incidents of violence may at least partly reflect an increase in the effectiveness of the police or indeed a diminished tolerance of minor violence. However, such evidence as we have of long-term trends in violent crime over many generations, notably the quantitative studies of Gurr (1981) and Stone (1983), appears to support Elias's case rather than otherwise.

Over a shorter time-scale, and once more in the specific case of Britain, Dunning and his Leicester colleagues are investigating trends in violent disorders between 1900 and 1975. In a preliminary account of their work (1987) they classify reported incidents of violence into four categories: disorders connected with politics, with industrial disputes, with sports and leisure, and with the 'community' in general – the last serving as a catch-all for episodes of street fighting not clearly belonging in the other categories. Except in the sports-related category, the trend over the period as a whole was downwards. On the other hand, the graphs do show an upward turn in the 1960s and 1970s. It is not easy to say whether this represents simply a minor short-term fluctuation or a more definite reversal of a long-term trend, but the latter possibility has led Dunning, Murphy and Williams (1988 : 242–5) to speculate that Britain is experiencing an actual 'decivilising' upsurge in violence. The explanation they tentatively offer for this introduces an interesting qualification into the theory of civilising processes. They suggest that functional democratisation, as one of the central components of the civilising process, produces consequences which are, on balance, 'civilising' in its early stages, but that when a certain level has been reached it produces effects which are decivilising and promote disruptive conflict. Functional democratisation has perhaps proceeded far enough for the demands of outsider groups to be expressed strongly, but not far enough, in Britain at least, to break down rigidities which prevent their demands being met fully. At any rate, Dunning and his colleagues admit that 'we do not fully understand the periodicity and ups and downs, . . . the condition under which a society moves, on balance, in a "civilising" direction and the conditions under which a civilising process moves, as it were, on balance into "reverse gear"' (1988 : 243). That is one of the key problems to be clarified by further research.

3. *The holocaust and other instances of mass murder*. Sir Edmund Leach (1986) alleged that at the very time that Elias was formulating his thesis, 'Hitler was refuting the argument on the grandest scale'. Elias, it is true, completed *The Civilising Process* before the 'final solution' had taken final form, but something of the character of the Nazi regime was already clear. In fact, he explained in the preface, 'the issues raised by the book have their origins less in scholarly tradition, in the narrower sense of the word, than in the experiences in whose shadow we all live, experiences of the crisis and transformation of Western civilisation as it has existed hitherto . . .' (1939 I: xvii). While he, like virtually everyone else, no doubt failed to foresee the extent of the killings, a sense of foreboding is occasionally evident. For example, explaining that the gradually established control of dangers in society was a precondition for the 'civilised' standard of conduct, he added that:

The armour of civilised 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 burst the limits set to them today.

(1939 I: 307 n.)

In other words, civilised conduct takes a long time to construct, but can be destroyed rather quickly. That, I think, is one of the central problems of the whole theory: at first glance Elias does appear to want to have his cake and eat it too. However, some points drawn from Elias's own thinking may help to explain the apparent asymmetry at which he is hinting.

First, it must be remembered that, though standards change from generation to generation in the course of a social learning process extending over many lifetimes, the prevalent standards of controls at any point in the process have to be acquired – or not acquired – by every individual in every generation through an individual learning process, by definition no longer than an individual lifetime. Abrupt changes in social circumstances may seriously disrupt the continuity of socialisation.

Furthermore, such changes may indeed bring about changes in behaviour in periods much shorter than an individual lifetime, without enough time having elapsed for changes in socialisation having taken place. For Elias thinks of civilising processes as involving a change in the *balance* between external constraints (constraints *by other people*) and self-constraints – the balance tilting towards the latter in the control of behaviour in the average person. The operation of self-constraints will not remain unchanged if changes take place in the patterning of external constraints – the behaviour of other people. Calculation of the external constraints always play a part in the steering of conduct, and if the calculations suddenly or gradually yield different outcomes, behaviour will change. Still more will it change if the outcomes become – as Elias says in the remark just quoted – more *incalculable*: the pattern of people's *fears* responds to changes in the *dangers* they face. And one of the distinguishing characteristics of decivilising trends is a rise in the level of danger and a fall in its calculability.

Elias's notion of the triad of controls is relevant in understanding the appeal of (literally) fantastic beliefs. During times of social crisis – military defeats, political revolutions, rampant inflation, soaring unemployment, separately or in combination – fears rise because control of social events has declined. Rising fears make it still more difficult to control events. That makes people still more susceptible to wish fantasies about means of alleviating the situation. A vicious circle or 'double-bind process' is set up, and a process of that kind can be clearly seen in Germany after 1918, helping to explain the rise of the Nazis and the appeal of racial beliefs.⁵

Second, while Elias associates function democratisation within increasingly large and complex survival units with the growth of a generally wider sense of mutual identification, he always stresses that this sense is felt much more weakly towards members of other survival units, and towards outsider groups within one's own survival group.⁶ The Jews had, of course, always been an outsider group; there had always been anti-semitism in Germany, although (as Elias himself recalls) it is easy with hindsight to exaggerate its extent. It is striking how hard the Nazi regime had to strive to diminish the identification which many Germans felt with their fellow-Germans, the Jews (which was evident, for instance, in the popular reaction to *Kristallnacht*, 1938). It was not merely a matter of propaganda, whipping up a sense of danger. The Jews were first removed to ghettos, breaking their personal contacts with their non-Jewish neighbours. Then, under the official pretext of 'resettlement in the east', they were removed to transit camps, labour camps, and finally extermination camps to some extent 'behind the scenes' at least of metropolitan Germany. The regime remained apprehensive of German public opinion even at this stage (on all this, see Noakes and Pridham 1988 III : 997–1208). 'Mutual identification' was apparently not negligible, but we are still left with the vast sociological, and moral, question of why it was so relatively easily by-passed.

It must also be remembered, however, that the revulsion felt by people throughout the world – Germans included – when the full scale of the killings became known is also a symptom of mutual identification. That should not be taken as a matter of course. Historically speaking there is nothing very unusual about the mass murder of defeated enemies, or about pogroms of outsider groups. They were long taken for granted.⁷

A final way that the theory of civilising processes casts light on the Holocaust is grimly paradoxical. Modern social organisation vastly multiplied the technical capacity to kill. The very long chains of interdependence and 'division of social functions' which play such a part in the civilising process were also essential to implementing the 'final solution'. And ironically, as Elias argues, 'civilised' controls in turn play their part in making possible those long chains of organised and coordinated activities, especially through rational bureaucratic organisation. This argument has been forcefully made again recently by Zygmunt Bauman (1989), who writes:

the major lesson of the Holocaust is the necessity . . . to expand the theoretical model of the civilising process, so as to include the latter's tendency to demote, exprobate and delegitimise the ethical motivations of social action. We need to take stock of the evidence that *the civilising process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and*

deployment of violence from moral calculus, and of emancipating the desiderata of rationality from interference of ethical norms and moral inhibitions. As the promotion of rationality to the exclusion of alternative criteria of action, and in particular the tendency to subordinate the use of violence to rational calculus, has been long ago acknowledged as a constitutive feature of modern civilisation, Holocaust-style phenomena must be recognised as legitimate outcomes of the civilising tendency, and its constant potential.

(Bauman 1989 : 28)

It should be noted, however, that Bauman is here using the term 'civilising process' in a sense only loosely related to Elias's work. He is certainly mistaken if he thinks Elias 'restated the familiar self-definition of civilised society' or that he 'celebrates with such relish' the 'mellowing of manners' (Bauman 1989: 107). The single most powerful influence on Elias's early work, after all, was Freud, in whose *Civilisation and its Discontents* (as in many other discussions during that period) 'civilisation' is by no means seen as an unalloyed good or as 'progress'. And if Elias did not much discuss the 'process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus', it is because systems of ethics and morals as such have never played much part in his theory; indeed, he has often been criticised for playing down the role of the Church and moral teachings.

The Holocaust refuted the theory of the European civilising process in much the same way that the Black Death cast doubt on the long-term tendency for the continent's population to grow. That is not facetious, nor an attempt to immunise the theory against falsification. It still leaves a great deal to be explained. But the fact is that, for all the horrific suffering the Holocaust involved, civilising tendencies regained dominance after a relatively few years; whether and how they would have done so without external military intervention we can only speculate.

4. *Decivilising processes over several generations.* My last category of decivilising processes consists of those which continued over at least three generations. I specify that length of time because that, it seems to me, is the minimum period over which one could hope to be able to observe whether the changes in the socialisation process – to which Elias drew attention as the means by which changing standards of civilised controls were transmitted from generation to generation – actually go into reverse when structures are broken and danger levels rise.

The most significant questions that may be asked about these longer-term decivilising processes fall into two main groups, corresponding more or less to the questions uppermost respectively in the second and first volumes of Elias's original discussion of civilising processes. The first group of questions are 'structural': in what circumstances do the chains of interdependence in society begin to break, and thus why do levels of complexity, differentiation and integration start to decline? The second group concerns the outcome of such processes of structural unravelling for people's experience: what are the cultural and psychological consequences and the impact on people's day-to-day conduct?⁸

The most spectacular instances of decivilising processes extending over several generations are the cases of more or less total collapse of complex

societies, of which the archaeologist Joseph Tainter (1988) gives a surprisingly long list. They include the Western Chou empire in China, the Mesopotamian empires, the Egyptian Old Kingdom, the Hittite empire, the Minoan civilisation, and several of the pre-Columbian New World empires. Tainter provides a careful eleven-fold categorisation and critique of earlier explanations of social collapse, of great interest to sociologists. His own favoured explanation is essentially economic. Collapse comes about because 'investment in socio-political complexity often reaches a point of declining marginal returns' (1988 : 118). By returns he means 'benefits to people' – by implication mainly powerful elite groups – and investment covers expenditure on legitimisation activities or alternatively the means of coercion as well as on more narrowly economic infrastructure. The main weakness of Tainter's theory, however, is that he has difficulty in specifying the point at which diminishing returns set in – independently, that is, of collapse itself. The theory therefore has a somewhat *ex post facto* quality.

In fact we seem to have no general theory of structural collapse, and perhaps it is not sensible to look for one. The precipitating circumstances are possibly too varied to be effectively subsumed under a higher-level abstraction like 'diminishing marginal returns'. The chances of fruitful generalisation may perhaps be greater in relation to my second group of questions, concerning the cultural and psychological effects and the impact on people's conduct when 'structural unravelling' occurs in various forms and degrees.

It seems probably that an increase in levels of danger and incalculability, and a decline in the capacity of central monopoly apparatuses to enforce their authority, will be associated with the re-emergence of free-rider problems. The consequence will be the onset of disinvestment in collective goods. Individual people and small groups simply find it less safe than it formerly was to depend on other people located at a distance from them down social chains, the links of which are starting to break. Collective arrangements, which ultimately rested on the capacity of authorities to enforce them, can no longer be relied upon. In the space of a generation or two, smaller and less dense webs of interdependence entailing fewer pressures towards foresight in the co-ordination of activities may, through the socialisation process, result in diminution of these capacities. People need to practice them if they are to be able to call on them at will. Conversely, in situations of greater insecurity, learning aptitudes resting on a very different temperament may have greater survival value.

In studying the psychological and cultural components of this process in historical contexts such as the decline of Rome, contemporary studies of the effects of increased levels of violence on adults and children in places like Northern Ireland and the Lebanon (Cairns and Wilson 1985; Hosin 1983) ought to be relevant. Increased levels of danger ought to be associated with increased fear and anxiety, and with a lessening of controls. As always, in practice it is not easy to make inferences from short-term studies to long-term trends. The increase in anxiety shows up in Northern Ireland, but as realistic, not neurotic anxiety. On the other hand, it may be thought that the relatively high level of inter-communal conflict in Northern Ireland over many

generations is reflected in the rather high fantasy content of popular beliefs in the province (see MacDonald 1983). But applying such insights to historical evidence is quite difficult, in part because periods of social disintegration are times when documentary evidence is likely to be less complete and clear.

The task of disentangling economic, political and cultural strands of causality in a case such as the decline of the Western Roman Empire is immense. Max Weber stressed one basic point:

the civilisation of Antiquity did not decline because the Empire fell, for the Roman Empire as a political structure existed for centuries after ancient civilisation had passed its prime. In fact this civilisation had been in eclipse for a long time. By the early third century Roman literature was played out, and Roman jurisprudence deteriorated together with its schools. Greek and Latin poetry was moribund, historiography faded away, and even inscriptions started to fall silent. Latin itself soon gave way to dialects.

When, after one and half centuries of decline, the Western Empire finally disappeared, barbarism had already conquered the Empire from within.

(Weber 1896/1976 : 389)

Weber goes on to make clear that by 'the civilisation of Antiquity'⁹ he means primarily *urban* culture, and in the decline of towns, economic and political forces certainly played a major part, even while the Western Empire persisted. Even so, the picture is complex. Weber's argument brings out that, in Elias's terms, decivilising processes involve civilising components, as well as *vice versa*. Emphasising the part played by the decline of slavery in the decline of ancient culture, Weber shows how, including as it did the transformation of slaves into serfs living not in barracks but in cottages with their own families, this involved an *increase* in mutual identification:

What we have described was a transformation of the fundamental structures of society, a transformation which was necessary and which must be interpreted as a tremendous process of recovery.¹⁰ For the great masses of unfree people regained family life and private property, and they themselves were elevated from the status 'speaking tools' to the plane of humanity. Ascendant Christianity now surrounded their family life with firm moral guarantees; indeed even the laws of the Later Empire for the protection of peasants' rights acknowledged the unity of the unfree family to an unprecedented degree.

It is also of course true that at the same time a part of the unfree population sank to a position equivalent to serfdom, and the civilised aristocracy of Antiquity was barbarised.

(Weber 1896/1976 : 410)

All this serves as a reminder that one should not expect everything suggested in the right hand column of the summary Table to show up in a mechanical and linear way. The coexistence of civilising and decivilising trends certainly complicates the problem of interpretation. For example, Tainter (1988 : 6) points out that the classical flowering of Chinese culture took place precisely in the aftermath of the collapse of the Western Chou. But this is less surprising than it seems at first glance. For the period of the Warring States (c. 400–221 B.C.) which followed the Chou, like the period of the 'elimination contest' in medieval Europe, was for all its turbulence one in which centripetal, integrating forces were in the ascendant, with gradual centralisation of power and the formation of great courts; and some of the socio-cultural developments of that period in China bear a resemblance to those in Europe a millennium and a half later documented by Elias (cf. Gernet 1982 : 62–100).

The study of decivilising processes over several generations need not be confined to cases of final and unreversed total collapse. Cases where subsequent recovery occurred are also relevant. For instance, the Thirty Years War had a prolonged effect on German life and culture for several generations before the recovery in the eighteenth century. Contemporaries depict a coarsening of manners and culture which persisted for some time, quite apart from the material, economic and political consequences of the war. Another interesting case may prove to be the Wild West, ironically because opinion among historians emphasises how relatively well social order and 'civilised behaviour' held up. (One must not forget, though, that the extent of mutual identification was in general not sufficiently wide to include the Indians – but then one would not expect it to be as strong across the boundary of a state society.) But the relatively high persistence of 'civilised' standards is what makes the case interesting. When people migrate into an area where the state apparatus is, at least temporarily, less effective, where the strength of *Fremdzwänge* is less and danger levels are higher, they themselves have generally been socialised in conditions where this was not the case. So, if the Wild West was not all that wild, it may throw some light on humans' capacity to 'run on their batteries' of self-constraints for some time. And that in turn may throw some light on the dynamics of a situation – like the decline of the Roman Empire – where the rise in the danger level was not a merely short-term blip.

Conclusion

One aim of this paper has been, through the pages of *International Sociology*, to draw the attention of a worldwide sociological audience to the wide-ranging and provocative work of Norbert Elias. Though originally developed through research on the development of manners among the secular upper classes in European history, his theory of civilising processes demands comparative research and testing in other historic cultures. Another direction in which the theory may be tested and extended is through the idea of decivilising processes. Some of the issues involved have been raised in relation to research on four possible instances of decivilising processes: the so-called 'permissive society', long-term and recent trends in the incidence of violence, the case of Nazi Germany, and longer-term processes of decline in social complexity.

Notes

1. In fact, especially in his more recent works, such as *Über die Zeit* (1984) and *Humana Conditio* (1985), Elias has spoken of civilising processes on a third level, that of humanity as a whole. The distinction is explained most clearly by Goudsblom (1984); see also Mennell (1989 : 200–24). Goudsblom's own essays on the domestication of fire (1987) and on the emergence of priests and warriors in agrarian societies (1989b, 1989c) are examples of theories pitched at this third level.

2. My interest in decivilising processes in fact arises out of criticisms that have been made of Elias's theory of long-term civilising processes. The four principal lines of criticism

are: 1. criticisms from the viewpoint of cultural relativism; 2. criticisms from the argument that there are 'stateless civilisations'; 3. the argument from the 'permissive society'; and 4. the 'barbarisation' argument. The first two lines of criticism emanate especially from anthropologists. I have dealt with them at length elsewhere (Mennell 1989 : 227-41). Here I want to concentrate on the third and fourth criticisms, which raise the most interesting questions in relation to the problem of direction. They have in common that they are both concerned with apparent reversals in the main trend of the process Elias traces through European history, and appear to cast doubt on the validity of his explanation of that process.

3. For a more detailed discussion, see Mennell (1989), especially Chapter 4.

4. See Stone and Mennell 1980 : 36, 102-6.

5. This paragraph needs to be understood in the context of Elias's theory of knowledge and of 'involvement and detachment'; see Elias (1987) and Mennell (1989 : 158-99). Elias's writings on Germany from medieval times to the present have recently been collected in the volume *Studien über die Deutschen* (1989). See also the excellent recent thesis by Jonathan Fletcher (1988).

6. I am alluding here to Elias's theory of established/outside relationships. See Elias and Scotson (1965), Mennell (1989 : 115-39).

7. Johan Goudsblom (1989c : 81, 132-3 n.) neatly juxtaposes strikingly similar descriptions of such treatment of enemies from the *Iliad* and from Winston Churchill's account (in *My Early Life* [1930]) of his participation in British operations against the Afghans in the 1890s.

8. A third set of questions should not be overlooked: whether the possible loss of certain learned psychological qualities and behavioural capacities – for example, any tilting of the balance back away from self-constraints, any associated decline in the general capacity for detour behaviour and the exercise of foresight, and any decline in the breadth of mutual identification – may contribute to structural decline once it has started.

9. The passage illustrates the difficulty of using 'civilisation' in the technical sense Elias wishes to employ; here the translator has used it simply to render the word *Kultur*.

10. Here Weber is perhaps not living up to the highest ideals of *Wertfreiheit*.

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Biographical Note: Stephen Mennell is Professor of Sociology at Monash University, Melbourne, Australia. He read economics at the University of Cambridge and sociology at Harvard University, and his doctorate is from the University of Amsterdam. Until early in 1990 he was Reader in Sociology and Comparative European Studies at the University of Exeter, UK. His books include *All Manners of Food* (1985), *Norbert Elias, Civilisation and the Human Self-Image* (1989) and *Human History and Social Process* (with Johan Goudsblom and E.L. Jones, 1989).

Address: Dept. of Anthropology & Sociology, Monash University, Clayton, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia 3168.