

Workshop on Norbert Elias

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Norbert Elias, 1897–1990

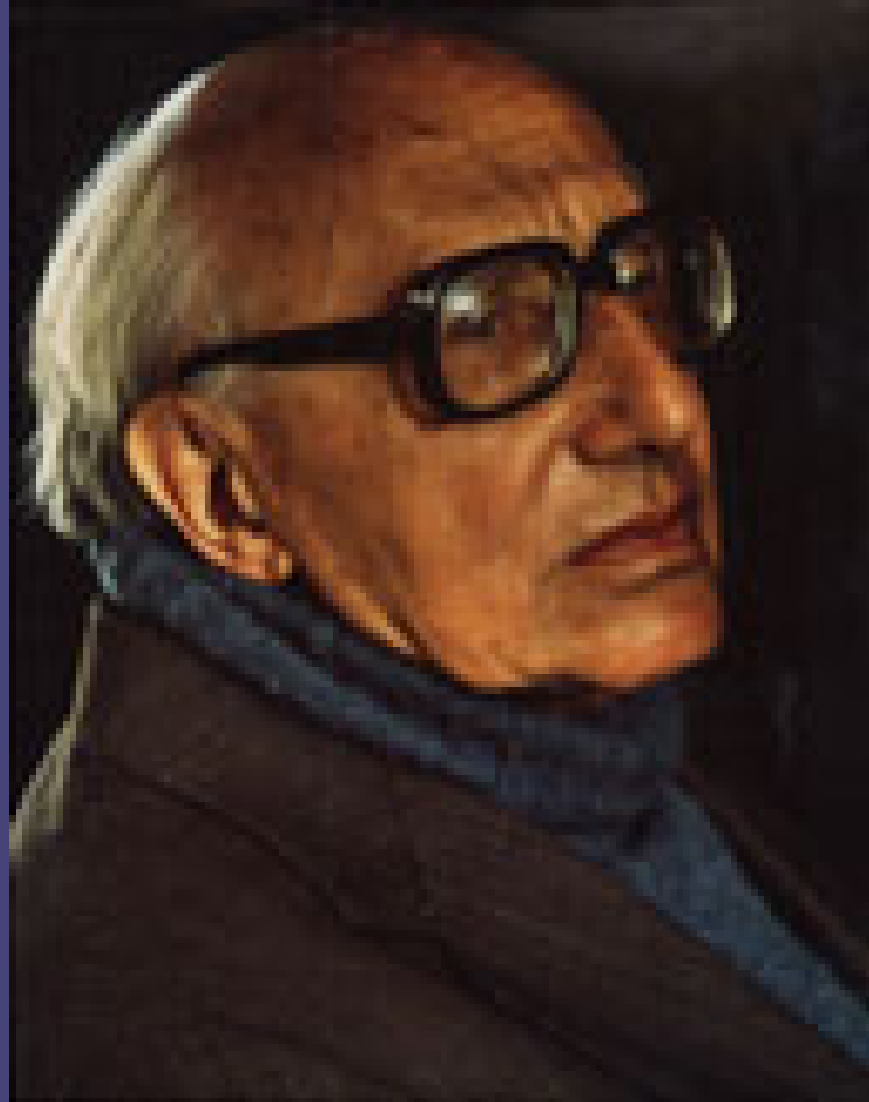
Two peculiarities of his reputation:

- Recognition came right at the end of his life – so he's in a sense a 'more recent' figure than his dates imply
- Though he called himself a sociologist, his work is much wider than conventional sociology today, and he often seems to attract more interest from scholars outside his own discipline

His life-story is relevant to understanding these peculiarities, and his work in general



Who was Norbert Elias?



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Who was Norbert Elias?

- Born 1897 in Breslau, which was then in German Silesia, now the Polish city of Wrocław
- Jewish, but very German family
- Anti-Semitism? – he denied experiencing it much, but probably formative experience
- First World War
- University of Breslau – philosophy and medicine
- The row with Richard Höningswald – certainly formative – rejection of Kantian *a priori* led to rejection of philosophy *per se* – ‘post-philosophical’ sociology – chains of generations



Who was Norbert Elias?

- Great German inflation 1922
- *Freikorps* street fighting, instability of Weimar Republic
- In meantime, Elias went to Heidelberg *as a sociologist*, not philosopher
- Alfred Weber, Karl Mannheim
- Frankfurt and the Frankfurt School
- Hitler, 1933: Elias witnessed violent takeover of city and university



Who was Norbert Elias?

- Exile in Paris, then London – poverty
- All this throws a different light on his theory of “civilising” processes
- *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* – written in London, published in Basle in 1939, but not published in English (*The Civilizing Process*) until 1978–82
- Really sense of civilisation as a thin and fragile veneer
- His mother died in Auschwitz



Who was Norbert Elias?

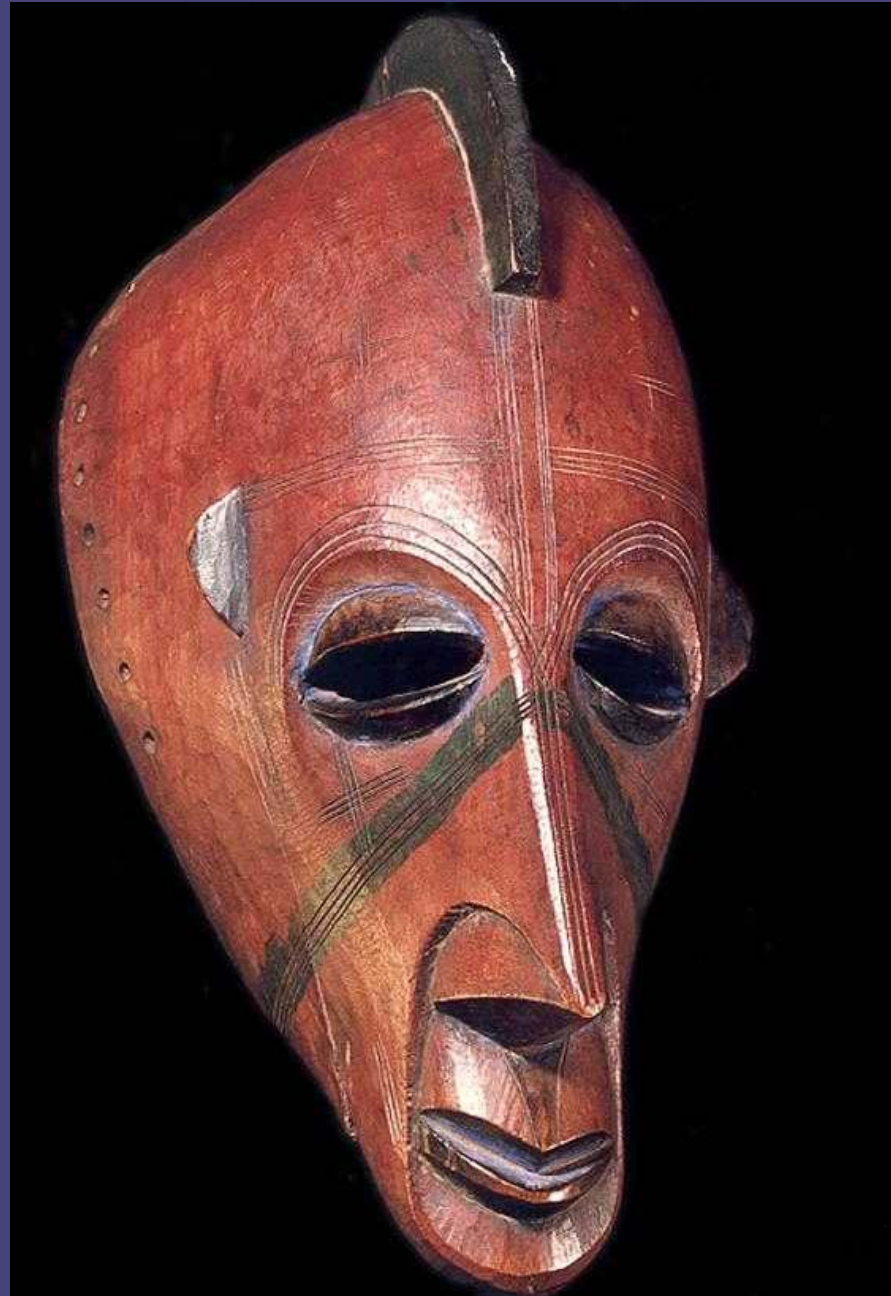
- LSE, internment etc.
- Precarious living as extra-mural lecturer
- Group Analysis – important school of psychotherapy
- Finally, at age of 57, obtained job in minor British university, Leicester, in 1954



Who was Norbert Elias?

- Leicester years: development of theory of knowledge and the sciences (involvement and detachment)
- And pioneered the sociology of sport, with Eric Dunning
- Professor in Ghana, 1962–64 – collection of African art – insightful writings on art too







Who was Norbert Elias?

- Fame grew after reissue of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* and first publication of *Die höfische Gesellschaft* in German, in 1969 – but a decade later in English
- Then a dozen other books, and around 100 articles – see Bibliography handout



Why *The Civilizing Process*?

- What was the fundamental sociological problem that Elias wanted to help solve when he began the research on manners and state formation in Europe that led to *The Civilizing Process*?
- How human habitus *changes* over many generations – in this case, a mere 500 years in Europe. (Later he was interested in far longer processes – human development as a whole.)
- The *e-coli* of civilising processes!



Why *The Civilizing Process*?

- Habitus is 'second nature' – learned social standards of behaviour *and feeling* = 'historical social psychology'
- 'The way in which individual members of a group experience whatever affects their senses, the meaning it has for them, depends on the standard forms of dealing with, and thinking about, these phenomena gradually evolved in their society'
- He said that in connection with the growth of knowledge, but it also applies to changing habitus



Why The Civilizing Process?

- The idea of changing human habitus often causes a negative reaction (especially from anthropologists, who are still collectively recovering from being the handmaidens of colonialism)
- Consequence has been an orthodoxy that Wittfogel called 'developmental agnosticism'



Why The Civilizing Process?

- But remember a remark by Kluckhohn and Murray in 1948:
“Every person is in certain respects
(a) like every other person
(b) like some other people
(c) like no other person”
- Every individual process of socialisation into prevailing social standards of behaviour, feeling and thinking is also a process of individualisation of those social standards



Outline of *The Civilizing Process*

- Book originally in two volumes:
 - I: changes in the behaviour of the secular upper classes in the West
 - II: State formation and civilisation
- Each volume contains two parts, thus:
 1. On the sociogenesis of the concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture' – *'emic' level*
 2. Civilisation as a specific transformation of human behaviour – *'etic' level*
 3. Feudalisation and state formation
 4. Synopsis: towards a theory of civilising processes



Part 1: The concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

- '*Civilisation*' is a controversial word – shot through with 'value-judgements'.
- We use it as a term of self-appraisal – that is, we like to see ourselves as 'civilised'.



Part 1: The concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

What does it mean, to claim we are 'civilised'?

- polite, good-mannered, considerate to others
- clean, decent, hygienic
- humane, gentle, kind
- restrained, even-tempered, not violent



Part 1: The concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

- By the nineteenth century, European people had come to describe themselves as civilised, and to see themselves as 'superior' to other people whom they described as 'primitive' or 'savage' or 'barbaric'.
- They also came to think of themselves as *inherently, innately* 'civilised'.



Part 1: The concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

- In fact, there was nothing *inherent* about their ways of behaving and feeling (and nothing inherently *superior* either).
- BUT some ways of behaving and feeling had become so deeply habituated, and so taken for granted, that they *felt* innate even to European people themselves.



Part 1: The concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

- They became *unconscious* of the fact that they had *learned* these ways of behaving, and that their standards were the product of a long inter-generational learning process.



Part 2: Manners Books

- Part 2 of Elias's book deals with the way *manners* had changed over the centuries, as they were depicted in 'manners books' from the 13th to the 19th century, in Germany, France, Italy and England.
- That also means changing *feelings*, emotions



Part 2: Manners Books

- These books were addressed to the upper classes
– to courtiers and would-be courtiers, then later to bourgeois groups. (Not to the *hoi polloi*!!)



Part 2: Manners Books

So it comes as a shock to find what they discussed, and obviously *had to* discuss:

- table manners
- 'natural functions'
- blowing one's nose
- spitting
- behaviour in the bedroom



Part 2: Manners Books

Trajectory is:

- Medieval books set out some basic rules (*no zero-points*), but briefly and not change much.
- From Renaissance, rules become more elaborate, *more* is said.
- Later, less needs to be said, and some things *cannot* be said.



Part 2: Manners Books

EXAMPLES:

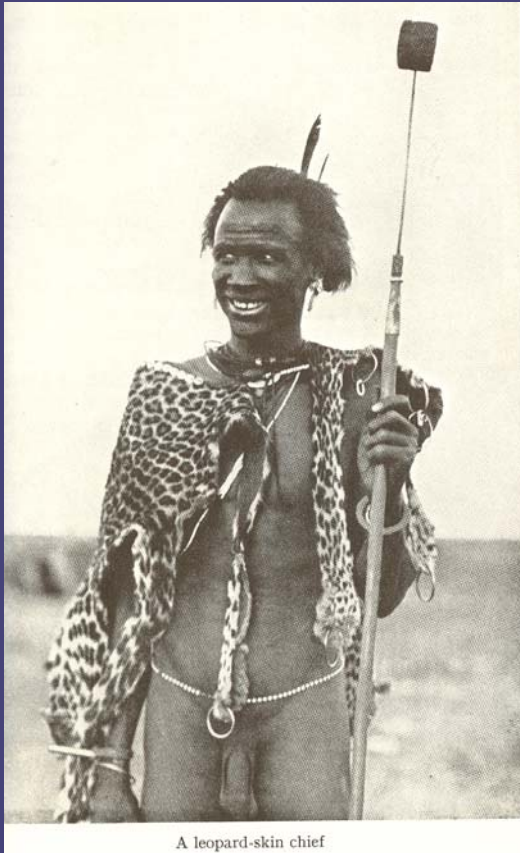
- Table manners
- Natural functions (= defecation and urination)
- Blowing one's nose
- Spitting
- In the Bedroom (dressing and undressing)



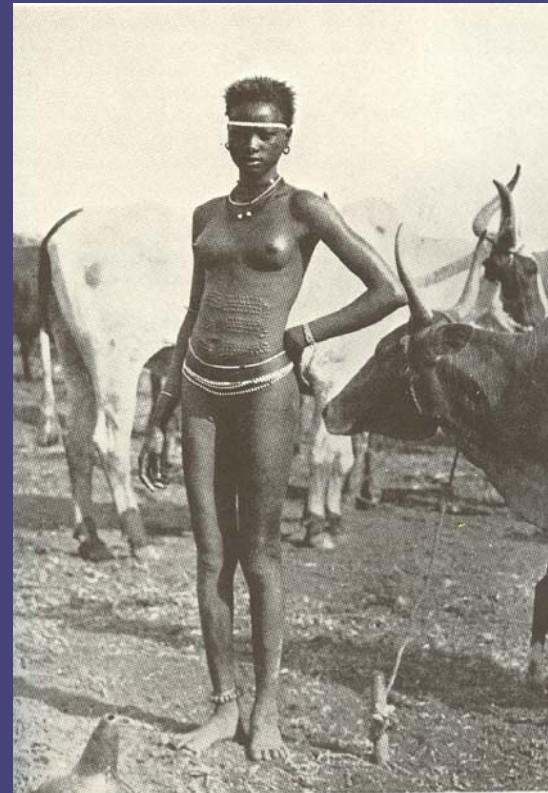
Including the generally puzzling question
of nakedness ...



Among the Nuer (Evans-Pritchard, 1920s) ...



A leopard-skin chief

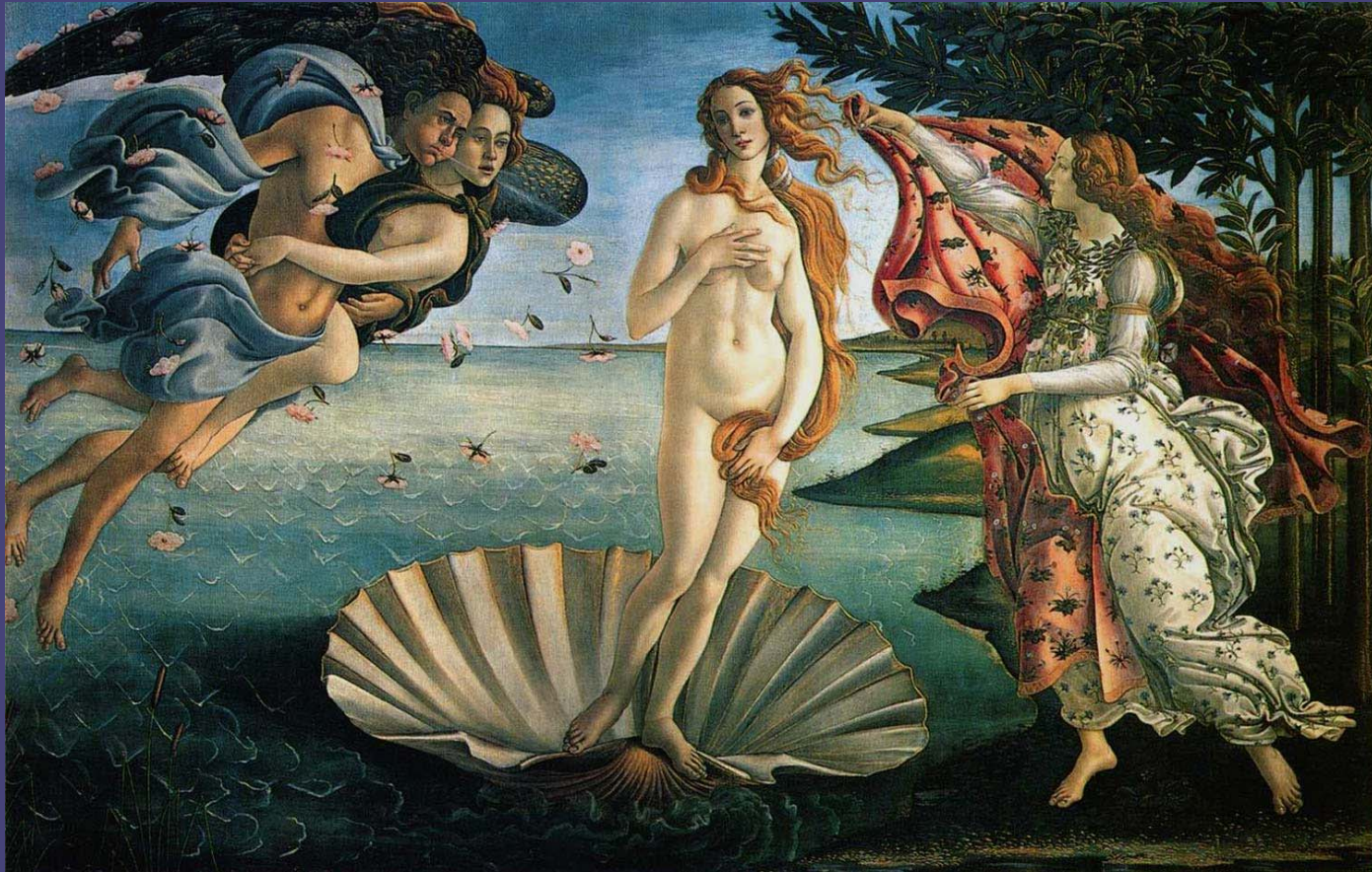


Girl in kraal (Eastern Gaajok)

And in medieval Europe ...



Or Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*



... including the puzzling question of
sexuality ...





Part 2: Manners Books

More generally, why study 'outward bodily propriety'?

- Because ALL human societies have some rules or standards about how these biological needs are handled.
- Because all human infants are born in the same emotional condition – the lifetime point of departure is always the same.
- And, therefore, when the social standards for dealing with these matters change over time, the changes are easy to track



Part 2: Manners Books

- The overall trend: a sequential order of development:
- People became aware of more things being forbidden. Caxton (late 15th century):

Thingis whilom used ben now leyd aside

Thingis sometyme alowed is now
repruid



Part 2: Manners Books

- 'An invisible wall of affects [emotions] growing up between people's bodies.'
- 'They saw that they were naked, and were ashamed.'
- 'Advance of the threshold of shame and embarrassment [or repugnance]'



Part 2: Manners Books

- Activities moved *behind the scenes* of social life
- and, in a sense, behind the scenes of *mental* life too – repressed into the unconscious.



Part 2: Manners Books

Explaining the trend: reasons for the changes:

- *Not* 'material' reasons.
- *Not* reasons of health and hygiene
 - “Reason” is not the motor of the civilising of ... behaviour’ – *contra* Max Weber
- But significance of 'reasons of respect'.



Part 2: Manners Books

- Only quite late in the process do standards come to apply to everyone and in all circumstances.
- It isn't a question simply of *more* self-control
- Note that earlier societies often had areas of *extreme* self-control – native Americans, ascetic monks, etc.



Part 2: Manners Books

- Standards gradually come to be
more even
more automatic
more all-embracing



Has the civilising process gone into reverse?

- BUT, if that was the long-term trend, how can we explain the apparent reversal in 'Permissive Society'?
- This question has been dealt with in detail by Cas Wouters – key idea is 'a highly controlled decontrolling of emotional controls'



Part 3: Fear, Danger and Violence

- The civilising process, evident in the changing contents of manners books, can also be seen in changing social standards governing *aggressiveness, violence and cruelty*
- The advance of the threshold of repugnance towards violence
- Has violence changed too since the Middle Ages?
 - see Slide 3 from *Mittelalterlicher Hausbuch*





Part 3: Fear, Danger and Violence

- 'Is Man Aggressive?' – not a static question – this too changes over time according to social circumstance
- Early Middle Ages – most of secular upper class were leaders of armed bands. They had little other social function but to fight. They loved it.
- Mutilation of prisoners, rape, pillage.



Part 3: Fear, Danger and Violence

- Later, increased survival chances from self-restraint even on the battlefield – increasing military discipline.
- Public executions and torture. (See account of public dismemberment at beginning of Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.)
- Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering*, 1984
- Later still, spectatorship, 'mimetic' pleasure.

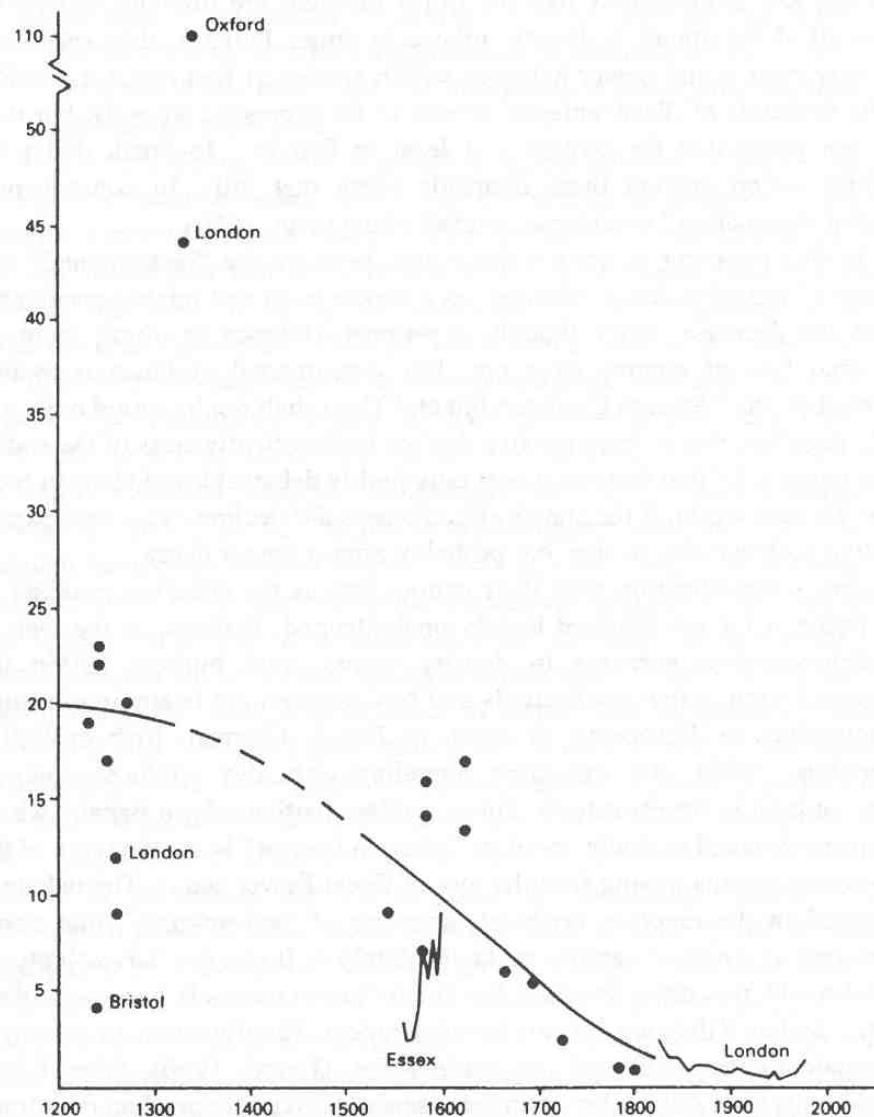


Part 3: Fear, Danger and Violence

- Long-term incidence of violence seems generally to be down (see slide)
- Further discussion: see Mennell, *The American Civilizing Process*, chapter 6



HISTORICAL TRENDS IN VIOLENT CRIME IN ENGLAND*



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

Part 3: Fear, Danger and Violence

- The link to state formation:
‘If, in this or that region, the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area people are *forced* to live at peace with one another, the moulding of the affects and the standards of the demands upon the management of emotions are gradually changed as well.’
(Elias)



Part 3: State formation processes

- What is a state?
- Max Weber defined a state as:
‘an organisation which successfully upholds a claim to successful rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence’
(*Economy and Society*, vol. I, p. 54)



Part 3: State formation processes

- Spiral process: pacification promotes trade, economic growth, growth of towns, yielding taxes, supporting more effective administration, better armies, bigger wars, bigger pacified territories ... and so on.



Part 4: Bringing it all together

- How are 'civilising' changes in habitus linked to state formation (and other 'macro' processes)?
- Diminishing danger (within a pacified territory) diminishes fear, which makes possible greater emotional detachment and greater control over impulses
- Central idea of lengthening chains of interdependence



Part 4: Bringing it all together

Component part-processes include

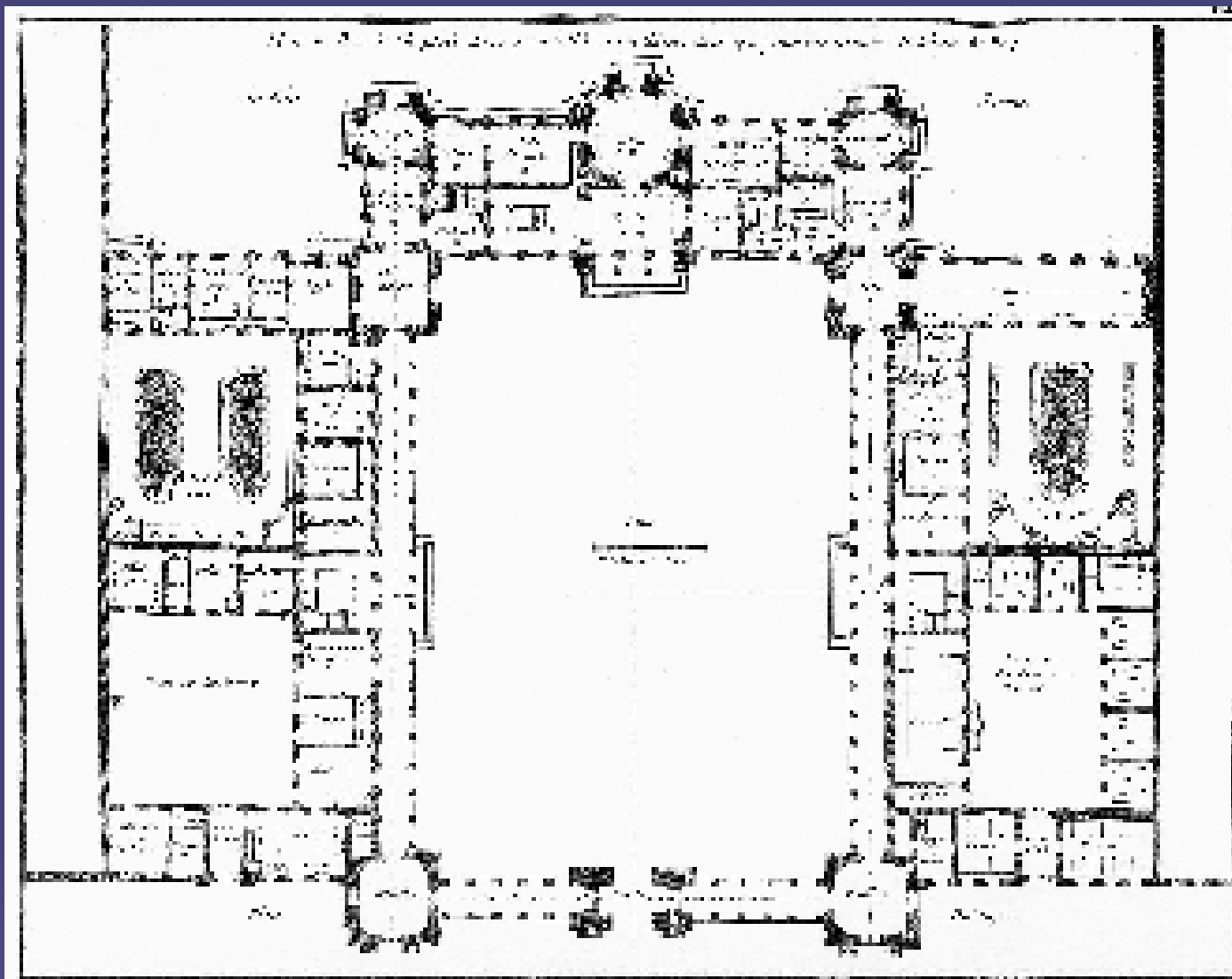
1. The social constraint towards self-constraint
(conversion of *Fremdzwang* into *Selbstzwang*)
2. Spread of the pressure for foresight
3. Diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties
4. Taming and 'courtisation' of warriors
5. Muting of drives: psychologisation and rationalisation
6. Shame and repugnance
7. Increasing pressure from below



The Court Society, 'historical social psychology', and the arts

- Courtiers at Versailles under Louis XIV
- Demanding standards of self-constraint reflected in culture: drama of Corneille and Racine, art of Watteau, gardens of Le Nôtre
- Begins from 'the structure of the dwelling' – plan of a *palais*, from the *Encyclopédie*





The Court Society, 'historical social psychology', and the arts

- See also Elias, *Mozart: the **Sociology** of a Genius* (originally subtitled 'Bourgeois Artist in Court Society')
- And Bram Kempers, *Painting, Power and Patronage* (London: Allen Lane, 1992)
- Olle Edström, *A Different Story: Aesthetics and the History of Western Music* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2008).



Theoretical Objections

1. The 'barbarisation' argument (Bauman, *Modernity and the Holocaust*) – see Elias, *The Germans*
2. The 'permissive society' argument – see Wouters, *Informalization and Sex and Manners*
3. The argument from cultural relativism
4. The argument from 'stateless civilisations'



Knowledge and the Sciences

- How is the theory of civilising processes related to a theory of knowledge, and of sciences (in the plural)?
- Think all the way back to Elias's dispute with Hönigswald
- Need a theory of knowledge that 'steers between the Scylla of philosophical absolutism and the Charybdis of sociological relativism'
- Key problems:
 - 'Objectivity'
 - The *growth* of knowledge



Involvement and Detachment

- Weber – *Wertfreiheit*
- Elias says 'objectivity' not matter of heroic individual psychology, but of the *social development of standards of emotion management*
- In other words – an aspect of a long-term *civilising process*
- Involvement–Detachment *continuum*



Involvement and Detachment

'One cannot say of a man's outlook in any absolute sense that it is detached or involved (or, if one prefers, "rational" or "irrational", "objective" or "subjective"). Only small babies, and among adults perhaps only insane people, become involved in whatever they experience with complete abandon to their feelings here and now; and again only insane people can remain totally unmoved by what goes on around them.'



Involvement and Detachment

- Neither 'psychological' nor 'social' – not cause and effect
- Rather:

'The way in which individual members of a group experience whatever affects their senses, the meaning it has for them, depends on a the standard forms of dealing with, and thinking about, these phenomena gradually evolved in their society'



Involvement and Detachment

- E.g. distinction between living and non-living things
- Highly 'reality-congruent' – it works consistently – but it didn't always exist



Involvement and Detachment

- Some scope for individual variations in emotional reaction to thunder, fire, illness – but in scientific societies, the *concepts* that all individuals use embody high degree of detachment – ‘lightning’ ‘tree’, ‘disease’, ‘electricity’, ‘cause’, ‘time’, ‘organism’.
- Not much scope for animism – but more in ‘society’ than in ‘nature’



Fantasy and Reality

- Lifetime civilising process: for children everywhere, the distinction between fantasy and reality is more blurred than for adults
- We learn the distinction between fantasy and reality, like other knowledge, in accordance with the *public* standard reached in our society
- And in scientific–industrial society, this public standard is very clear and rigid



Fantasy and Reality

- But the 'magical–mythical' mode of experience does not cease to exist – it endures in what Freud called the 'unconscious'
- And it comes nearer to the surface in some areas – such as politics – than in others



Science as a Detour via Detachment

- Situation of danger: Edgar Allen Poe's story 'A Descent into the Maelstrom'
- Principle of emotion management
- Science involves 'detour via detachment' – construction of a 'theory' by the brother who survived



Science as a Detour via Detachment

- Detour behaviour = 'deferred gratification'
- Essential element in 'rationality' – guiding of action by means of symbolic representation of the connection between present means and future ends
- Early examples: tool making, hunting, control of fire



Growth of the Sciences

- Pursuit of 'universal laws of nature' e.g. Boyle's Law – apparent utter emotional detachment
- But do these 'eternal laws' apply outside the physical sciences? – problem of 'physics envy' – atomistic fallacy
- Elias's 'model of models'
- 'Levels of integration' – Needham, Huxley, Waddington



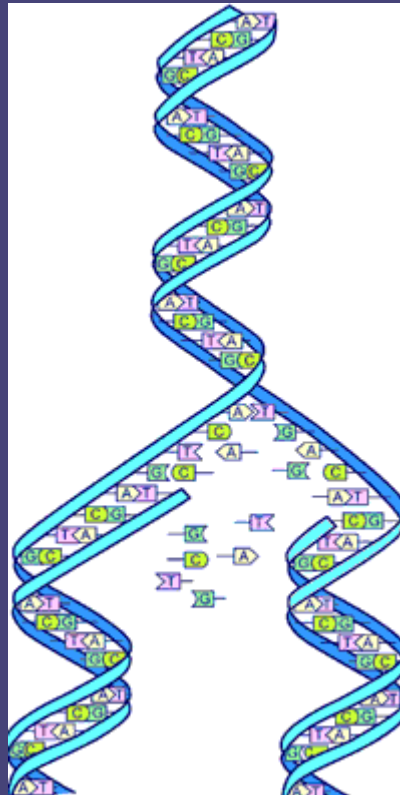
Growth of the Sciences

- Complexity of integration increases up the hierarchy of the sciences:
- 'Universal laws' apply to congeries (loose integration), reversible like Boyle's Law
- Chemistry – 'structure theories' (three dimensions – sugar $C_6H_{12}O_6$, many varieties



Growth of the Sciences

- Or Crick & Watson's 'double helix' of DNA



Growth of the Sciences

- Biology – process theories in 4 dimensions (space & time in evolution) – not universal, not reversible – much higher level of integration – growth, development
- By extension, society still more complex:
- Needs process theories in *5 dimensions* – space, time, *experience* (or the *symbolic* dimension)



The Social Sciences

'Objects' are also 'subjects'. Difficulties:

- Double distancing – but capacity for that itself grows over time as social process
- 'Structured processes of change' – yet no-one is planning – interweaving of interdependent people
 - From plans arising, yet unplanned
 - By purpose moved, yet purposeless

