

Civilizing Processes

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The terms “process of civilization” and “civilizing processes” are associated with the writings of Norbert Elias (1897–1990), and since his death with the active international research tradition known as “figurational” or “process sociology.” The idea was first developed in Elias’s early magnum opus, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (1939), now available in a definitive English edition as *On the Process of Civilisation*, vol. 3 of the *Collected Works* (2012). Older editions of the book were published under the title *The Civilizing Process*—but that is slightly misleading because, although the book is a study of long-term social development in Europe, Elias never intended to imply that there was just one, European, civilizing process.

The theory of “civilizing processes” in the technical sense is not what specialists in race and ethnicity might imagine it to be. It is a theory of the changes brought about in people’s social habitus in the course of long-term intergenerational processes of social development, particularly through changing power relations—at every level, from the power ratios between men and women or parents and children through to the power balances within a state or in the international arena. It is neither a celebration of the triumph of the west nor a Victorian theory of inevitable “progress” (see Liston and Mennell 2009). It does, however, have a great deal to do with *explaining* how western people came to have a sense of their superiority. They came to see their own standards of behavior and feeling as *innately* superior, and had forgotten how

those standards had changed through many generations of their own ancestors. Elias explores the processes and stages of development through which they had to *become* as they now were. And this is relevant to the use they made of ideas of their own “civilization” in forming their colonial empires. Through careful study of empirical evidence recorded in the manners books, paintings, literary works, and other historical documentation that had survived since the Middle Ages in European societies, Elias traces changes in standards of acceptable behavior (and feeling) over many generations. But he emphasizes that on no account must the European Middle Ages be regarded as a “zero point”; there are no absolute beginnings, no “uncivilized” societies. Elias does not dispute that different kinds of societies develop their own patterns of acceptable modes of social behavior at their own pace, and are affected by different worldviews.

What seems to be most peculiar to the European civilizing process is the hiding behind the scenes of what has gradually come to be considered distasteful. The rise of the number of taboos concerning many basic aspects of everyday social life is the perfect indicator of this. The thresholds for the feelings of shame, embarrassment, and repugnance involving the “carnal” functions of the human body—such as eating, defecating, and sleeping—have been extended and moved “behind the scenes” while, through social competition, increased discretion and self-restraint came imperceptibly forward to the “front stage” of social life as a “badge of superiority.” Especially from the Renaissance onward, socially elite groups adopted more and more elaborate customs, behavior, and feelings, which, through the complex webs

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of interdependence, very gradually became recognized and imitated by those from the lower social strata. Elias speaks of the twin mechanisms of “colonization” (in a figurative sense) and “repulsion”: upper classes disparage the lower orders for lacking the elaborate manners that they themselves have developed, but, when those manners trickle down the social order through imitation, even more elaborate patterns emerge as a means of distinction among the elite.

Elias argues that there is a very strong connection between changes in social and psychological dynamics—between “socio-genetic” and “psychogenetic” processes—in the process of creating and re-creating the new standards and patterns of acceptable behavior, to the extent they become part of the *habitus*, or “second nature,” to people of certain social classes. Elias speaks of “lengthening chains of interdependence,” which, by making more and more people dependent on each other, gradually increase the “social constraint towards self-restraint,” so that self-restraint over impulses operates more unconsciously and automatically. At the same time, longer chains of interdependence broaden the circle of “mutual identification.”

Elias links civilizing processes to processes of state formation—that is, following Max Weber’s definition of a state, the internal pacification of territory and the gradual monopolization of the legitimate use of the means of violence by the state. More habitual standards of restraint over violent impulses depend upon a greater sense of security, safety, and predictability in everyday life within the states.

A mass of empirical data assembled in recent years suggests strongly that the long-term trend in violence within industrial societies is downwards; Steven Pinker, drawing heavily on Elias, has advanced this thesis in his bestselling *The Better Angels of Our Nature* (2011). On the other hand,

Elias stressed that “internal pacification” *within* territorial states has tended to go hand in hand with wars on an increasing scale *between* states. Moreover, even within states, civilizing processes are not “inevitable”; civil wars and genocides are facts of history. Elias discusses “decivilizing processes” in detail in *Studies on the Germans* (2013).

Arising out of the theory of the civilizing processes came another study, by Elias and John L. Scotson—*The Established and the Outsiders* (originally published in 1965)—which is of direct relevance to the study of race and ethnic relations. The book is a study of two socially almost identical working-class communities in Winston Parva, on the outskirts of the city of Leicester in the English Midlands. Leicester, known at the beginning of the twenty-first century as the first British city to be on the brink of having a majority of its population not born in the United Kingdom, was quite different at the time of Elias and Scotson’s study around 1960. The two groups in Winston Parva were both white and working class, differing only in their length of residence. Nevertheless, Elias and Scotson found that the same elements of stereotyping so often encountered in race relations were at play; the “outsiders,” the more recent arrivals (in a newer area of housing), were defined by the longer-term residents as dirty, violent, promiscuous, drunk—just the same supposed qualities as seen by late medieval and early modern upper classes in their internal social inferiors, and just the same labels as often applied by colonizers to the colonized. If these faults were to be found among the newer arrivals, it was among only a tiny minority of families, the “minority of the worst” upon whom the older group based their stereotype. Equally, the older, established group based its own collective self-image on a “minority of the best”—the most “respectable” of their own members. The qualities that constituted

“respectability” were closely connected to those that Europeans had come to perceive as “more civilized.” Here lies the connection with the broader theory of civilizing processes. Elias warns here that we need to look beyond the tempting but superficial notions of prejudice or discrimination, simply because they imply that the problems under study are phenomena occurring on an individual level, problems of relationships among people as individuals. Rather he seeks an explanation for the established-outsider relations in Winston Parva in the longer-settled group’s monopolization of the main positions of power within the small town. He argues that the complexity of this figuration relates generally to the power balances between the two groups, directly affecting each other.

SEE ALSO: Culture, Conceptual Clarifications of; Elias, Norbert (1897–1990) and Established–Outsider Relations; Social Change; Stranger, the

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