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Malešević, S. and K. Ryan, 2012. 'The Disfigured Ontology of Figural Sociology: Norbert Elias and the Question of Violence', *Critical Sociology* 39 (2), pp. 165-181.

## **The Disfigured Ontology of Figural Sociology: Norbert Elias and the Question of Violence**

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### **Abstract**

This article scrutinises Norbert Elias's figural sociology by focusing on its ontological foundations. The analytical spotlight is on the inherent tension between Elias's stance of normative neutrality and detachment, his naturalistic ontology, and an unyielding commitment to directional development. We show how Elias's social theory does not stand apart, as an external observer, from the figurations it seeks to explain. On the contrary, it constitutes its own outside, and this has consequences when it comes to explaining the 'dark sides' of the present, and in particular the social sources of organised violence in modernity. It is our contention that Elias' ontology incorrectly posits violence as the absolute Other of civilisation, so that his theory of the Civilising Process fails to adequately account for the persistence and proliferation of warfare in the modern age.

## **The Disfigured Ontology of Figurational Sociology: Norbert Elias and the Question of Violence**

While the discipline of sociology, or at least 20<sup>th</sup> century sociology, has tended to ignore the study of organised violence, Norbert Elias identified violence as a key constitutive ingredient of social life. His main work on *The Civilising Process* (2000) traces the steady decrease in individual and collective forms of violence to long term processes of expanding external social control, coupled with a gradual internalisation of self-restraint. In *The Civilising Process* Elias examined the development of self-restraint through the study of manners, while in *The Quest for Excitement* (with Eric Dunning, 1986) he examined sport, connecting non-violent contests such as Rugby to the formation of parliamentary politics in Britain, where rival groups learnt to engage with each other less through fear and more through trust. For Elias, violence is one of, if not the most important counterpart to civilisation, so that the overcoming of violent action in both its inter-personal and structural forms is the central feature of the Civilising Process, as is the process of modern state-formation; more specifically, the ways in which the monopolisation of violence has pacified society, which is subsequently regulated less by violent outbursts on the part of individuals and groups, and more by shame, repugnance, and trust – by exercising self-restraint and mutual forbearance. In short, the Civilising Process imposes internal and external constraints on human aggressiveness.

According to Elias, there is an inverse relationship between violence, which diminishes in tandem with the Civilising Process, and a ‘detached’ mode of thinking, which becomes more extensive. The concept of detachment is a key ingredient of Elias’ epistemology, as can be seen from his 1968 Postscript to *The Civilizing Process* (originally published in 1939), where he stages a critique of the social sciences in general, and Parsonian sociology in particular, on the grounds of a tendency to conflate what ‘is’ with what ‘ought’ to be. This was the focal point of his later

work on *Involvement and Detachment* (1987a; also 1987b), where Elias examined what he described as a lack of congruence between the natural and social sciences. Acknowledging that there is always some sort of ‘balance’ or interplay between involved and detached thinking, Elias was of the view that involved thinking is still very much in evidence in the social sciences, and he was attempting to spearhead a movement that would tilt the balance in the opposite direction, thus paving the way for research that would yield ‘reality congruent’ knowledge. In opposing the ‘mingling of what is and what ought to be, of scientific analysis and ideals’, Elias claimed that his approach – exemplified in *The Civilising Process* – pointed toward ‘the possibility of freeing the study of society from its bondage to social ideologies’ (2000: 468). And this would not be without political consequences, for Elias harboured the hope that detached thinking would help us to solve some of our most intractable problems, and in particular the problem of violence. In discussing the historical and cultural significance of detached thinking, Elias presents us with a staircase metaphor:

[T]he staircase model evokes an ascent or descent of human groups from one level to another...What is often registered simply as different types of knowledge, among them the magical-mythical and the scientific types, are connected with each other in the form of a clearly recognizable sequential order of ascent and descent. They represent different phases of a process, different stages in the development of the involvement-detachment balance (1987a: xl).

Elias is here using the figure of the staircase to compare the natural and social sciences, his point being that the social sciences are lagging behind the natural sciences, but they can catch up, and should do so, in order to overcome the problems that result from ‘magical-mythical’ thought. Randall Collins (2009) has characterised the Civilising Process as a trend theory: it describes a developmental process or set of processes that move along a linear track. The image of a

staircase – signifying phases, stages, and a sequential order – complicates this in that it suggests an historical yardstick: at once a means of conducting intra- and inter-cultural comparison and a vantage point that allows for differences to be evaluated. It is this tricky task of steering between commitment and detachment – between prescription and description – that we wish to explore in this paper, moving toward the argument that Elias’ explanatory framework contains within itself a commitment to directional development that prevents Elias from being able to adequately account for a mode of action which is central not only to figurational sociology, but to the modern world: violence. The paper is presented in two parts, beginning with a critical examination of how Elias’ commitment to detachment is also a mode of judgement which is brought to bear on behaviours that disturb the momentum of the Civilising Process. The second part of the paper builds on this, focusing specifically on the question of violence, and on the weaknesses of Elias’ attempt to account for large-scale organised violence.

### **At the Margins of the Civilising Process**

Elias focused on long-term historical processes because he wanted to unplug himself from his lived context – he wanted to ‘tear’ himself ‘away from involvement in present affairs’ (1987a: xxi) in order to get behind the appearance of truth. What lies behind the appearance of truth is not an ultimate and final Truth writ large, but rather ‘object adequacy’, meaning theories and empirical statements that can be systematically tested, that can be verified or falsified, that can be revised, modified, and rejected, either in part or as a whole (1971b: 358). This is the type of ‘detached’ knowledge that can advance in the sense of cumulative development, and is what Elias had in mind when he wrote that he was part of an ‘emancipatory movement among sociologists’ (1987a: 20; 1987b: 225).

Over the course of some fifty years, Elias was consistent in arguing that detachment is the answer to violence – whether this takes the form of inter-state wars, civil wars, or bloody revolutions inspired by ideals of freedom. The scientific attitude of detached thinking is fact-orientated and emotionally neutral: it is the stuff of self-restraint and it is what makes ‘conscious control’ possible (2000: xiv). Involvement on the other hand (i.e. involved thinking) is the stuff of unrestrained emotions, of impulsive behaviour, and it engenders the ‘communal fantasies’ that lead to ‘barbarism’ (1987a: xxiii; 1971a: 162). Knowledge that emerges from detached thought and analysis thus serves a purpose: it offers the possibility of guiding human affairs away from problems of involvement and towards conscious control, and as such, it seems reasonable to suggest that Elias’ sociology is a type of genealogy. Colin Gordon has suggested that genealogical investigations, or ‘histories of the present’, have become ‘one of the traditions of modernity, a significant institution of our culture’ (1986: 76). Elias’s *Civilising Process* is arguably part of this tradition, and can be situated among a corpus of works produced by a generation of German-Austrian exiles. Gordon gathers these under the heading of a ‘semiology of catastrophe’, including Hayek’s *Road to Serfdom*, Polanyi’s *Great Transformation*, and Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Here, history provides a critical vantage point on the present catastrophe, which is not only a type of forensic inquiry into what *has* gone wrong (i.e. the rise of fascism, two World Wars, the Holocaust), but also an investigation of undiagnosed trends and tendencies deemed to be immanent to democracy, and which may portend a totalitarian future (Gordon, 1986: 77-8). We are not suggesting that Elias should be added to this list – his *Magnum opus* is not a history of the present catastrophe, but it is nonetheless born out of catastrophe, the experience of war and exile, of being an (Jewish) ‘outsider’ among the (German) ‘established’ (Mennell 1992: 3-23), and perhaps most importantly, the *Civilising Process* takes up that question which is arguably the special preserve

of genealogy: what are we, and how have we come to be who we are? (Foucault 1984) If Elias' approach to this question is not a meta-narrative of catastrophe, then the question arises as to what type of genealogy it is. Our aim in this section is to use this question to explore Elias' social ontology, which will be approached through a close reading of *The Established and the Outsiders*. This particular study will enable us to zoom-in on the question of how his prescriptive axis of detached-involved thinking intersects with his descriptive axis of established-outsider relations. It is the intersection of these axes that give Elias' genealogical method its distinctive stamp, and it is this analytical grid that frames the question of violence.

In *The Civilising Process*, Elias notes that 'competing members of the established groups have...to make common cause in their endeavour to preserve their distinguishing prestige and their higher status over those pressing from below – still more or less outsiders' (2000: 429-30). In *The Established and the Outsiders* (2008), which Elias wrote with John L. Scotson, this question of group status and distinction is examined in the micro-setting of community power relations. Working between the macro- and micro-levels of analysis in this way, Elias was conducting empirical research with a view to elucidating universal features of human co-existence (2008: 212-213), and to reiterate a point made above, this knowledge was to serve a *purpose*.

The primary research for *The Established and the Outsiders* was conducted by Scotson between 1959 and 1961. Writing an MA thesis under Elias' supervision, the original focus of his research was delinquency in South Wigston, near Leicester. South Wigston was disguised as 'Winston Parva' for the purpose of the study, which developed beyond the initial concern with delinquency to become a more encompassing figurational study. The specific relation under investigation was two working-class communities, with the more common markers of distinction – class, or ethnic, or 'racial' difference – absent. What distinguished the two groups in Winston

Parva was simply the length of time they had resided there. The original village was built during the 1880s, but expansion during the 1930s had seen ‘outsiders’ migrate into the area to occupy new housing stock, which led to the ‘established’ residents developing practices such as gossip to police the boundary between inclusion and exclusion. More specifically, praise-gossip (bestowed by the established on their own people) and blame-gossip (used to exclude the outsiders) were revealed to be one of the key ways in which power was exercised. Elias and Scotson designated these two zones of Winston Parva the Village (the established group) and the Estate (the outsider group), and it was the Estate that was home to ‘a small minority of particularly large and troublesome “problem families”’ (2008: 48). The Estate thus anchored the original research question of delinquency, and is examined by Elias and Scotson in their chapter on ‘Young People in Winston Parva’. Here the ‘unruliness’ of Village youngsters is described in terms of aggressiveness and destructive behaviour – boisterousness, vandalism, fighting: what might be described as low-level violence, and it is this section of the study we wish to focus on, because it yields important insights into how violence is explained within the frame of the Civilising Process.

The central question posed by Elias and Scotson concerns power and exclusion: how/why are the families on the Estate prevented from joining the ranks of the ‘established’ (assuming of course that they desire inclusion)? In answer to this question, the authors explain that ‘the behaviour of parents in disordered families...engendered tendencies of behaviour in their children which led in turn to their rejection when they began to branch out on their own’ (2008: 149). In developing this point, the authors offer an explanation that dovetails with Elias’ theory of the Civilising Process:

The ‘problem families’ of today, are the diminishing remnants of generations of such families – remnants who by a sort of sociological inheritance of certain tendencies of behaviour have



been unable to escape the vicious circle which tends to produce in children of disordered families propensities for forming in their generation again disordered families...The disordered families on the Estate in Winston Parva were a small sample of the backwash in our generation of the greater masses of disordered families in past generations. Their children showed some of the mechanisms of transmission (2008: 151).

This reference to a ‘backwash’ is given a more precise meaning in the claim that ‘throughout the nineteenth century...family disorganisation and law-breaking by young people were more common among the industrial working classes than they are today’ (2008: 150). There is a sudden surge in the historical scope of the analysis at this precise point, pitching the reader into the social turmoil of industrialisation and urbanisation during the nineteenth century. As noted earlier, one important strand of Elias’ theory of the Civilising Process concerns the universality of established-outsider relations, but the theory does not stand apart, like a detached observer, from this type of relation. On the contrary, it contributes to the construction of such a relation by constituting its own ‘outside’. In the case of Winston Parva, as with any figuration, both the analyst and the entire field under investigation are immanent to the Civilising Process – constituted by it and constitutive of its continuance – but conceived of as a ‘backwash’, the ‘problem families’ of Winston Parva are positioned in such a way that they are seen to represent an earlier stage of social evolution: they are at once part of the present while being a residue of the past. Ascending the staircase of detached thinking, the figurational sociologists leave behind those people and forms of conduct that disturb the onward march of order, so that the axis of description and the axis of prescription combine and reinforce each other as a projection that looks to the future, and not simply in terms of ‘onwards’ but also ‘upwards’. When the idea of a linear process (the Civilising Process) is combined with the notion of an ascent (climbing above involved or ‘mythical’ thought), and when everything that might disturb this passage is described

not only as a ‘backwash’, but also as a ‘reversal’ or ‘regression’ (Elias 2000: 445; 1996: 309) – suggesting an historical slippage that pulls backwards against the present – then it is difficult not to conclude that some type of evaluation is at work.

The unruly youngsters of Winston Parva are said to provide evidence of how negative aspects of the past (*disordered* and *disorganised* families) are transmitted and inherited so that they inhabit the present, and here we encounter the Civilising Process’s zero-point. Elias himself insists that the Civilising Process has no zero-point, by which he means no absolute starting point – no line can be drawn through the archive to mark the precise point at which the Civilising Process commences. However, Stephen Mennell provides some clarification on this by making explicit what is otherwise implicit in Elias: ‘there *is* a zero-point in the individual: infants are born in the same emotional condition everywhere and in every generation, devoid of self-restraints’ (2007: 67, original emphasis). The zero-point is human life in its raw, pre-socialised state, which is posited as a trans-historical – i.e. universal and constant – substance which is subject to a process of formation which can take a potentially unlimited number of ‘directions’ (to use Elias’ term). It all boils down to the specific cultural context in question. This is hardly controversial, but only up to the point where cultural difference is examined by using a version of the ‘staircase model’. In other words, the difference between the Village and the Estate mirrors the relation between involvement and detachment which, to cite Elias again, form ‘a clearly recognizable sequential order’.

Untrained life is at the intersection of historical and conjunctural processes of formation. Elias’ way of thinking about this is in terms of psychogenesis and sociogenesis: ‘individuals, in their short history, pass once more through some of the processes that their society has traversed in its long history’ (2000: xi). So we have a type of recapitulation theory; not a crude biological theory of recapitulation (such as Ernst Haeckel’s theory that ‘ontogenesis is a brief and rapid

recapitulation of phylogenesis'<sup>1</sup>), but a theory of bio-cultural recapitulation, so that those people who deviate are thought to be recapitulating an earlier stage of social evolution which has become *other*.

Bringing this back to Elias' overarching theory, it can be argued that the Civilising Process forms an historical arc. One tail of the arc (represented by the unruliness of Winston Parva's Village) reaches back into the past, and where it intersects with the present it exists as a residue of the past. At the opposite end, pointing towards the future, the arc tapers along the direction of Elias' yearning: a future free from violence, and 'object-adequate' knowledge is to guide us toward that future. With respect to the question posed at the start of this section, Elias' genealogical meta-narrative is not one of catastrophe but of resilience: his theory gestures toward a future where the Civilising Process is not only intact but also more robust and more expansive. It may not pan out that way, and Elias certainly cannot be accused of prophesying, but his stance of detachment is nonetheless born out of hope: that the Civilising Process can withstand both the micro and macro instances of 'reversal' and 'regression'.

The Eliasian arc points towards a future where self-restraint has replaced violence so that self-mastery – or 'conscious control' as Elias called it – holds sway. The theory of the Civilising Process describes as passage from external constraint to self-restraint, from violence to pacification, from emotional involvement to detachment, from fantasy-thinking to reality-congruent knowledge, from libidinal drives to civilised manners – in a word: it tracks a process of cognitive and moral development. And so we arrive at a theory of progress; not a teleological theory of progress, but a progress-theory nonetheless. It is crucial to recognise that this is not constructed in the form of normative argument but as a commitment to change for the better. The problem here is arguably endemic to the social sciences: a question of the degree to which one

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<sup>1</sup> Elias distances himself from this type of recapitulation theory in a footnote to his *Civilising Process* (2000: n. xi).

can become ‘detached’ from a field of investigation which is, to a greater or lesser extent’, constitutive of who and what one is. But this is also perhaps why it is important to adopt a stance described by Michel Foucault as ‘a permanent critique of our historical era...of ourselves’ (1994: 42-3). To practice detachment is ultimately to fail, but fail how exactly? In Elias’s case, his social ontology is constructed in such a way that behaviours and people seen to deviate from and disturb the Civilising Process are placed in what amounts to a black box. We have illustrated this above within the compass of a single study, but the scope of the problem is more far-reaching, evidenced in particular in Elias’ explanation of the Holocaust as a ‘regression into barbarism’ (1996: 309), and more generally in his way of accounting for violence. This is the focus of the next section, and we begin with some critical reflections on Elias’ ontology of the subject.

### **Taming Violence**

We have noted that one of the defining characteristics of Elias’ sociology is his focus on the question of violence. Further to this, Elias’ figurational sociology insists on an interdependent relation between the micro- and macro-worlds whereby aggressive behaviour is simultaneously tamed through the historically protracted transformation of organisational control and increasing self-restraint. In this context Elias’s processual sociology is often hailed as a successful attempt to transcend the macro-micro/structure-agency divide as it emphasises the inherently dynamic quality of both structure and action and sees figurations as contingent processes operating in a constant state of fluctuation and change (Mennell 1992, Van Krieken 1998, Ritzer 2007).

However, we argue that Elias’s epistemology is grounded in an essentialist ontology of the subject so that violence is posited as a biological fact rather than an intrinsic part of the Civilising Process itself. The consequence of this is that Elias is unable to provide a plausible explanation

of violent action. To corroborate this argument we will examine Elias's micro and macro sociology of violence.

### *The Human Animal*

There is an inherent paradox in Elias's theory of the Civilising Process: it was one of the first coherent sociological attempts to develop a dynamic, processual and contingent historical model for understanding long term social change, yet its key analytical propositions are heavily rooted in an essentialist and unreflexive understanding of human beings. Our contention here is that one of the key building blocks of Elias's epistemology rests on a flawed micro sociology that espouses what amounts to a Hobbesian diagnosis of human action.

Although Elias (2000: 52) insists that the Civilising Process has no absolute starting point (and we have discussed the question of a zero-point above), it seems clear that his interest in external and internal mechanisms of restraint presuppose an unrestrained human subject. In other words the prior existence of barbarism is the prerequisite of any civilising trend or endeavour. Hence in Elias' view, the further one delves into the past the more one is likely to encounter wild and uninhibited human beings who are not very different from their animal counterparts. For example The Civilizing Process is littered with references to humans as essentially animalistic creatures motivated by biological impulses, which are presented in the form of 'elementary urges', 'drives', 'instinctual tendencies', 'animalistic activities' and 'animalistic impulses' (Elias 2000: 107-116; 119-20; 158-9; 216, 218, 230, 252, 365). In more recent publications Elias makes frequent references to 'the animal nature of humans', 'the elementary constraints of human nature', and to 'instinct control' whereby human beings are seen as coming to this world as 'wild, helpless creatures' (Elias 1996: 32-3; 1991: 22). In Elias's analysis socialisation is given exceptional transformative power in the way that it moulds children, turning the 'semi-wild

human animal' into a fully fledged and self-constrained person. Or again, in discussing 'the animalistic spontaneity of young children's expression of their drives', Elias notes that young children exhibit 'a very strong animalistic need for physical contact' (1998: 200-1). Thus despite his insistence on the figurational character of social relations, the starting point of his analysis (and this accords with the zero-point of untrained life) is an essential, primordial, human nature governed by (unchanging) drives and instincts.

This distinctively Hobbesian conception of the human subject is most pronounced in Elias's understanding of violence. Rather than conceptualising violent action as a product of (changing) social relations, for Elias violence has a naturalistic quality. Not only does he fail to distinguish between the psychological phenomenon of aggression and the sociological process that is violence, but he also views violent behaviour as innately pleasurable. When writing about 'medieval society' he alludes to the 'original savagery of feeling' and contends that for most people 'the pleasure of killing and torturing others was great'. And because 'belligerence, hatred and joy in tormenting others were more uninhibited', so these were 'socially permitted pleasure[s]' (Elias 2000: 163). In this view violence is seen as an 'elementary urge' and 'a means of satisfying lust'. Thus violence is an integral component of human nature which if not controlled is bound to lead towards never ending bloodshed and the abuse of others (Elias 1998: 23). Those who inhabited the medieval world are depicted as governed by insatiated 'drives' which were 'wild, cruel, prone to violent outbreaks and abandoned to the joy of the moment'. They apparently found 'delight in plundering and rape', and this gave expression to their 'desire to acknowledge no master' (Elias 2000: 241-2). This view is problematic on at least four counts.

Firstly, Elias provides little empirical evidence to corroborate his strong claims about the character of violent action, and when anecdotal evidence is offered it seems prone to misinterpretation. Despite his commitment to social science, Elias employs what amounts to a

sloppy methodology. Elias' focus was large scale behavioural changes, yet his theory relies on an uncritical reading of documents such as manners books. Such historical documents cannot be taken at face value, as they tell us little about the extent to which the authors' perception and depiction of events and actions correspond to lived reality. For example, rather than scrutinising Erasmus's portrayal of peasant behaviour, Elias (2000: 49) takes this literary work as a statement of fact: 'Bodily carriage, gestures, dress, facial expressions – this "outward" behaviour with which [Erasmus's] treatise concerns itself is the expression of the inner, the whole person. Erasmus knows this and on occasion states it explicitly'.

This descriptive strategy leads directly to uncorroborated assumptions concerning a general lust for violence. For example, Elias (2000: 164, 249) cites various documents where aristocratic warriors boast of their enjoyment in killing and torturing enemies, and he argues that 'the warrior of the Middle Ages not only loved battle [but] ...lived for it'. Elias also emphasises stark gender asymmetries whereby women are mere objects for the warrior's gratification: 'women are given to man "for his necessity and delectation"'. Again, these hyper-masculinist statements recorded by medieval observers cannot be taken at face value. It is important not to confuse the proto-ideology of a warrior ethos – the way this glorified violence and the subjugation of women – with conditions on the ground. As Gellner (1997: 20) observes, just as the agrarian world was often prone to 'exaggerat[ing] its own inequality and hid[ing] such mobility as occurs', so have aristocratic warriors regularly embellished their own bellicosity and misogyny even though many of them were not personally comfortable with this rhetoric (Kleinschmidt 2008, Cowell 2007)<sup>2</sup>. As many studies of gang behaviour and prison environments have shown, unstable and highly coercive social orders stimulate the emergence of violent and extreme masculinist rhetoric

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<sup>2</sup> However as Kleinschmidt (2008: 170) shows this violence and war prone rhetoric was not as prevalent as often assumed: 'early medieval sources provide little explicit evidence for war-proness or outright delight in atrocities on the side of those engaged in war'.

(Gambetta 1993, Messerschmidt 2001; Collins 2008). However, fierce verbal expression often conceals the full complexity of social relations. In this respect the medieval warrior resembles contemporary gang members as both display misogynist and violent attitudes which are occasionally backed up by actual, although sporadic, ruthlessness. Nevertheless, rather than stemming from an innate bloodlust which is anchored in biologically imprinted ‘drives’, this behaviour is the product of specific social conditions that reflect a particular historical dynamic, such as the volatile character of the medieval world. The proto-ideology of extreme belligerence and misogyny masks the more subtle and contradictory social relationships that shaped and structured medieval Europe (Youngs 2006; Le Roy Ladurie 1979; 1978).

Secondly, despite Elias’s insistence on the inherent belligerence of humans, recent research on the behaviour of individuals in violent situations shows that our species is neither good at nor comfortable with the use of violence. Elias (2000: 371) describes the medieval warrior as having ‘freedom in living out his feelings and passions’, pursuing ‘savage joys’ and displaying ‘hatred in destroying and tormenting anything hostile or belonging to an enemy’. However as many studies on face to face killing and combat have demonstrated, human beings are reluctant and unwilling killers (Bourke 2000; Grossman 1996; Holmes 1985). Rather than being an innate ability or a ‘savage joy’, killing is an extremely difficult process that involves tearing apart one’s moral universe. From the early studies of du Picq (1921) and Marshall (1947) to more recent work by Griffith (1989), Miller (2000) and Collins (2008), there is mounting evidence to show that only a very small number of individuals are willing or capable when it comes to killing other human beings – even among those subject to intensive military training and prolonged programmes of indoctrination. Most frontline soldiers for example avoid shooting at the enemy. During WWI only ten percent of soldiers were deemed by their officers to be willing to fight, while during WWII most front line infantry soldiers were convinced that they had not killed a single enemy



combatant (Bourke 2000: 73; Holmes 1985: 367). As Collins has demonstrated, in violent situations most individuals find themselves paralysed by fear, and as a result are incapable of killing another human being. Micro-violent actions are messy, difficult to initiate, and even more difficult to maintain: 'violent interactions are difficult because they go against the grain of normal interaction rituals. The tendency to become entertained in each other's rhythms and emotions means that when the interaction is at cross purposes – an antagonistic interaction – people experience a pervasive feeling of [confrontational] tension' (2008: 20).

It must be added that none of this is unique to modern or Western social orders, but is just as prevalent in the pre-modern world and in non-Western civilisations. Anthropologists have documented many cases of societies that have never engaged in organised violence. The best known cases involve the Semai and Semang of Malaysia, Siriono of Bolivia, Paliyan of India, Inuit of Canada, and Mbuti of South Africa (Service 1978). Fry (2007: 17) identifies over seventy known societies where individuals rarely if ever fight others and have no experience of warfare. In general most hunter gatherers avoid intra-group violence. The prevalence of torture in medieval Europe was more of an exception than a rule. As noted by Collins (1974), rather than being an inborn quality, torture is a social product, most apparent in extremely stratified social orders where it ritualistically dramatises the warrior's status dominance. Hence there is nothing inherently enjoyable in killing and torture; they are both products of intensive and prolonged social pressure.

Thirdly Elias makes no distinction between aggressive behaviour and organised violence, seeing both as originating in the same biological 'drives'. However, unlike aggression which is a psychological, genetic and hormonal phenomenon that for most mammals is controlled and regulated by various parts and nuclei of the midbrain (such as amygdala, hypothalamus, prefrontal cortex, cingulate cortex, hippocampus, and septal nuclei), collective violence is a

product of social action (Malesevic 2010: 52-8; Goldstein 2001). In contrast to aggression which involves some type of reflex and/or affective response to external stimuli, collective violence entails sophisticated coordination, organisation, control and at least some degree of planning. In this sense aggressive behaviour is almost the exact opposite of organised violent action, as instead of acting on impulse successful collective violence presupposes restraint. The goal-oriented use of physical force requires cool headedness, instrumental rationality and self-control. Hence rather than being stifled by the Civilising Process, complex forms of organised violence, such as warfare, revolutions and terrorism, are only possible with the development of civilisation. In this sense there is no point in contrasting the ‘battle fury of the Abyssinian warriors’ or the ‘frenzy of the different tribes’ with the ‘subdued aggressiveness’ of ‘even the most warlike nations of the civilised world’ (Elias 2000: 161), as in all of these instances collective violence presumes a particular cultural coding, self-restraint and substantial degree of social organisation and coordination. The alleged ‘battle fury’ and ‘tribal frenzy’ are not innate biological propensities but are particular social devices for organising violence and mobilising individuals. The ritualism associated with battlefields changes in time and place, and in this sense there is no great distinction between the battle cries of past Abyssinian warriors and morale-boosting pep talks on the part of military officers stationed in Iraq or Afghanistan today.

Finally Elias misinterprets the collective behaviour of individuals in violent situations. Instead of casting a sociological eye on biographic accounts of war experience in 15<sup>th</sup> century Western Europe, he takes these narratives as given assuming that they reflect the instrumental motives of individual warriors. For example Jean de Bueil’s depiction of war as a ‘joyous thing’ is understood by Elias as a personal joy of fighting. He traces the gradual transition from the ‘direct pleasure in the human hunt’ towards ‘enthusiasm for a just cause’ and ‘joy of battle serving as an intoxicant to overcome fear’ (Elias 2000: 165). However, if carefully read and unpacked de

Bueil's account appears to be not about the pleasure of killing others, or the 'joyous intoxication' of giving 'oneself up wholly to the fight', but about something much more universal in the context of warfare: intensive feelings of micro-solidarity among soldiers on the battlefield. As numerous studies confirm (Shils and Janowitz 1948, Holmes 1985, Bourke 2000, Collins 2008) most frontline soldiers do not fight for ideological or utilitarian reasons but out of sense of loyalty to their platoon or regimental comrades. The extreme conditions of being constantly exposed to death forges intensive bonds of solidarity whereby one's willingness to die for close comrades often exceeds the desire for self-preservation. In this extreme environment, correctly identified by Simmel (1917) as an 'absolute situation', one's platoon starts to resemble one's close knit family. In the words of one WWII veteran: 'Those men on the line were my family, my home. They were closer to me than I can say, closer than any friends had been or ever would be. They never let me down, and I couldn't do it to them' (Holmes 1985: 300). Hence it is not the joy of fighting that binds warriors together, it is an unprecedented and heightened sense of micro solidarity that stimulates this special feeling in individuals. The 'joy of war' is not the joy of killing and death but the joy of life and love. Reading carefully de Bueil's narrative makes this apparent: 'War is a joyous thing. We love each other so much in war....A sweet joy rises in our hearths, in the feeling of our honest loyalty to each other... seeing our friend so bravely exposing his body to danger...we resolve to go forward and die or live with him and never leave him on account of love...' (Huizinga 1996: 94; Elias 2000: 165). Thus it is our sociality and not biological determinants that make us both perpetrators and victims of violent action.

### *The Killing Fields of Civilisation*

Figurational sociology insists on the interdependency of the micro and macro social worlds, and Elias's theory of the Civilising Process successfully links historical transformations in state

formation to the changing behaviour of individuals. Drawing indirectly on Weber, Elias (2005, 2000: 344) explores the consequences of political and military ‘elimination contests’ through which states have gradually established monopolies of violence and taxation. In his view the internalisation of self-restraint and consequent behavioural change goes hand in hand with structural transformations in Europe whereby military and fiscal might, coupled with demographic change, urbanisation, a greater division of labour, the expansion of trade and the emergence of a money economy fostered internal pacification and state centralisation. The rise of free towns and the steady growth of a money economy allowed former feudal rulers to bypass warlord landed nobility and monopolise the means of violence and taxation, thus enabling them to wage further wars of elimination and expand their realms of rule. European feudalism thus reached its absolutist stage with the formerly independent warrior aristocracy becoming replaced with highly dependent courtiers. For Elias absolutism/court society expanded the internal pacification of states while simultaneously facilitating behavioural changes as the declining aristocratic courtier class relied on the symbols of greater self-restraint to distinguish themselves from the rising middle classes. Ultimately the values and practices of self-restraint and refined mannerism became status markers gradually imitated and embraced by other groups in society leading towards more civilised social conduct. Therefore, structural changes such as state formation generated external mechanisms of restraint which eventually became internalised in the form of self-restraining behaviour which gradually spread throughout Europe.

Although Elias’s macro-sociology is built on more solid foundations, it too operates with a highly problematic understanding of violence. Not only does an unsound Hobbesian/Freudian ontology underpin his macro- as much as his micro-sociology, but in counterpoising civilisation to violence, Elias’ theory is unable to explain the proliferation of organised violence in modernity. Here again it is possible to pinpoint at least four pronounced explanatory weaknesses.

Firstly, by insisting on the inherent incompatibility of civilisation and violence Elias misdiagnoses the relationship between the two. In Elias's writings the Civilising Process is understood as a dual phenomenon through which individuals learn how to constrain their own 'natural' violent impulses and through which entire social orders become more pacified. However, not only is it the case that civilisation and violent action are fully congruent, as all coordinated collective violence requires a substantial degree of self-restraint, but more importantly, civilisation is the cradle of organised violence. Despite the popular view that human beings have engaged in warfare since time immemorial, numerous archaeological and anthropological studies have shown that organised collective violence emerged only in the last 10,000 years, and large scale warfare only in the last 3000 years of human existence (Otterbein 2004; Herwig et al 2003; Keegan 1994, Ferrill 1985). For much of its existence *Homo sapiens* lived in small, isolated, scavenging nomadic bands that rarely exceeded several hundred people. These groups possessed no weaponry and were constantly on the run from larger carnivores, so that they had neither the technology nor the organisational means to engage in warfare. Organised violence appears on the historical stage together with sedentary cultures – with the domestication of plants and animals, organised farming, land ownership, fortified towns, institutionalised religions, political orders and elaborate forms of social stratification. In a word: civilisation. What distinguished the first known civilisations, Sumer, ancient Egypt, Shang China and Mesoamerican worlds from the earlier social formations was their ability to use organised violence and fight wars of conquest. The pristine states of early civilisations were created through warfare and distinct civilisations have expanded through organised violence (Mann 1986; Textor 1967; Kohn 1987). Since Hintze's (1975), Oppenheimer's (2007) and Tilly's (1985, 1985) extensive analyses it has become apparent that state-making and war-making are mutually constitutive processes. Eckhardt's (1992: 3) meticulous data also shows that there is an elective

affinity between civilisational advances and collective violence, as 'later civilisations have been more militaristic than earlier civilisations'. Hence violence is not the Other of civilisation but one of its most important components.

Secondly, by focusing almost exclusively on medieval and early modern Europe, the theory of a Civilising Process misinterprets the direction of historical transformation of violence.

According to Elias, as external and internal constraints of civilisation gradually advance, so violent action becomes simultaneously repressed and outlawed through the state's monopolisation of coercion. In other words, violence decreases with the arrival and expansion of modern, civilised, social orders. Thus Elias shares a popular stereotypical view which contrasts 'medieval barbarism' with the alleged increasingly peaceful modernity: 'medieval societies were - compared with our own - very violent' (Elias 1998: 198). However empirical evidence shows otherwise. Whereas the medieval world was characterised by episodes of gruesome cruelty, witch hunts, and intermittent torture, these macabre practices often conceal their low efficiency as a means of destruction. In contrast, the Civilising Process dispenses with sporadic ghoulishness and utilises mechanisms of mass murder. In the so called dark ages wars were no more than ritualistic skirmishes between aristocrats, and while organised violence might have been more ghastly it certainly could not compare to what transpired with the advent of civilisation: whereas only 60,000 people lost their lives in all wars combined during the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, this figure increases to approximately 1.4 million for 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries combined, and 7.8 million for the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. Nevertheless, it is the 19<sup>th</sup> and especially the 20<sup>th</sup> century that witnessed a staggering escalation of mass killings, with human casualties amounting to 19 million and 111 million respectively (Eckhardt 1992: 272-3). Hence rather than constraining violence, the Civilising Process has fostered its unprecedented proliferation. Instead of obliterating such practices as killings, persecution and inflicting pain on other human beings, the

state monopoly of violence has proved to be the most efficient organisational vehicle for mass murder. As Bauman (1989) and Mann (2005) demonstrate convincingly, ethnic cleansing and genocide are modern phenomena inspired by modern ideological blueprints, modern means of organisation, modern and mutually exclusive state building projects, and conflicting visions of modernity. While the modern subject might avoid spitting or blowing her nose in the table cloth, the populations of modern states are complicit in many episodes of mass violence, whether detonating atomic bombs, perpetrating ‘targeted assassinations’, or launching ‘pre-emptive’ and ‘surgical strikes’, and the reality of these actions is often sanitized through the language of ‘collateral damage’.

Furthermore, in Elias’s (2000: 303) sanguine vision of the contemporary world, once the monopoly on violence is fully institutionalised, so the economic interests are bound to surpass coercive action: ‘when a centralised and public monopoly on force exists over large areas, can competition for means of consumption and production take its course largely without the intervention of physical violence’. Nevertheless this view overlooks the fact that successful economic transactions always remain tied to the threat of external coercive action: it is the police and military that coercively impose and preserve the rules of the (economic) game (Malesevic 2010: 242-63). As the recent wars in central Africa, Iraq and Afghanistan show, the proliferation of warlordism on the one hand and the dominance of private military contractors on the other often successfully challenge the state monopoly on violence (Kestnbaum 2009). However even when fully monopolised by the state, violence does not evaporate but is concentrated and accumulated so that it can periodically be unleashed to fight large scale wars.

Thirdly, the theory of a Civilising Process can not adequately explain the persistence and proliferation of warfare. As violence and civilisation are conceptualised as inversely proportional the logical corollary of this explanatory model would be the gradual decrease of violent action in

all its forms. And this is exactly how Elias (2000: 318) interprets the historical trajectory of European societies, contrasting the situation of ‘pure enmity to the death’, which he associates with the pre-modern world, and an essentially peaceful social environment of ‘highly developed societies’ where individuals are pacified through the ‘ambivalence of interests’. However instead of their steady disappearance, wars, revolutions, terrorism and other forms of violent action have expanded and have also become more deadly. As Tilly (2003: 55) has documented, the 20<sup>th</sup> century alone was witness to over 250 new wars with more than a million deaths annually. This was a century that gave birth to total war, the Holocaust, gas chambers, gulags, organised suicide bombings and the atomic annihilation of entire cities. In contrast to Elias’s diagnosis, ‘pure enmity’ is not characteristic of the pre-modern world where violence was theatrical, macabre and inefficient, but something that emerges with total wars. The two World Wars were the embodiment of industrialised total wars where all the resources of the state and society, including all healthy men and women, transport, trade, industrial production, and communications were placed at the disposal of the state at war. War became not just a conflict between two armies but between entire populations. Mass production, mass politics and mass communications were mobilised for mass destruction, as total war eliminated the distinction between state and society, military and civilian, and the public and private spheres. The military ideologies and strategies behind these two wars were conceived and implemented by highly refined and self-disciplined gentlemen bent on implementing Clausewitz’s (1997: 6) dictum of absolute war as a realm of ‘utmost violence’ where one side is determined to annihilate the other. The theory of the Civilising Process has no answer for this development. For Elias war is just an epiphenomenon that is bound to gradually disappear, whereby the obvious obstacles to his theory such as the mass slaughter of trench warfare are simply dismissed as nothing more than a temporary aberration. In his own words the excessive atrocities of the WWI are ‘merely a very slight recession, one of the



fluctuations that constantly arise from the complexity of the historical movement within each phase of the total process' (Elias 2000: 157). Rather than seeing warfare as an integral component of the Civilising Process – one of the crucial constituents of modernity as we know it – Elias' sees it as a temporary 'regression to barbarism' (Elias, 1996: 308). Here again we see negative properties of the social assigned to the past, with the temporal arc of figurational sociology operating as an umbrella to protect the normative concerns at the heart of Elias theory.

Finally, and here again we can detect the force of Elias' temporal arc, when facts fly in the face of his theory, Elias utilises concepts such as 'decivilising spurt' to rescue his explanatory model<sup>3</sup>. An example is how Elias accounts for Nazism and the Holocaust, where he argues that the Civilising Process can occasionally go into reverse. So concentration camps, gas chambers, extensive systems of torture and genocide are understood as no more than a 'deepest regression into barbarism' whereby war removes all internal and external constraints and individuals revert to their 'animalistic selves'. In particular Elias (1996: 311) emphasises the role of specific social agents wedded to irrationally held belief systems with 'high fantasy content' that provided them with 'a high degree of immediate emotional satisfaction'. In other words, a decivilising spurt strips away the civilising benefits of detached thinking, and marks the return of emotionally-charged communal fantasies: 'national Socialist movement was mainly led by half-educated men'; 'the Nazi belief system with its pseudo-scientific varnish spread thinly over a primitive, barbaric national mythology... that it could not withstand the judgement of more educated people' (Elias 1996: 315). Leaving to one side the deeply normative tone of an author who claims to speak from a position of detachment, this unconvincing and ad hoc argument does not hold up to empirical scrutiny. As most recent studies of the Nazi movement show (Mann 2004, 2005;

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<sup>3</sup> Informalisation is another late (and not very successful) attempt to account for increasingly prevalent popular ignorance of manners in eating, dress code, bedroom behaviour among 'civilised' Western men and women of the late modern era. See Elias (1996) and C. Wouters (1977, 2007).

Burleigh 2000; Jarausch 1990), much of its leadership as well as its support base were very well educated. Many German intellectuals, university professors and broader cultural elite were sympathetic to National Socialist ideas and its core constituency was much more educated than the rest of German society. For example '41 per cent of SD [Nazi intelligence service] had higher education at the time when national average was 2 or 3 per cent' (Burleigh 2000: 186); the SS recruits and officers were highly educated; majority of doctors, judges and solicitors were members of NSDAP. As Muller-Hill (1994) shows the majority of the commanders of *Einsatzkommandos* (mobile killing squads) who were the main protagonists of genocide were highly educated individuals: economists, solicitors, academics. More than two thirds of these commanders had higher education and one third had doctorates. In a similar vein 'half of the German students were Nazi sympathisers by 1930'; 'university-trained professionals (i.e. 'academic professionals') were overrepresented in the NSDAP and in the SA and SS officer corps (Mann 2004: 165-6; Jarausch 1990: 78). While National Socialist ideology did attract many social strata, some of which had little or no education, its core ideological support base were young and educated males: 'Fascism was capturing the young and educated males because it was the latest wisdom of half a continent. Its ideological resonance in its era... was the main reason it was a generational movement (Mann 2004: 167).

Nevertheless what is even more problematic in Elias's ad hoc explanation is its inability to comprehend that the Holocaust and other 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century genocides are not a 'regression' to previous historical periods but are in most respects a structural 'progression' to a novel age, an age that provides organisational and ideological know how for mass murder. Whereas in pre-modern times one was more likely to be killed for where she was, in modernity one is often killed for whom she is (Smith 1999). As Bauman (1989), Mann (2005) and Wimmer (2002) rightly argue, rather than being an anomaly within modernity, the Holocaust was only possible in the

modern era. It is modernity's legacy of Enlightenment that fosters the grand and often mutually incompatible ideological blueprints for creating an ideal society and it is modernity alone that can provide the efficient bureaucratic apparatus, the science and technology capable of implementing these grand vistas of a brave new world. Hence, 'genocide arrives as an integral part of the process through which the grand design is implemented. The design gives it the legitimization; state bureaucracy gives it the vehicle; and paralysis of society gives it the "road clear" sign' (Bauman 1989: 114). It is civilisation, not the lack of it that is at the heart of the organised and protracted mass slaughter of millions of human beings.

## **Conclusion**

Norbert Elias is celebrated as a pioneer of dynamic, process oriented sociological analysis which succeeds in reconciling the macro- and micro-social worlds, while also forging a bridge between social theory and historically grounded empirical research. What many sympathetic commentators tend to neglect however is the problematic ontological foundations of Elias's figural sociology. We have shown that Eliasian theory is situated between an implicitly normative social ontology and an ontology of the human subject which is conceptualised as an unchanging substance: a pre-social and 'animalistic' substrate upon which the Civilising Process is inscribed. Elias assumes that, without the constraining effects of the Civilising Process, we are predisposed or compelled to engage in savage bloodletting. Rather than seeing violence for what it is – a product of social action – for Elias violence stems from an unchanging and inborn desire to use others as the means of satiating primal appetites and urges. His social ontology rests on a temporal arc that functions as a black box, so that anything that might disturb or tear at the fabric of the Civilising Process reverts back to an earlier stage of the Civilising Process itself. The absence of organisational and ideational controls, culminating in a lack of self-restraint, is posited

as the source of both social disorder (the civilizational ‘backwash’ of Winston Parva) and large scale violent action (the genocidal projects that have shaped the 20th century). Instead of understanding organised violence as a product of ideological and organisational development – of civilisation – for Elias violence remains the ultimate Other of the Civilising Process. This disfigured ontology of figural sociology is incapable of explaining the continuous expansion of organised coercion, and in particular the proliferation of warfare in the modern era. In Elias’ quasi-teleological dystopia of pacified, restrained and (potentially) directed progress, there is an enduring reluctance to confront the sheer modernity of organised violence. In short, Elias offers no satisfactory explanation for the mass slaughters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ultimately, Elias’s attempt to formulate a theory of long-term change which is ‘detached’ from ideals fails, and it does so because the explanatory foundations upon which his theory is based are anchored in an unyielding commitment to a future that conforms to his reading of the past. The fact that this stems not from an explicit normative commitment but emerges through the detached empirics of the Civilising Process is a lesson we can still learn much from. The Eliasian interpretation of historical change is just that – an interpretation – shaped by a yearning for a fully pacified world. Elias condemned communal fantasies because of the violence they engender. Yet the Eliasian fantasy is not only empirically flawed, it is also dystopian, and for some no doubt, also disturbing in the way that it envisions a path into the future whereby we subject our emotions to ever-greater control. If, as Elias assumes, we were less than human in the past, it also seems sure that we would not be fully human in the future that he envisions for us.

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