
Towards a Theory of Decivilizing Processes

Relatively little attention has been given to the theory of decivilizing processes. Some writers, such as Dunning and Sheard 1979: 288-9), Dunning et al. (1988: 242-5), Goudsblom (1989: 84) and Wouters (1990a: 38), have referred to the possibility of such a theory implied in the work of Norbert Elias, and Elias himself mentions the idea (1986a: 46; 1988d: 183). However, only the sociologist Stephen Mennell (1990, 1992: 227ff) and the anthropologist Mart Bax (1993) have taken up the issue in any depth, each with a respective emphasis on the theory and empirical documentation of decivilizing processes (see also Burkitt 1994).

This paper represents some of my reflections on the development of the theory of decivilizing processes and attempts to answer the following inter-related questions: What are civilizing and decivilizing processes and how can they be specified? What are the probable characteristics of decivilizing processes and under what conditions would they be likely to occur?

Firstly, I will discuss the meaning of civilization and civilizing processes in the work of Norbert Elias. It is particularly important to clarify the theory of civilizing processes before specifying what might constitute decivilizing. I then focus on the criteria of civilizing and decivilizing and suggest three main criteria for determining such processes. Finally, I distinguish between various dimensions of decivilizing which may have their own particular dynamics. In conclusion I suggest the empirical application of the concepts put forward.

I

Norbert Elias points out that in the emergence of Western nation states violence and civilization are intertwined with each other. Civilizing processes depend upon the control of violence.¹ In *The Civilizing Process*, which covers the development of some major European powers between roughly the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries, Elias offers an explanatory model of state formation in which larger land owners were drawn into a competitive elimination contest. Either they had to fight to save them-

selves, or face their potential social and physical destruction. Without these violent actions and the forces of free competition, the monopoly of violence, the attendant suppression and control of violence over large areas and the development of lengthening chains of interdependence could not occur.²

According to Elias, within the European civilizing process the propensity of most people to abstain from aggressiveness increased, in conjunction with state formation and pacification processes. Violence was increasingly 'confined to barracks', legitimately practiced only by members of the armed forces and the police, or within specific, controlled contexts such as sporting competitions. People became more sensitive with respect to witnessing or perpetrating impulsive violence, while at the same time an increase in the planned use of physical force occurred. This disposition became incorporated within the personality structure in the form of a specific kind of conscience formation, generating heightened guilt and repugnance feelings surrounding violent actions.

For Elias, the patterning of drive and impulse controls varies in different societies, although there is no society in which they are absent (1994: 481; 1992a: 146; 1988d: 183). During civilizing processes, however, changes in the self-steering of people are not represented simply as *increases* in self-restraint (cf. Elias 1992a: 147; 1992d: 385-6). One may find extreme forms of self-restraint at earlier phases in civilizing processes existing side by side with the relatively free gratification of pleasures, for example among medieval orders of monks within a warrior society (Elias 1994: 451; 1992a: 153-4, 157-60, 206-7n).

In the first volume of *The Civilizing Process* Elias focuses on psychical and behavioural changes through the investigation of manners and the general comportment of people. He suggests that there has been a long-term change in personality structures in which the patterning of self-restraint became stricter, more even, more all round, more stable and more differentiated.³ This is accompanied by increasing 'rationalization' and the importance given to the 'psychological' interpretation of the actions of others. Elias shows how these long-term changes occurred in the personality structures of people in the secular upper classes of the West, spreading and interweaving with those characteristic of other social classes lower down on the social ladder of these societies.

Elias's perspective constitutes an historicization of Freud's categories of the personality and refers to changes of the affect-economy. He uses the term 'habitus' to refer to changes on this 'individual' level of the civilizing process.⁴ One can also distinguish between individual habitus, which refers to the emotional and behavioural dispositions which are specific to a

particular person, and social habitus, which denotes the learned dispositions shared by most members of a group or society (cf. Elias 1988a: lxxiii, lxxv, lxxvii; 1988b: 315, 316, 319, 320, 333, 387, 388, 484; 1991a: 182-5, 209ff).

These changes in social and individual habitus - that is, civilizing processes - are interconnected with changes in relations between people over generations. In other words, they are connected to the dynamics of power and dependency relations. In particular, Elias specifies the increasing division of social functions and state formation processes to be crucial for the sociogenesis of European civilizing processes. In his earlier work, Elias concentrates on the intra-state sociogenesis of civilization, whereas later on he also refers to civilizing processes at the global level of 'humanity' (1992d: 383; see also 1987: 74-118; 1991b: 136-9, 146-7; 1992c: 236; cf. Haferkamp 1987: 545-57).

One of the main aims of *The Civilizing Process* is to demonstrate the process character of the term civilization (1994: 39, 41).⁵ This process character of civilization in Elias's work is succinctly encapsulated in the following quotation which is taken from one of Elias's essays first published in German in 1980: 'The civilization of which I speak is never completed and constantly endangered' (1980: 98, my emphasis). Note that in the English translation this is rendered: 'Civilization is never completed and constantly endangered' (1988c: 177; cf. 1989: 225) - the intentional allusion to the associations of the term civilization which are peculiar to Elias are lost in this translation. So, both 'civilization' and the concept of 'civilizing processes' have specific meanings in Elias's work which differ from the more everyday use of these terms. As Eric Dunning points out, 'just as other sociologists employ terms such as 'class' and 'bureaucracy' in a sense that is more detached than their everyday usage, so Elias used the concept of civilizing processes in a more detached sense' (1992: 262).⁶

II

The theory of civilizing processes is part of a larger model of social processes which Elias was continuously elaborating throughout his long sociological career (see Elias 1977, 1978, 1983: 221). In this view, social processes are long-term (at least three generations), directional and structured (cf. Elias 1992c: 234-40). Yet they are also 'blind', with no inherent purpose and are characterized by emergent properties which are *sui generis*, beyond the control of any single individual bound up within them.

This brings me to the criteria of civilizing processes in particular. For Elias, civilizing processes are not confined to the development of Western European societies.⁷ They can be found wherever a stable and durable control of the means of physical force takes place, and in the European case, this was related to the competitive pressures increasing the division of social functions and the numbers of people dependent upon each other. This condition allows and requires co-operation on a level which is more determined by controls over vehement emotions, and demands longer-term hindsight and foresight, together with the need for more differentiated interpretations of the actions and intentions of others (Elias 1994: 456; cf. 1992a).

Certain criteria specifically for determining 'directions' of civilizing processes can be found in Elias's work (see 1994: 443-524, 1992d: 384-6). Again, these are inter-related. They include: a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint; the development of a social standard of behaviour and feeling which generates the emergence of a more even, all round, stable and differentiated self-restraint; an increase in the scope of mutual identification between people; increasing differentiation between drives and drive-controls; a spread in the pressure for foresight; psychologization and rationalization; an advance in the thresholds of shame and repugnance; contractions of behavioural and emotional contrasts and expansions in alternatives; and changes in orientation from more involved to more detached perspectives (cf. Wouters 1990a: 35ff; Flap and Kuiper 1981/2: 277). These features are in turn related to the extent to which human beings are dependent upon and control non-human natural processes.

I would like to suggest that three of these inter-related criteria stand out as the most important in determining civilizing processes: firstly, *a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of the latter*; secondly, *the development of a social standard of behaviour and feeling which generates the emergence of a more even, all round, stable and differentiated pattern of self-restraint*; and thirdly, *an expansion in the scope of mutual identification within and between groups*.

Together, these three features would be likely to arise in conjunction with the development of a ruling authority's more centralized, stable, continuous and impersonal monopoly of physical force which effectively curbs the perpetration of face-to-face violence within a particular territory. This in turn facilitates an increase in the length and density of interdependency chains (political, commercial, emotional and cognitive bonds) - the development of the division of functions, trade relations, commercial growth and identification with the broader political territory as well as an

increased cognitive awareness of having to take more people into account more often. This further increases the likelihood that the scope of inter-group identification becomes more encompassing, including people in different situations, strata or societies. The growing density of interdependency chains increases the need for people to restrain themselves in specific ways: the necessity for planning and rational thinking increases, together with changes in the way people steer their emotions in ways deemed to be socially acceptable. Greater efficiency and precision is required, for example, in organizing meetings, delivering goods or travelling from one place to another. These processes in turn facilitate the consolidation of the monopoly of violence function through taxation measures and a strengthening of norms surrounding the control of violent actions in public.

So much for civilizing processes. In *The Civilizing Process*, and elsewhere, Elias makes some isolated comments which reveal an awareness of the potential results of an increase in social fears and levels of violence. He suggests, for example, that the 'armor of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly' if former levels of social fears and insecurities re-emerged (1994: 253n); in such situations the human capacity for 'rational' action 'would crumble or collapse' (1994: 519), and also that established authority would become increasingly challenged as groups tested through physical struggles the correspondence between actual social power relations and those symbolized in the form of laws (1994: 531n). These comments undoubtedly reflect Elias's experiences during World War I and his observations regarding developments preceding World War II.⁸ Indeed, in the preface to *The Civilizing Process* he remarks that the issues raised in the book owe less to a scholarly tradition than to the 'experiences of the crisis and transformation of Western civilization' (1994: xvi). Much later in his life, he writes in *Studien über die Deutschen* that he first encountered what he calls the Nazi 'barbarization spurt' as a personal problem under his own eyes in the 1930s, which led him to wonder how standards of civilized behaviour could break down. Believing that little knowledge existed about the socio- and psychogenesis of such civilized controls, he set out to investigate this in his two volume book (1989: 45-6n).

In some of Elias's formulations in dealing with this problem, the connotations of 'barbarism' as employed in an undifferentiated, everyday sense - involving negative value judgements held up against a positively imbued notion of 'civility' - are often implicit in his unqualified use of the terms 'barbarism' and 'barbarity'. These words are peppered throughout his essay on the 'Breakdown of Civilization' in *Studien über die Deutschen*.⁹ Elias describes the mass murder of the Jews as 'a throwback to the

savagery and barbarism of earlier ages' (1989: 394) and as 'one of the deepest regressions' to barbarism of the twentieth century (1989: 401). The title of this essay, 'The Breakdown of Civilization', itself merely serves to compound an impression of primarily normative valuations in Elias's use of these terms.

However, it is important to bring out the ambivalencies surrounding the *experiences* of situations or behaviour and the process of *theorizing* about them. I would not wish to suggest that the terms 'barbarism' and 'barbarity' are *inappropriate* to describe the actions of certain people in Nazi Germany. Indeed, I would have no problem in using these terms in this normative way. But for Elias to use them without further comment merely invites questions as to whether and to what extent he uses the word *civilization* normatively.

The importance of these observations lies in the fact that Elias is so careful to develop a more detached concept of civilization: that is, he differentiates civilization as an ideal from that referring to factual processes. For the sake of clarity, I would suggest, the opposite of this notion as an ideal is that of 'barbarism' or 'barbarization'. To be consistent, therefore, Elias should refer to the opposite of the factual process of civilization with the technical term decivilization.¹⁰ Elias in fact refers to the Nazi era in terms of 'rebarbarization' (1989: 45, 54) and, as I have already mentioned, a 'barbarization spurt' (1989: 45n), but he does not comment on his choice of words.

To return to the problem of criteria for decivilizing processes, an important point remains that Elias himself did not develop a theory of decivilization, although his discussion of 'feudalization' in the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* could be seen as an implicit model of a decivilizing process (1994: 273-314). Indeed, he states much later in a footnote in *Quest for Excitement* that 'feudalization' represents an opposite trend to a 'civilizing spurt' (1986b: 297n). He also refers, elsewhere in *Studien über die Deutschen*, to the Nazi mass murder of the Jews as a 'decivilizing spurt' (1989: 7, 23). The term 'spurt' (*Schub* in German) seems to be used by Elias rather loosely to refer to a phase in which the *pace* of social processes increases, while he uses the term *decivilizing* to refer to civilizing processes which go into 'reverse' (1986a: 46; 1992d: 386). Commenting on the general course of the civilizing process, Elias suggests in an interview for *Der Spiegel* in 1988: 'It has two directions. Forwards and backwards. Civilizing processes go along with decivilizing processes. The question is to what extent one of the two directions is dominant' (1988d: 183). The relationship between civilizing and decivili-

zing processes is here clearly conceived in terms of a *balance* between dominant and less dominant processes.

As for the criteria of decivilizing processes, it follows from the three main criteria of civilization that I mentioned earlier that there are three main criteria of decivilizing: one, would be a *shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of constraints by others*; another would be *the development of a social standard of behaviour and feeling which generates the emergence of a less even, all round, stable and differentiated pattern of self-restraint*; and thirdly we would expect a *contraction in the scope of mutual identification between constituent groups and individuals*.

These three main features would be likely to occur in societies in which there was a decrease in the (state) control of the monopoly of violence, breaking social ties and shorter chains of commercial, emotional and cognitive interdependence. It is also likely that such societies would be characterized by: a rise in the levels of fear, insecurity, danger and incalculability; the re-emergence of violence into the public sphere; growing inequality or heightening of tensions in the balance of power between constituent groups; a decrease in the distance between the standards of adults and children; a freer expression of aggressiveness and an increase in cruelty; an increase in impulsiveness; an increase in involved forms of thinking with their concomitantly high fantasy content and a decrease in detached forms of thought with an accompanying decrease in the 'reality-congruence' of concepts (cf. Dunning and Sheard 1979: 288-9; Dunning et al. 1988: 242-5; Mennell 1990: 206).

These social processes may be reciprocally augmenting and fear inducing, that is, what Elias calls in *Involvement and Detachment*, 'double-bind processes' (1987: 42-118). However, social processes which may involve decivilizing would not necessarily replicate in 'reverse' processes which are likely to generate civilizing. One reason for this is the relatively large human capacity for social learning which modifies social relations. It is unlikely that people simply forget, although this is of course possible. But they do not simply reverse and go backwards, as it were, down the path along which they have already travelled. It is extremely unlikely that the composite relations of the networks of interdependencies go into 'reverse' to the same degree, resulting in a different composition of the new configuration.

So far, the discussion has focused on civilizing processes, decivilizing processes, some criteria with which to specify them, the possible conditions in which it is likely that such processes would occur, as well as some possible characteristics of decivilizing.

I think it is also helpful to highlight several inter-related dimensions of decivilizing processes, or in other words, the perspectives from which it is possible to view them: firstly, one can speak of the individual dimension of decivilizing processes, in which a person experiences an erosion of his or her standards of behaviour and emotion management; secondly, there is the group dimension, in which significant numbers of members experience an erosion of their dominant social and psychological standards of behaviour and emotion management; thirdly, the intra-state dimension, in which the same occurs among significant numbers or even most members of a state-society; fourthly, the inter-state dimension, in which this occurs simultaneously within neighbouring states; and finally, there is the dimension of humanity, in which the same might occur among significant numbers or even most of the world's population. All of these dimensions of decivilizing processes - or the perspectives from which they may be seen - can be understood within the time-span of one generation (roughly 30 years) or over several.¹¹

III

In terms of the three main criteria of *decivilizing* processes I have mentioned - shifts in the balance of social constraints and self-restraint, changes in the social standards of feeling and behaviour and changes in the scope of mutual identification - such processes would involve 'reversals' of each of these three inter-related criteria in such a way that if a 'reversal' occurred within one of them, a 'reversal' would also be triggered, sooner or later, among the others, together forming a *dominant* overall process.

The term 'reversal' thus refers to a collapse or gradual erosion of specific social standards which were previously dominant within particular individuals and among particular groups or societies. A 'reversal' in these inter-related criteria could occur amongst a smaller or larger group; and it may occur within these main criteria *in conjunction* with two other part-processes: a breakdown in the monopoly of violence and a disintegration of interdependency chains, representing a societal decivilizing process. During decivilizing processes, these part-processes I have mentioned - that is, the three main criteria, the de-monopolization and disintegration processes - would be likely to 'trigger' each other in what might be called a 'mutually reinforcing spiral'.

Decivilizing in smaller or larger groups may be immanent and simultaneous components of particular phases in civilizing processes. In some situations, less direct, long-distance ties via the state become increasingly

more important at the expense of those more direct face-to-face contacts, and this may result in solidarity and controls by others among those who were formally highly dependent upon each other, diminishing (cf. Van Stolk and Wouters 1983; Bogner 1992: 7; Schröter 1990: 72-85; Wilterdink 1993). Under specific conditions, this may result in decivilizing, and this is evident, for example, in some inner city areas and in the integration processes of tribal societies in nation states. The reported increases in the incidence of inter-personal violence in the latter half of the twentieth century, particularly within large urban conurbations, can be described as group decivilizing processes which may occur in the context of a longer-term process of civilization, or indeed, they may even be precursors of a decivilizing process within the societal and inter-societal dimensions (cf. Pearson 1983; Mennell 1990: 213-14; Dunning et al. 1987, 1988; Murphy et al. 1990).

IV

I have suggested that the specification of state societal and inter-state societal decivilizing processes, in contrast to those within the smaller or larger group dimension, refer to more encompassing social processes which gain a greater permanence due to the fragmentation of structural ties. Thus, a decivilizing process involving a decrease in the scope of mutual identification; a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of the former; and a change in social standards of behaviour and feeling which allows for a decrease in the evenness, stability and differentiation of self-restraint would be likely to occur in a society or group of societies in which there is a disintegration of interdependency chains and the breakdown of the state monopolies of violence and taxation. The scope of societal decivilizing processes can contract to the smaller or larger group level, or the reverse may occur.

However, these theoretical comments on the various dimensions of decivilizing processes require empirical corroboration through the detailed consideration of particular examples. I hope to have clarified some of the conceptual issues surrounding the specification of decivilizing processes and to have provided some possible answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper concerning the nature of civilizing and decivilizing processes and their various dimensions. I have also described some of the possible characteristics of decivilizing processes and the probable conditions under which they would be likely to occur.

But I have not dealt with the substantial problems of historical detail and explanation, such as specific examples of decivilizing and the problem of transition between group decivilizing processes and those occurring in the other, broader dimensions of social relations, or between civilizing and decivilizing processes more generally. But if the theoretical reflections presented here go some way towards encouraging the application of these concepts in the context of empirical research, then they will have fulfilled their function as a means of adding to our understanding of social relations characterized by fear, violence and reciprocal killing.

Notes

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1. Elias does not define or differentiate the concept of violence. He uses the word *Gewalt* in his German publications, which generally indicates force, but its meaning in German is somewhat more differentiated than violence. In everyday speech, violence tends to refer to the (usually sudden) exercise of physical force so as to inflict injury or damage to humans, animals or things. More precisely, as I use it here, violence includes actions which infringe *physical* integrity, such as torture, wounding, killing and rape, or destruction by impact or arson. I would suggest that this is identical to

the way in which Elias uses the term violence throughout his work.

2. There is a good deal of historical evidence to back up Elias's claims concerning declining levels of violence within state-societies: see Huizinga (1955), Gurr (1981), Stone (1983), Thomas (1984), Beattie (1986), Cockburn (1991), Franke (1991) and Spierenburg (1993). For a contrary view, based on English material, see Macfarlane (1981).

3. Elias's account of the ways in which personality structures have changed in Western Europe since the Middle Ages has not gone unchallenged. In particular, see the objections of Van Krieken (1989), Duerr (1988), Maso (1982) and Lenhardt (1979).

4. See Goudsblom's differentiation of the three levels of civilizing processes: individual, socio-cultural, and the level of humanity at large (1984a: 129-47 and 1992: 7-8); cf. the differentiation made by Rehberg (1991: 69-70).

5. Elias clearly restates his intentions to this effect in the 1968 introduction to the German edition of the book (1994: 181-87). 'Civilization' is frequently used by historians and archaeologists to describe a specified social organization with certain 'levels' of achievement in its social, political, economic, religious and/or

artistic features; for example, the past 'civilizations' of Sumer, the Inca, Greece, India, Egypt, etc. Elias traces the antithetical development of the terms *Zivilisation* and *Kultur* in Germany, and *civilisation* in France and England in *The Civilizing Process* (1994: 3-28) and shows how 'civilization' is derivative of *courtesy* and *civility*, a sequence of terms for socially desirable upper-class behaviour. He discusses the way in which the term developed as a conceptual badge with which established Western elites described themselves in a particular historical era: it was (and to a large extent still is) the expression of their we-image. 'Civilization' was first widely popularized and understood in process terms by the Physiocrats. The development of this use of the word is closely associated with its normative connotation referring to a 'higher' state, frequently seen as a 'progression' in the sense of 'better' than that which had previously existed, associations from which Elias sought consciously to distance himself. This meaning of 'civilization' is often contrasted with a 'barbaric' or 'primitive' state of human existence and is used as a substantive in polar opposition to these two terms: it has obvious ethnocentric connotations. Cf. Kuzmics (1988: 518), who clarifies three main concepts of 'civilization' found in Elias's work.

6. In several places in *The Civilizing Process* the term civilization appears without quotation marks but it is quite obvious in these contexts that the word has a processual meaning. However, the word is used without qualification in a number of places throughout the book (see for example 1994: 165-67, 461, 485, 491, 493, 507, 511). This is less true of *The Court Society*, where the term appears without quotation marks in relatively few places (for example, 1983: 257, 259, 261, 263, 264, 265). Thus, Elias is not

always successful in his attempt to disentangle systematically the more normative connotations of the word civilization from his more detached use of the word simply because he was not more explicit on the matter (cf. Schröter 1990: 43ff; Mennell 1992: 30; Blok in Wilterdink 1984: 287-91).

7. The fact that Elias's theory is based primarily on European data does not mean that it is necessarily Eurocentric (cf. Mennell 1992: 207-8), or even ethnocentric, as some claim (Albrow 1969: 234; Thomas 1978: 30). However, see Thoden van Velzen (1982), Rasing (1982) and Jagers (1982) for critiques which suggest that members of certain non-state societies also exhibit civilized personality traits. For a defence of Elias on this see Goudsblom (1984b) and Mennell (1992: 240-41). The issue requires further research.

8. Cf. Mennell (1992:14-19). The following appears at the beginning of *The Civilizing Process* - a book written in exile - and seems frequently to have been missed by some readers: 'Dedicated to the memory of my parents, Hermann Elias, d. Breslau, Sophie Elias, d. Auschwitz 1941 (?)'. This certainly reveals some awareness of the fragility of modern civilization, contrary to the interpretation of Coser (1978: 566).

9. I have found the terms 'barbarism' and 'barbarity' in the following places in the essay: 394 (twice), 395 (three times), 401, 402, 410 (twice), 429, 447 (twice), 459, 464, 491 and 516 (Elias 1989).

10. In his article on decivilizing in the former Yugoslavia Mart Bax also uses the term 'barbarization' (Bax 1993).

11. Cf. Goudsblom (1992: 7-8), who differentiates three 'levels' of civilizing processes: the individual level; the socio-cultural level; and the level of humanity as a whole.

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