

**Review Article:**

**NORBERT ELIAS'S THEORY OF THE CIVILIZING PROCESS**

by M.W. Jackson<sup>1</sup>

The principal thesis of Norbert Elias's **The Civilizing Process** is that human nature has been changed by social life.<sup>2</sup> We have been civilised by a complex interaction of psychological and sociological factors in the last 400 years or so. The single most important consequence of this process has been the increase in our capacity for concentration and discipline as individuals, and thereafter also as collectivities.

Freely admitting that the civilising process had no zero point, Elias contends that it had become explicit around 1550. By that time manners were codified and communicated in etiquette books. With the appearance of these books teaching and learning manners became common and uniform within certain social strata. The consequent transformation was gradual, but great.

In the first instance, manners placed a premium on the control of bodily functions such as urinating, spitting, defecating, eating, and the like. Psychic functions of sexual desire and anger were also brought to book at about the same time. In short, eating and sex evolved from a bestial satisfaction of needs to social rituals in manners.

First Hegel and then Marx realised that biological needs had to be socially satisfied. Hence the concept of a commodity. Elias is not interested in the production of commodities, but he is interested in the manner in which they are used and consumed. Thus he attaches great importance to the changes in cooking that disguised the animal origins of meat. At one time whole roasted animals were presented to diners who proceeded to pull them apart. But then animals were carved after cooking to be served in joints or slices. Sauces were added to mask the strong flavour of wild game.

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<sup>2</sup> **Über den Prozess der Zivilisation: Soziogenetische und Psychogenetische Untersuchungen**, 2 volumes, Bern: Francke Verlag, 1969 [1938] translated as **The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners**, Volume I, E. Jephcott, trans., Oxford: Blackwell, 1978 and **State Formation and Civilization**, Volume II, E. Jephcott, trans., Oxford: Blackwell, 1982.

In a change like this Elias sees the evolution of human nature from the natural to the social.

Although a variety of contemporary writers like the libertarian Robert Nozick and the feminist Germaine Greer have accepted John Locke's premise that each individual owns her or his own body, Elias is the only theorist to have worked out the programmatic implications of that premise. His fundamental insight is that at some time individuals began to be charged with the responsibility of managing and controlling their own bodies and psyches. Defecating in a stairwell or exploding into violent fits of temper were accepted as natural facts like wind or rain. It never occurred to anyone that these functions could be controlled, still less that they should be controlled. If some control had always been exercised over these functions, it increased greatly and spread widely in Renaissance Europe, according to Elias. In time defecating and urinating left the public realm for the private. First nose picking was banished from the table. Then it became *de rigueur* to disguise it as nose blowing. Shirt sleeves, coat tails, table-cloths, and curtains were no longer used for nose blowing. The handkerchief was invented and gradually accepted as an etiquette for its use was devised. Spitting has pretty much been eliminated as a need. Farting is scarcely tolerated. While Erasmus devoted much attention to when and where all of these bodily functions should and should not be done, today Debrett's *Etiquette and Modern Manners* has nary a word of them.<sup>3</sup> Controlling these bodily functions is so deeply ingrained in our culture that children are well versed in them by the age of 5. If a person thinks we have no manners today it is because we are so well mannered in so many ways that it is taken for granted. The "affect control" that these manners required in Elias's theory was the seed from which have grown<sup>4</sup> the highly complex and differentiated societies of today.

Note that Elias's argument is not just that the content of manners has changed, nor even that the scope of manners has increased, though he does argue these two points. But in addition he argues that manners required an ever greater control of the individual's body and psyche. Increasing control was a side effect of changing and growing manners of far greater significance than any fashion manners.

During the period when manners were undergoing development, improvements in transportation, safety of travel, and communication meant that people no longer lived

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<sup>3</sup> E. Donald, *Debrett's Etiquette and Modern Manners*, London: Pan, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> *The History of Manners*, pp 70-71 ff

out their lives in primary and secondary groups that changed only with birth and death. Travel brought strangers together. Communication made cooperation practical. Transportation made it possible to find markets for local surplus. To meet and do business with strangers made self-discipline necessary along with a perception of and deference to the interests of others. Of course, Elias acknowledges that some measure of affect control had always existed. His point is that it became a self-conscious occupation. The "medieval men", whom Marc Bloch described in *Feudal Society* as having "little control over their immediate impulses", became extinct.

On Elias's showing manners are autonomous. In *The History of Manners* Elias offers an extensive review of the etiquette literature from about 1500 to 1800. Nowhere in these books nor in related sources does he find so much as a hint that manners, say at the table, were advocated because of any real or imagined knowledge of hygiene. Tableware originated, proliferated, and differentiated as a means to display the wealth and refinement of its possessor, not as the means to curb the spread of germs. Concealing one's age, complexion, and emotions behind a mask of cosmetics and courteous banalities provides a similar proof. As Europe passed from the age of warrior-knights to the age of absolutism, manners became the basis of social status.

The knife symbolizes this transition from medieval knight to refined courtier. When whole roasted animals were *haute cuisine*, each man's knife was the only tableware. In the anarchical rush to cut off the best parts of a carcass diners often cut something off each other as well. Such incidents were bad enough within a family or a courtly entourage, but they were a disaster within a group of strangers at an inn. Meal-time accidents often led to murder and mayhem. A sudden move for one's knife just as a neighbour at the table was cutting a joint frequently led to trouble. Only slowly did manners dictate the control of the knife. Today a child learns not to point a knife at another person by the age of 4 or 5. That is a lesson that took Europeans hundreds of years to learn.

As manners became more elaborate so did our need for knives. There followed fruit knives, butter knives, fish knives, steak knives, bread knives, grapefruit knives, desert knives, and the like. Each has its own etiquette. Table settings in some restaurants and at some dinner parties seem to be locked into a competition for the most complicated and elaborate array of knives and of spoons and forks and bowls and plates. The competition is very real, according to Elias. The prize is refinement of manners that peaked in the court of Louis XIV. Manners offered then, as they do now, an arena for peaceful competition among status seekers. Once an etiquette controlling bodily functions was accepted within

the social elite two developments followed. Within the elite the competition went on to other things like tableware, dress and speech. Meanwhile, the control of body and psyche passed down the social strata.

The desire for status once expressed in the martial values of the knight came to be expressed in the refinement of manners. Even if the competition is as intense as it ever was, it is not nearly as destructive and de-stabilising. Moreover, a competition of manners provides a common set of values that all members of a strata may share and that all strata may share to a degree. The elaboration of grand manners at Versailles, Elias argues, did much to strengthen French unity and to weaken that of Germany.

During the heyday of Bourbon splendour at Versailles many German dukes and princes were blinded by the glitter of France. They took the manners of French courtly society as their model. Even those who should have known better like the Duke of Wurttemberg did so, shunning traditional Stuttgart customs in favor of French manners, much to the outrage of the duchy's patricians, bourgeoisie, and peasantry alike.<sup>5</sup> French was spoken. Palaces were planned. One duke even converted to Catholicism, and shortly thereafter began to take mistresses. The German bourgeoisie in Wurttemberg and elsewhere in Germany remained devoted to nationalistic values expressed in language, literature, religion, customs, and mores. They pursued education and learned administration while their betters dreamed of Versailles. When Peter Shaffer's Mozart disparages Italian love in "Amadeus" it is because it was mannered, in contrast to unadorned and therefore honest German love. When Prussia and the Germanies modernised, the bourgeoisie was ready to play its part.<sup>6</sup> In the age of absolutism the German aristocracy and bourgeoisie lived in worlds separated twice over. Not only were they separated as nobles and commoners were everywhere, but they were also separated again by the French manners of the aristocracy. Consequently, a distinctively "German self-image" was a long time in the making and diffusion.

For all of their other differences the French aristocracy and bourgeoisie had the same language, literature, and religion. Elias argues that the French bourgeoisie imitated courtly manners, and Fernand Braudel

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<sup>5</sup> J A Vann, **The Making of a State**, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984, p.173 ff.

<sup>6</sup> H E. Mueller, **Bureaucracy, Education, and Monopoly**, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, pp.145-154

<sup>7</sup> **The History of Manners**, pp 34 and 108

quotes him approvingly on this point<sup>8</sup> Insofar as that is true, the aristocracy and bourgeoisie had the same manners. And there evolved the competition of manners within the bourgeoisie and between bourgeoisie and aristocracy. Archeological evidence of this double competition can be found in **fin-de-siecle** novels like Marcel Proust's **Temps Perdu**. In the genesis<sup>9</sup> of this competition Elias emphasises the genius of Louis XIV.<sup>9</sup> Louis recognized the vanity of the aristocracy, partly because he shared it. He made a conscious effort to manipulate their vanity, encouraging them to compete in the refinement of manners. A flowery speech evolved in which no one ever said what they really thought. Costumes became ever more exotic, elaborate, and expensive. Appearance had to be maintained at all costs. All of this was in deadly seriousness. There was a saying at the time, Elias reports, that many a house destroyed a family.<sup>10</sup> The need to keep up the appearance of a grand **hotel** impoverished many a noble family. Louis was only too pleased to see proud, stubborn, and independent nobles reduced to beseeching him for loans that would never be re-paid.

Elias's analysis suggests many contemporary analogies. One of particular importance to Australia concerns what Louis Hartz has called new societies.<sup>11</sup> Nations founded by European migration are new societies. Each new society must have had periods when its elite, like the German aristocracy and royalty, modelled itself on a foreign example, namely the elite back in the home country. Australia has certainly had long periods when its elite - political, economic, legal, literary, artistic, financial, and so on - identified first with England and then with the U.S.A. If members of the mass were tempted to do so as well, it was more difficult for them. Travelling to England was too expensive and so was purchasing imported English commodities. The addition of post-war migrants, similarly oriented to their old home countries, further complicates the nature of Australian nationalism. With the traditional elite so long oriented to England, with migrants oriented to home, it is hardly surprising that Australian nationalism is negative. It identifies what it is not, taking pride in denouncing ties with England and the U.S.A., ties that are strongly felt here, if not in England or the U.S.A. If Australia is truly multi-cultural, then Australian nationalism will probably

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<sup>8</sup> F Braudel, **The Structure of Everyday Life**, S. Reynolds, trans., New York: Harper, 1981, p.481.

<sup>9</sup> **State Formation and Civilization**, pp.191-201.

<sup>10</sup> **Court Society**, E. Jephcott, trans., Oxford: Blackwell, 1983, p.53.

<sup>11</sup> L Hartz, **The Founding of New Societies**, New York: Harcourt, 1964.

always be negative. Negations are all that the people who happen to live in Australia have in common.

Of course, many others have explained the different developments of France and Germany from the Renaissance to the French Revolution. One of the most recent and well-researched of such explanations is Marc Raeff's **The Well-Ordered Police State: Social and Institutional Change Through Law in the Germanies and Russia, 1600-1800.**<sup>12</sup> Raeff's thesis is that the deliberate design and action of the policy makers of the **Polizeistaat** in the Germanies laid the institutional and cultural foundations for the modern state. While a number of writers, including Elias, have stressed the growth of government as it accumulated functions and the changing class composition of the administrative elite, Raeff contends that the most important change was in the outlook of those who governed, regardless of their class origins.<sup>13</sup> If the traditional outlook of administrators had been limited to reacting to short-term problems, the new outlook Raeff uncovers was to adopt a long-term perspective explicitly geared to social engineering. In his survey of hundreds of **Landes-Ordnungen** Raeff finds many, many statements on the need to create a rational, central, professional authority along with the need to create a citizen who could understand and accept the value of such an authority. This is an original and impressively documented argument that has the added virtue of ascribing autonomy to politics.

However, Raeff's case rests on the letter of the law alone, and not on a study of what actually happened in the **Polizeistaat**. Raeff's exposition of the **Ordnungen** implies a Germany of dynamic, progressive, and enterprising communities forging ahead. Nothing could be further from the truth. During the period of study, Germany consisted largely of moribund remnants of feudalism. In many of the German duchies, principalities, fiefdoms, and states, politics involved little more than sexual liaisons, plans for new palaces, and the hire of mercenaries. The **Ordnungen** neither reflected nor influenced German reality. They were rather like beautiful sermons preached in an empty church. Following the implications of Elias's analysis of Franco-German relations, these **Ordnungen** were yet another German attempt to imitate France. Taken as explications of the attitudes, hopes, and values that underlay earlier developments in France, the **Ordnungen** are very perceptive.

For his part Elias does not attribute the growth of

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<sup>12</sup> (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

<sup>13</sup> Confirmed in Vann, **The Making of a State**, *supra* n 5, p 196

affect control to "a course of conscious, purposive measures"<sup>14</sup> No, these changes, he says, were "unplanned but not unstructured"<sup>15</sup> The trend is always for ever more affect control<sup>16</sup> Despite Elias's disclaimer, his philosophy of history is resonant<sup>17</sup> with Hegel's much maligned remark on the cunning of reason. In time the increase in affect control leads "toward a greater scope for planned intervention"<sup>18</sup> into both the social and individual structures".<sup>18</sup> And so Louis XIV and the authors of the *Ordnungen* planned their interventions.

The control of the natural impulses of the body and psyche makes us capable of ever more intricate and abstract tasks We are able to delay gratifications and to concentrate for longer periods, according to Elias, than our forebearers. These qualities are general now, but once they were extremely rare. This contention of Elias's is borne out in some studies by historians or anthropologists.<sup>19</sup> The example that Elias uses is driving a motor car.<sup>20</sup> Operating a motor vehicle at high speeds down narrow traffic lanes requires concentration and judgement of a higher order. The rigorous self-control required could not be expected of a mediaeval European or contemporary cave dweller. This self-control increases the individual's capacity for a host of tasks and deepens the individual's capacity for each of these tasks Such a well-disciplined person can study a radar screen, monitor the running of a computer programme, peer into a microscope, and the like. As always Elias's insight penetrates into the psychological mechanisms generated by social factors like the automobile.

Those for whom driving has become second nature may find it difficult to appreciate these psychological mechanisms, because they are taken for granted. That is not reason to doubt that they exist. We are seldom aware of our nature - born or habituated.

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<sup>14</sup> *The History of Manners*, p.222 and cf. *State Formation and Civilization*, p.231.

<sup>15</sup> Elias, 'Sociology of Knowledge, I', *Sociology*, 5 (1971), 2, pp.149-68, at p.154.

<sup>16</sup> *The History of Manners*, p.100.

<sup>17</sup> *State Formation and Civilization*, p.231.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p.232.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, II, L. Manyon, trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961, p.411

<sup>20</sup> *State Formation and Civilization*, pp 233-234

If increasing social organisation and new technology has made life and work easier, it has done so at the price of the rigorous self-control required. One of the most succinct comments on the changing nature of work is this:

When he [man] lets nature be worked over by a variety of machines, he does not cancel the necessity for his own laboring but only postpones it, and makes it more distant from nature ... the laboring that remains to man becomes more machinelike; man diminishes labor only for the whole, not for the single [laborer]; for him it is increased rather; for the more machinelike labor becomes, the less it is worth,<sup>21</sup> and the more one must work in that [machinelike] mode.

That was Hegel writing in the winter of 1803-1804, at the end of the period Elias considers in **The Civilizing Process**. If we believe Hegel rather than Elias, work was already exacting a mechanical discipline from unmannered labourers.

One of the most provocative aspects of Elias's work is his readiness to understand the people whom he studies in the terms in which they understood themselves. Ordinarily this is not done in social science, because it is assumed that participants do not have a scientific knowledge of what they are doing, and that a scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge there is.<sup>22</sup> For his part Elias resolutely resists the temptation to project the 19th Century ideas of economics and politics that continue to structure our thought onto 17th and 18th Century Europeans. He does not assume or argue that what really motivated these people, whether they knew it or not, was profit or power. Instead he reconstructs their mental world in which status was an end in itself. Though great sociologists like Max Weber and Thorstein Veblen acknowledge status, in **Court Society** Elias concludes that they regard it as irrational because it involves luxury and prestige which are wasteful and impotent.<sup>23</sup> It is certainly true that sociologists who declare themselves to be taking status seriously as an end in itself are quick to lapse into treating it as a means to an end such as gain.<sup>24</sup> Elias himself together with John Scotson has done an empirical study of an English town to demonstrate the role that status

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<sup>21</sup> G W F Hegel, **First Philosophy of Spirit, 1803/1804**, H.S Harris, ed., and T.M. Knox, trans., Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979, p.247.

<sup>22</sup> Elias, "Sociology of Knowledge, I", **supra** n.5.

<sup>23</sup> **Court Society**, pp. 38, 54 and 102.

<sup>24</sup> For example, Mueller, **Bureaucracy, Education, and Monopoly**, **supra** n 6, p 27



still plays They reported in **The Established and the Outsiders** that they found status was the product of conduct and belief<sup>25</sup> It was not a product of the conventional sociological indicators of education, occupation, income, and religion.

Status based on manners of even the most ordinary kind can have great consequences. Among the many possible literary examples, consider Ken Kesey's novel **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest**. Big Nurse's domination of her charges did not rest on her formal authority or the enforcement of her wardsmen, but on the sense of inferiority she provoked in the confused, frustrated, and excited minds of her patients. She cultivated this sense of inferiority by her well groomed, calm, polite, subdued, hushed, and concerned demeanor. Her very example made her patients feel ashamed. In Elias's terms Big Nurse and her patients shared a common shame threshold produced by their eculturation.<sup>26</sup> Her charges were not far enough gone to have lost this threshold though they were far enough gone to have lost some of their bodily and psychical controls, and the institution denied them other controls over dress, diet, and toilet. They were losing control, but had not lost the shame threshold. Hence, they felt embarrassed and ashamed of themselves as Big Nurse well knew Red McMurphy's challenge was that he was not ashamed of himself. In Kesey's novel as in Raeff's history there is some vindication for Elias, and reading these books in the Elias method adds something to our comprehension of them.

Elias has made me aware of the psychological and sociological mechanisms that undergird the daily routines that I used to take for granted. One example is self-service shopping. My parents had to change to self-service shopping, but I was reared in it. Now we all take it for granted. If we strike a chemist that is not self-service or for some other reason have to wait for service where we have been accustomed to self-service, we feel impatient or, perhaps, resent the inquiries of the staff when we say that we want some eye drops of a certain brand. No doubt economists can explain the value of self-service shopping, but they cannot explain the sociological and psychological interactions that make it work as well as it has for as long as it has. While it may be right to say that now "it costs more to guard it than to put up with a certain amount of thieving", as a character in a Robertson Davies novel says, that does not

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<sup>25</sup> **The Established and the Outsiders**, London: Cass, 1965, p 148.

<sup>26</sup> **Stat Formation and Civilization**, pp 290, 293-294, and 300

explain how it works.<sup>27</sup> Self-service shopping depends on the assumption that "civiliz d peopl " will not do too much shoplifting, as a character in a Nadine Gordimer novel says<sup>28</sup> It also assumes that people know what they want, can identify it by brand name and packaging, select the size of container desired, know how to use the product, know how to store it at home, know which products are for sale in which shop, know what is for sale in the shop and what is not and so do not try to buy the shopping trolleys, know not to eat the products before purchasing (children are excepted from this rule as are people waiting in line to purchase soft drink in a milk bar), know to take their goods to the cashier and wait for a turn, and so on. If all this seems second nature to us now, it is only because we have learned it slowly and unsurely. Two generations ago every one of the points listed above were not assumed. Instead stores were designed to see to them. The sales assistant advised the customer on what was needed to meet a certain need, urged one brand rather than another on the customer for that need, commented on the use and storage of the product, recommended the purchase of a specific quantity, while the store was laid out to keep the goods out of the hands of consumers until the price had been paid, and the information imparted. Imagine how surprised and upset one would be if the cashier at Franklin's advised one to buy mineral water rather than tonic water in view of one's complexion, or the No Frills mineral water rather than another, and in the 750 bottle and not the litre. The functions that were once performed in the shop by the sales attendant are now done through education that equips us to read instructions on packages, and legislation that specifies the information to be put on packages, and advertising, especially on television where the product can be shown and shown in use. But television only works if we watch it for the advertisements and learn from them. That is an art in itself, since everything said in television advertisements cannot, and is not intended to be taken literally. Imagine how surprised the Franklin's cashier would be if one were to hold her responsible for the fact that brand X did not remove a 10 year old grass stain from a lace table cloth, contrary to the advertisement.

In volume two of **The Civilizing Process** entitled **State Formation and Civilization**, Elias offers a rather conventional account of the material conditions of state formation as it eventuated in the age of absolutism. Elias describes the transition of the realm from the private property of the king to the public property of the populace. Elias explains the unification and centralization of the modern state, exemplified by France, as due to an iron law of

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27 R Davies, **Rebel Angels**, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981, p 134

28 N Gordimer, **A Guest of Honour**, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970, p 300

hegemony<sup>29</sup> Rulers will compete with each other for supremacy and the fittest survive in a political Darwinism. The survivor holds a monopoly of power. That law, unqualified, would lead to a world government. Such "a worldwide monopoly of physical force"<sup>30</sup> does not presuppose a single world civilisation. It does however presuppose a civilised world, i.e., a world of people with high affect control. That control need not have been generated by manners at all, still less by uniform manners for Elias does not argue that manners are the necessary means for the development of affect control. His argument is that it was the means that occurred in European history. World civilisation and world government do require a high degree of affect control so that one can meet and treat with all kinds of people, very different from one's self.

Elias finds it difficult to explain the transition of the central monopoly of power of the Darwinian survivor from a private to a public property. He describes the change in this way:

Power first won through the accumulation of chances in private struggles, tends, from a point marked by optimal size of possessions to slip away from the monopoly rulers into the hands of dependents as a whole, or, to begin with, to groups<sup>31</sup> of dependents, such as the monopoly administration.

There is a paradox here: power grows as it is centralised, but it slips away at the same time. Elias emphasises the paradox, but is not explicit in explaining it, yet his theory suggests the explanation needed.

As political power was centralised, as political power enlarged as new functions were assumed by government, power changed. It changed from what Dennis Wrong has called integral power to interscursive power.<sup>32</sup> In a system of integral power initiatives and decisions are the exclusive province of a single party of individual. Hobbes recommended this system in *The Leviathan*. That kind of power is still exercised in certain emergencies.<sup>33</sup> Some political systems are still marked by integral power. The other kind of power

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<sup>29</sup> **State Formation and Civilization**, pp. 95 and 99.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.332.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p.109.

<sup>32</sup> D Wrong, **Power**, Oxford: Blackwell, 1979, p.11.

<sup>33</sup> G van Benthem van den Bergh, 'The Interconnection between Processes of State and Class Formation', **Acta Politica**, 11 (1976), p 309

is interscursive. It exists where the constitutive elements of power like Robert Dahl's skills, willingness, and resources are divided and distributed within the populace.<sup>34</sup> As the integral power of the absolutist monarchs grew, it became interscursive power.

Affect control created a disciplined citizenry. While Bourbon kings unified the realm, this discipline was spread. The power of France waxed, but the power of France's kings waned. Disciplined citizens had more and more social, economic, and political skills. These skills together with a willingness to use the resources available gave ever more people influence within the society. Moreover, it gave them, and others observing, the taste for more power. The more successful the courtly society at Versailles was at causing other strata to imitate it, the less the other strata and regions needed or wanted control from Versailles. Civilised people can and want to rule themselves. The obvious analogy is children. The better and more quickly they are brought up to be self-controlled and self-disciplined, the sooner they will depart from parental control and discipline. In the American edition of *The Civilizing Process* the second volume is entitled *Power and Civility*.<sup>35</sup> To express Elias's argument, as I have interpreted it, I think that title would better be *Civility and Power*. It seems to me that the thesis of Elias's argument is that civilisation (defined as affect control) is power, both for the nation and the individual.

In a brief interpretative essay like this I have tried to think along with Elias without intruding any critical distance. Thus, it is important here at the end to emphasise some of the criticisms that his theory has met.

First, Elias does insist that the history of European civilisation has been progressive. By limiting himself to the period roughly 1500 to 1800 Elias avoids the necessity to comment on the periodic decays of affect control. The decline of ancient Greece and modern Germany into barbarism lie at either end of his history. Elias does, of course, conclude that the development of manners has had its stops and starts, but that hardly seems to describe the slaughter of Melos or Auschwitz (where his mother was murdered). In a similar vein one can ask whether the growth of affect control is always for the best. Even within the epoch to which Elias limits himself, manners had their critics. Molière's *Alceste* and Jean-Jacques Rousseau replying to his erstwhile friend Monsieur d'Alembert both described the hypocrisy and deceit

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<sup>34</sup> R Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis* (4th ed.), Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1984, pp.38-44.

<sup>35</sup> *Power and Civility*, E Jephcott, trans, New York: Pantheon, 1982.

of rarefied manners. Still later Henry James detailed the emotional starvation and suffering occasioned by the limitations of manners in such novels as **The Europeans**. Misanthropes do not detain Elias. Nor does he consider whether a Red McMurphy's anarchism would have precluded Auschwitz. Perhaps disorder bred of affects out of control is better than affect control and more affect control.

Second, Elias may also be taxed for underestimating the degree to which social strata outside court society had manners of their own. His few references to the masses leave them as empty vessels to be filled up with manners trickling down from the elite. There are social historians today who argue that these masses had a rich cultural life that was eradicated by elites who felt threatened by that cultural life.<sup>36</sup> The main vehicle of that eradication was work. Work has been the main contribution of the mass to civility, but it is completely neglected by Elias. Yet since the industrial revolution, if not before, work has been the main teacher of discipline to the bulk of the population and the main foundation for civilisation. Affect control has also produced R.S.I.

Third, like so many scholars, Elias's vision is exclusively secular. Religion is assigned no role in the civilising process. Indeed it is elided altogether from Elias's account of the softening of manners. Consequently, while Elias quotes extensively from the etiquette book of Erasmus, the monastic background that shaped Erasmus and the theological issues that preoccupied him are entirely ignored.

Fourth, the psychoanalytic dimension of Elias's theory cannot be accepted as read. That civilisation is possible only through the repression of our animal instincts is a thesis similar<sup>37</sup> to Sigmund Freud's in **Civilization and its Discontents**. In this book Freud asked if that repression could be reduced now that civilisation had been obtained. Freud raised the question because he thought that the repression that occurred came at the price of neuroses and psychoses. In Freud's theory the ego could not easily accommodate the repression dictated by the superego. The ego's resistance produced mental illness. Apparently for Elias either the ego does not resist the superego and so produces no mental illness or it does but it cannot be changed since repression remains necessary. Neither alternative is satisfactory without some argument and

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<sup>36</sup> For example, Robert Darnton, **The Great Cat Massacre** (London: Allen Lane, 1984)

<sup>37</sup> J Strachey, trans (New York: Norton, 1961), p 6

evidence At the very least stress ought to be noted as a price of civilisation <sup>38</sup>

I have assumed that most readers are unfamiliar with Elias's work and so I have concentrated on introducing some of his central ideas to stimulate interest in his work. My focus has been limited to the most original part of his contribution, namely manners. I have paid much less attention to other aspects of **The Civilizing Process** and ignored entirely his other work on football, music, violence, hierarchy, science and methodology.

Elias's **The Civilizing Process** has had a chequered history Taught by the likes of Rickert, Husserl, Jaspers, and Alfred Weber, Elias worked as Karl Mannheim's assistant at Frankfurt in 1930. There he mixed with Eric Fromm, Paul Tillich, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. Elias left Germany in 1935. A fledgling publisher in Basel courageously decided to publish **The Civilizing Process** in 1938 despite the fact that there was no prospect for the distribution and sale in Germany or Austria of a book by a Jewish exile. Strangely enough the publisher had the book printed in Germany as was his usual practice and delivered to Basel. The advent of the war ended any hope of distribution and sales. In the hope of finding some way to sell the book to exiled Germans in England and the United States the publisher blotted out the "printed in Germany" notation on the title pages of the stacks of the book he was stuck with, but to no avail. Fritz Karker, the publisher, has said that more copies were sent out for review than were sold. <sup>39</sup> Then in the 1960s this book came to the notice of some French scholars, intrigued by Elias's study of the Bourbon court society. A French translation was made in due course. In 1979 the first volume appeared in an English translation with the second in 1982. Since 1979 it has steadily won attention. Between 1969 and 1977 Elias's work was cited an average of fourteen times a year, according to the **Social Science Citation Index**. Between 1978 and 1983 that average grew to fifty-five times a year.

Scholars regularly proclaim the value of multi-disciplinary studies, especially when funding is sought. Too often these same scholars retreat in horror at the sight of a multi-disciplinary work like **The Civilizing Process**. It is a book that does not conform to the conventional distinctions

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<sup>38</sup> Cees Nooteboom, **Rituals**, A. Dixon, trans. (Baton Rouge Louisiana State University Press, 1983 [1980]), p. 123.

<sup>39</sup> W Lepenies, "Norbert Elias", **New German Critique** (1978) 15, pp 58-59 One such review is Franz Borkenau, **Sociological Review**, 30 (1938), pp 308-311 and 31 (1939), pp 450-452

among disciplines In my university's library the German edition has been catalogued as history However, the English translation has been treated as political science The French translation that I have ordered for the library may well be regarded as sociology or psychology. I am quite sure that Elias would agree with the economist William Kapp (though few economists would) that it is better to be interesting than accurate.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> W Kapp, *Toward a Science of Man in Society* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1961), p 206.