Dunning, Eric, and Jason Hughes. "Elias's 'Central Theory'." *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013. 76–111. *Bloomsbury Collections*. Web. 26 Apr. 2023. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781780933405.ch-003>>.

Downloaded from Bloomsbury Collections, www.bloomsburycollections.com, 26 April 2023, 00:26 UTC.

Copyright © Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes 2013. You may share this work for non-commercial purposes only, provided you give attribution to the copyright holder and the publisher, and provide a link to the Creative Commons licence.

Elias's 'Central Theory'

Elias regarded his theory of 'civilising processes' as a 'central theory'. As far as we are aware, he never wrote this down, but we know from his teaching and conversation that he developed the concept of a 'central theory' in partial agreement with C. Wright Mills's (1959) critical stance towards what Mills called 'grand theories' – theories which involve 'a level of thinking so general that [their] practitioners cannot logically get down to observation... [nor] from the higher generalities to problems in their historical and structural contexts. This absence of a firm sense of genuine problems, in turn, makes for the unreality so noticeable in their pages' (Mills 1959: 42).

The work of Parsons (1951) is probably the best example of a 'grand theorist' in this sense. Elias shared Mills's opposition to the generality, abstractness and non-empirical character of most of the writings of such scholars. He also shared Mills's stress on sociology as an historical subject concerned with structures. Hence the theory of civilising processes, as we shall see, involves the tracing of connections between the minutiae of developing social standards and social habituses on the one hand, and levels of state-formation, interdependency chains, functional democratisation and degrees of pacification under state control on the other.

In his Introduction to the 1968 edition of *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Elias compared his own work with the 'grand theory' of Parsons in the following terms:

What in this book is shown with the aid of extensive documentation to be a process, Parsons, by the static nature of his concepts, reduces retrospectively ... to states. Instead of a relatively complex process whereby the affective life of people is gradually moved towards an increased and more even control of affects – but certainly not towards a state of total affective neutrality – Parsons presents a simple opposition between two states, affectivity and affective neutrality, which are supposed to be present to different degrees in different types of society, as being like different quantities of chemical substances. By reducing to two different states what was shown empirically in *On The Process of Civilisation* to be a process and interpreted theoretically as such, Parsons deprives himself of the possibility of discovering how the distinguishing peculiarities of different societies to which he refers are actually to be explained. So far as is apparent, he does not even raise the question of explanation. The different states denoted by the antitheses of the 'pattern variables' are, it seems, simply given. The subtly articulated structural change towards increased and more even affect-control that may be observed in reality disappears in this kind of theorising. Social phenomena in reality can only be observed as developing and having developed... (Elias 2012a: 497–8)

So, according to Elias, Parsons's work involved 'process-' or 'state-reduction' (*Zustandsreduktion*). Sociological explanations, Elias contended, have to be data-based and historical-developmental in character. Robert Merton (1957) shared some of Mills's and Elias's opposition to 'grand theories' and advocated instead what he called 'theories of the middle range'. Since a 'middle range theory' sounds as though it might be similar to a 'central theory', it is essential to clarify what Merton and Elias meant by their very different concepts. According to Merton,

it would seem reasonable to suppose that sociology will advance in the degree that its major concern is with developing theories of the middle range and will be frustrated if attention centres on theory in the large. I believe that our major task *today* is to develop special theories applicable to limited ranges of data – theories, for example, of class dynamics, of conflicting group pressures, of the flow of power and the exercise of interpersonal influence – rather than to seek at once the 'integrated' conceptual structure adequate to derive all these and other theories ... I am suggesting that the road to effective conceptual schemes in sociology will be more effectively built through work on special theories, and that it will remain a largely unfulfilled plan, if one seeks to build it directly at this time. (Merton 1957: 9)

Elias would almost certainly have applauded the processual flavour of Merton's analogy between theory-building and road-building. However, despite the apparent similarity suggested by the words 'middle' and 'central', Elias was strongly opposed to the *ad hoc* character of Merton's concept. That was on account of his belief that Merton's strategy, whilst of undoubted potential value in addressing the need for a sociology based on a 'two-way traffic' between research and theory, would contribute to little or nothing being done to address the fragmentation which is rooted in the multi-paradigmatic character of the subject.

Hence Elias stressed the need for *central* theories, that is for theories based on meticulous, detailed and sensitive empirical observation couched at a level of synthesis sufficiently high to be applicable to a range of topics yet sufficiently down to earth to be clearly related to and relevant regarding the real-life experiences of humans. That Elias achieved a degree of success in this connection is suggested by the fact that the theory of civilising processes has been used to contribute to the advancement of knowledge with regard to such seemingly disparate subjects as – and we mention them in no particular order – time and timing, sport and leisure, the consumption of food and tobacco, war and violence, death and dying, scientific establishments, music in court and bourgeois societies, and many other aspects of human life. Let us look more deeply into Elias's central theory.

Western 'civilising processes' and some of their major variations

Elias's theory of civilising processes involves an attempt to shed light, among other things, on the rise to global dominance of the West in the eighteenth,

nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. It is concerned with exploring and explaining the undisputed, though far from permanent, fact of Western dominance and not with glorifying it (as some critics of Elias have suggested). Elias saw it in process terms. It was, at the time of writing (the 1930s), he suggested, the latest phase in a series of relatively discontinuous 'integration struggles' which have tended over long periods of historical time³⁵ and with numerous 'spurts and counterspurs' (Elias 2012a: 481) to become increasingly global in scope. In his later writings, Elias increasingly stressed as possibilities, not only further global unification and pacification under global state control, but also that humanity might destroy itself through nuclear war or global warming or at least propel itself back to a new 'Dark Ages'. It was one of his hopes that sociology might be of help to people in achieving the first of these possibilities and avoiding the second and the third. Let us explore the theory of 'civilising' processes in greater detail.

Elias's central problem

Elias's first words in his Preface to *On The Process of Civilisation* were:

Central to this study are modes of behaviour considered typical of people who are 'civilised' in a Western way. The problem they pose is simple enough. Western people have not always behaved in the manner we are accustomed to regard as typical or as the hallmark of 'civilised' people. If members of present-day Western society were to find themselves suddenly transported into a past epoch of their own society, such as the medieval-feudal period, they would find there much that they deem 'uncivilised' in other societies today. Their reaction would scarcely differ from that produced in them at present by the behaviour of people in feudal societies outside the Western world. They would, depending on their situation and inclinations, be either attracted by the wilder, more unrestrained and adventurous life of the upper classes in this society, or repulsed by the 'barbaric' customs, the squalor and coarseness that they encountered there. (Elias 2012a: 3)

Among the implications of this passage are the fact that Elias recognised that there are ways of 'being civilised' other than the Western one, and that, in the West at the time when he was writing, there was not a single, totally unified social habitus or behavioural canon. Thus Elias wrote that a 'civilised' person of his day would either have been in varying degrees attracted to or in varying degrees repulsed by the life of the medieval upper classes. Also, at pertinent points in his text, Elias placed inverted commas around terms such as 'civilised' and 'uncivilised' to signal his distance from their normative connotations (the emergence of which, indeed, was part of his central problem). His point was that most people in Western societies today have come to *regard themselves* as 'civilised', but that they would hesitate to apply this adjective to many people in 'tribal' societies or 'Third World' countries. However, it is also the case, according to Elias, that most people in the contemporary

West would not regard their own forerunners, for example, people in the 'medieval-feudal' period of Western history, as 'civilised'. They might like the relatively high degree of freedom of that period, particularly of the upper classes. They might dislike its coarseness and squalor, for example, the smell of horse dung and human excrement in the streets. Almost certainly, however, they would judge it in much the same manner as they would judge a 'Third World' country of today, that is as 'backward', 'crude', and 'uncivilised'. In a word, Western societies can be said to have undergone a 'civilising process', a series of transformations in the course of which their social structures and the social habituses of their people have become what they are today. This gives rise, said Elias, to a number of questions, in particular 'How did this change, this "civilising" of the West, actually happen? Of what did it consist? And what were its "causes" or "motive forces"? It is to the solution of these main questions that this study attempts to contribute' (Elias 2012a: 3). Thus, Elias was *attempting to contribute* to the understanding of how and why this 'civilising' of the West occurred. That is, he did not put *On The Process of Civilisation* forward as a final, definitive answer, some kind of 'grand theory', 'metanarrative' or 'totalising answer'. As Elias expressed it somewhat later in the text: 'This study ... poses and develops a ... wide-ranging problem; it does not pretend to solve it. It marks out a field of observation that has hitherto received relatively little attention, and undertakes the first steps towards an explanation. Others must follow' (Elias 2012a: 7).³⁶

Elias also made it clear at the outset that he was motivated in his study by practical as well as scholarly concerns. It has been suggested by Stephen Mennell (1998: 26) that Elias never became involved in party politics. It is true that, even after gaining British citizenship, he admitted to never having been a member of a political party, nor to have voted in elections. People who stress this negatively, however, seem unaware of Elias's practical involvement, not only in teaching and the development of sociology but also, while he was on the permanent staff at Leicester, in university politics (partly in the role of advisor to Ilya Neustadt) and, after his retirement, in student politics as well. During the student revolt across the West in 1968, for example, he insisted that Dunning accompany him on visits to the students – the leaders were mainly sociology undergraduates – who were occupying Leicester's library and administration building. He was interested in their reasons for what they were doing and in the experiments in 'new forms of living' in which members of the younger generation saw themselves as engaged in the 1960s. He also took pains to keep abreast with developments in world politics. In the Leicester Senior Common Room, for example, he was a regular reader of *Time Magazine* and the *International Herald Tribune*. He also listened regularly to the World Service of BBC radio. During the 1940s and early 1950s, he was also practically involved in the development of group psychoanalysis in Britain. What he sought principally to do in that connection, much like Fromm and other

members of ‘the Frankfurt School’ who attempted something not dissimilar from a mainly Marxist standpoint, was to contribute to the development of more sociologically informed forms of politics and psychotherapy than had existed hitherto. In fact, one could say that, *via* his use of aspects of the work of such scholars as Mannheim, Simmel and the two Webers, Elias succeeded better than Fromm *et al.* in producing a synthesis of the works of Marx and Freud. That had been something akin to the search for the ‘philosophers’ stone’ or the ‘Holy Grail’ among social scientists in the first half of the twentieth century. A flavour of the sort of thing that Elias had in mind is captured in the following passage:

[T]he issues raised by [this] book have their origin less in scholarly tradition ... than in the experiences in whose shadow we live, experiences of the crisis and transformation of Western civilisation as it has existed hitherto, and the simple need to understand what this ‘civilisation’ really amounts to. But I have not been guided in this study by the idea that our civilised mode of behaviour is the most advanced of all humanly possible modes of behaviour, nor by the opinion that ‘civilisation’ is the worst form of life and one that is doomed. All that can be seen today is that, with gradual civilisation, a number of specific civilisational perils arise. But it cannot be said that we already understand why we actually torment ourselves in such ways. We feel ... we have got ourselves, through civilisation, into certain entanglements unknown to less civilised peoples; but we also know that these less civilised peoples are ... often plagued with difficulties and fears from which we no longer suffer, or at least not to the same degree. Perhaps all this can be seen somewhat more clearly if it is understood how such civilising processes actually take place. At any rate, that was one of the wishes with which I set to work on this book. It may be that, through clearer understanding, we shall one day succeed in making accessible to more conscious control these processes which today take place in and around us not very differently from natural events, and which we confront as medieval people confronted the forces of nature. (Elias 2012a: 8)

Elias divided his study into four main parts. He called them:

1. ‘On the Sociogenesis of the Concepts of “Civilisation” and “Culture”’;
2. ‘Civilisation as a Specific Transformation of Human Behaviour’;
3. ‘Feudalisation and State-Formation’;
4. ‘Synopsis: Towards a Theory of Civilising Processes’.

Über den Prozess der Zivilisation (1939; 1968) was originally published simultaneously in two volumes. So, as we mentioned in Chapter 1, was the first English translation. However, in the latter case they were given titles different from Elias’s own. Volume 1 was called *The Civilising Process: the History of Manners* (1978) and Volume 2, *State-Formation and Civilisation* in the United Kingdom and *Power and Civility* in the USA. Both English translations of Volume 2 appeared in 1982. Elias objected strongly to ‘the History of

Manners' and 'Power and Civility' as, respectively, sub-title and title, but his objections were overruled by Urizen, the first publishers. He objected to 'the History of Manners' because it was less accurate and hence more misleading as a characterisation of the contents of the first volume than Elias's own 'Changes in the Behaviour of the Secular Upper Classes in the West', a sub-title which makes explicit the fact that he was, above all, deliberately excluding from systematic consideration in the study of the part played in European 'civilising' processes by religious elites. *Power and Civility* is similarly misleading because it contains no reference to processes of state-formation and gives pride of place to 'civility', a concept which, as we shall show, Elias demonstrates to have been the second in the tripartite series, 'courtesy', 'civility', 'civilisation' by means of which successive Western ruling classes expressed their self-image. In the nineteenth century, as the West as a whole became a kind of 'global ruling class', 'civilisation' came to be a 'national' term which expressed the self-consciousness of 'incorporated' groups in Western countries more generally. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, that meant in the first instance principally France and England and, later, increasingly the one-time colonial offshoot of the latter, the USA.³⁷

The sociogenesis of the concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'

By the term, 'sociogenesis', Elias meant 'social generation' or 'social production'. He would not have accepted terms like 'social construction' in this connection which were popularised in the 1960s by authors such as Berger and Luckmann (1966) and which remain quite widely used today. That is because Elias saw such terms as overly voluntaristic and rationalistic, whilst he was concerned with establishing as precisely as possible the *balance* between choice and determinism or compulsion in the origins and development of concepts, social practices, and social structures. Elias wrote not only of sociogenesis but of 'psychogenesis' as well. By this he meant the part played in social processes by 'psychodynamics' – that is, processes at the level of the psyche, personality or habitus that have lasting social ramifications.

Following the structure of *On the Process of Civilisation*, it makes sense to commence our exposition by exploring what Elias had to say about the sociogenesis of the concepts of 'civilisation' and 'culture'. What he wrote is, in effect, an essay in the sociology of knowledge, and grasping it is crucial for understanding the adequacy and value of the theory of 'civilising' processes as a contribution to sociological understanding. Elias arguably anticipated in this connection many of the arguments later put forward by writers such as Edward Said (1978) on this score. He cannot thus be fairly accused of 'eurocentric' bias.

The concept of 'civilisation', said Elias, can be used to refer to a wide variety of facts: to a society's level of technology; to the habitus and manners of its

people; to their religious ideas and customs; to their levels of bodily cleanliness and hygiene; to the way they play their sports; to the level of their scientific understanding; to the patterns of their class, gender and 'race' relations; to the ways in which they prepare their food; and many other things. In fact, there is practically nothing in the social lives of humans which cannot be described as more or less 'civilised' or more or less 'uncivilised'. This makes the concept of 'civilisation' difficult to define. However, it is not so difficult, according to Elias, to determine the general *function* of the term. What it has come to do, he wrote, is to express the self-consciousness of the West, especially of its dominant groups. It is, that is, a concept which is fundamentally bound up with power differentials and inter-group feelings and perceptions. As Elias put it, the concept:

sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or 'more primitive' contemporary ones. By this term, Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of *its* technology, the nature of *its* manners, the development of *its* scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more. (Elias 2012a: 15)

It is perhaps worth noting in passing that the Elias of the 1960s onwards would have sought to avoid the reification in this passage by referring to the beliefs of the *members* of Western *societies*. However, that minor correction is less important for present purposes than the fact that Elias went on to suggest that there are differences in the meaning which the concept of 'civilisation' has for the members of different Western nations, above all for the French and English on the one hand, and the Germans on the other. Even at this relatively early stage in his career, Elias was thinking in terms of what other German scholars have called the *Sonderweg*, Germany's partly separate or 'special path'. More particularly, while, for the French and English, 'civilisation' and its derivatives are terms that denote values of the highest rank, for the Germans, while 'civilisation' *can* be used as a praise-word, it is *usually* used only to denote second rate values. In German, it can also be used in a derogatory sense to mean 'superficiality' and a 'lack of solidity and depth'. As Elias put it: 'The word through which Germans interpret themselves, which more than any other expresses their pride in their own achievement and their own being, is *Kultur*, that is, "culture"' (Elias 2012a: 15).

A number of complex issues are raised by this discussion. For present purposes we shall dwell upon only one. Elias suggests that, while the concept of 'civilisation' is a universalistic term stressing common human characteristics that are either *in fact* or which *can potentially* be more or less widely shared, *Kultur* is, by contrast, a particularistic term which stresses difference. What Elias wrote on this is worth citing at length.

To a certain extent, the concept of civilisation plays down the national differences between peoples; it emphasises what is common to all human beings or – in the

view of its bearers – should be. It expresses the self-assurance of peoples whose national boundaries and ... identity have for centuries been so fully established that they have ceased to be the subject of ... discussion, peoples who have long expanded outside their borders and colonised beyond them.

In contrast, the German concept of *Kultur* places ... stress on national differences and the particular identity of groups; primarily by virtue of this, it has acquired in such fields as ethnological and anthropological research a significance far beyond the German linguistic area and the situation in which the concept originated. But that situation is the situation of a people which, by Western standards, arrived at political unification ... only very late, and from whose boundaries, for centuries and even down to the present, territories have again and again crumbled away or threatened to ... Whereas the concept of civilisation has the function of giving expression to the continuously expansionist tendency of colonising groups, the concept of *Kultur* mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation which had constantly to ... constitute its boundaries anew, in a political as well as a spiritual sense, and again and again had to ask itself: 'What really is our identity?' The orientation of the German concept of culture, with its tendency towards demarcation and the emphasis on the detailing of differences between groups, corresponds to this historical process. The questions: 'What is really French? What is really English?' have long since ceased to be a matter of much discussion for the French and English. But for centuries the question, 'What is really German?' has not been laid to rest. One answer to this question – one among many – lies in a particular aspect of the concept of *Kultur*. (Elias 2012a: 17)

Elias wrote this in the 1930s, at a time when the British Empire appeared, at least on the surface, to be by and large intact. Now that the British Empire and its 'Commonwealth' have virtually ceased to exist and the United Kingdom has become a multi-ethnic, 'multi-cultural' society which is part of the European Community, the question of what it 'really means to be English' has arisen once again alongside what it means to be 'British', 'Scots', 'Welsh', 'Northern Irish', 'Hindu-', 'Sikh-' or 'Moslem-English', or an English/British person of African, Afro-Caribbean or Hong Kong Chinese descent. Much the same holds good for the French. However, according to Elias writing in the 1930s, the concept of 'civilisation' in French and English had by then come to be a high-praise term that expresses the national self-consciousness of colonising peoples who had enjoyed secure national boundaries and a corresponding sense of national identity for centuries. Together with this, went a tendency to want to 'civilise barbarians' in fact as well as in ideological justification of their colonial exploitation of them.

By contrast, the German concept of *Kultur*, the Germans' equivalent high-praise term, is a concept that mirrors the self-consciousness of a nation that has lacked secure boundaries, a secure national identity and that has not been able to engage in such continuous and successful colonial expansion as the French and the English. Finally, *Zivilisation* can be a praise-term of second rank in German usage as well as a term with a negative meaning.

How can this overall linguistic development be accounted for? Mathematical concepts, said Elias, can be separated from the groups that use them. You can explain triangles or rectangles without reference to socio-spatial,

socio-historical and socio-cultural circumstances. They are the same in Ireland, England, Australia and Kurdistan. They are the same today as they were in the ninth, twelfth, sixteenth, and twentieth centuries. However, *social* concepts such as 'civilisation' and 'culture' cannot be understood independently of the groups that invented and use them. Nor can they be understood independently of the histories of these groups. They are terms which bear the stamp of whole peoples, or perhaps only of certain of their constituent classes. Early on, these were usually ruling classes but, later, to the extent that democratisation occurred, wider groups became drawn in.

A given-term may have been invented by a traceable individual. It may have been '*man-made*' as opposed to '*men-made*', (or '*person-made*' as opposed to '*people-made*'), that is, an 'individual' as opposed to a 'collective invention'.³⁸ However, the fact that a given term becomes established indicates, according to Elias, that it meets 'collective' and not merely 'individual needs'. How does Elias explain the emergence of the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation* in German usage? And how and why did this antithesis take root?

According to Elias, the interaction among a combination of three part-processes helps to answer this question. More particularly, he suggests:

- (i) German society did not undergo a process of national unification until a comparatively late stage, much later than the French and English;
- (ii) the courtly ruling classes in Germany were more socially exclusive than their French and English counterparts and did not possess sufficient confidence to integrate bourgeois groupings into their social circles to the same degree as the more secure and self-confident French and English;

and

- (iii) the ruling classes in Germany in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries spoke French rather than German and modelled their behaviour to a large extent on that of their counterparts in France. In fact, they used the French terms 'civilisation' and 'civilisé' to describe their own behaviour and to contrast it with that of their own compatriots lower down the social scale, members of the bourgeoisie included. As Elias suggests, the philosopher Leibniz, the only German in this period who won wide acclaim in European courtly circles, 'wrote and spoke French or Latin, seldom German' (2012a: 22). And Frederick the Great, the King of Prussia, published a book in 1780 which he entitled *De la littérature allemande* (*Of German Literature*) in which he said of German: 'I find a half-barbarous language, which breaks down into as many different dialects as Germany has provinces ...' (2012a: 22).

Elias sought to explain this emergent antithesis thus:

At the top almost everywhere in Germany were individuals or groups who spoke French and decided policy. On the other side, there was a German-speaking intelligentsia, who by and large had no influence on political developments. From their ranks, essentially, came the people on whose account Germany has been called the land of poets and thinkers. And from them concepts such as *Bildung* ('cultivation') and *Kultur* received their specifically German imprint... (2012a: 26)

At the roots of the antithesis between *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*, wrote Elias, lay the 'relative indigence' of Germany as a whole which followed from the country's post-medieval fragmentation and the frequency with which it was involved in wars. 'This', he suggested,

impelled the nobles to cut themselves off, using proof of ancestry as the most important instrument for preserving their privileged social existence. On the other hand, it blocked to the German middle class the main route by which in Western countries bourgeois elements rose, intermarried with, and were received by the aristocracy: through money. (2012a: 31)³⁹

Elias acknowledged that, at times, the meaning of *Kultur* for the Germans came close to that of 'civilisation' for the French and English. For example, Meyer wrote in 1897 that: 'Civilisation is the stage through which a barbaric people must pass in order to attain higher *Kultur* in art, science and attitudes' (2012a: 559). The idea of *Zivilisation* as second rate nevertheless persisted. It was 'an expression of Germany's self-assertion against the Western Countries' (2012a: 559) and had its counterpart in the belief of people in the latter that they had fought the First World War against Germany in order to defend 'civilisation'. Elias could not have had more than an inkling of this at the time when he was writing but 1939, the year in which *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* was published, was also the year in which a second 'crusade' against Germany in the name of 'civilisation' was about to begin. As we shall see, Germany in that period was in the throes of a 'breakdown of civilisation' and members of the victorious 'allies' felt more than fully justified in going to war against the German 'barbarians' for a second and, in the case of the French, third time.

'Civilisation' as a specific transformation of human behaviour

We suggested earlier that Elias saw 'civilisation' as the latest term in the threefold series, 'courtesy', 'civility', 'civilisation', through which, in the context of societies that were experiencing what we now know to have been accelerating social change, members of the secular ruling classes expressed their self-consciousness and sense of social superiority. However, Elias did not deal with the concepts in the order in which they emerged. He started rather

with the middle term, 'civility', a term first used, if the currently available records are correct, by the humanist, Erasmus of Rotterdam, in a book entitled *De civilitate morum puerilium* (*Of civility in boys*) which was published in 1530. It went through more than 130 editions, thirteen as late as the eighteenth century. It was translated into all main European languages (2012a: 62), a fact which indicates that it met a widely felt need among the secular ruling classes as the Middle Ages drew to a close and 'modernity' came into the ascendancy.

Elias dealt with 'civility codes' first because Erasmus's book enables readers to 'look', as it were, 'both ways', at what was, in the sixteenth century, the past as well as the future. It was, quite literally, a transitional text. It recommended ways of behaving to boys that were rooted equally in feudal and modern traditions. In that sense, it was indicative of 'civilisation' as a process. Listen to Erasmus on 'body language', in the first instance on how people use their eyes. 'A wide-eyed look,' he said,

is a sign of stupidity, staring a sign of inertia; the looks of those prone to anger are too sharp; too lively and eloquent those of the immodest; if your look shows a calm mind and a respectful amiability, that is best. Not by chance do the ancients say: the seat of the soul is in the eyes. (2012a: 64)

The sentiments expressed here are neither shocking nor surprising to people with the habitus or affective moulding of people who consider themselves 'civilised' today. Shortly afterwards, however, Erasmus went on to write: 'There should be no snot on the nostrils ... A peasant wipes his nose on his hat and coat, a sausage maker on his arm and elbow' (2012a: 64). Later on, he said: do not expose 'the parts to which Nature has attached modesty' unless you need to. Some people, he wrote, demand that boys should 'retain the wind by compressing the belly'. But you can become ill if you do that. 'Fools who value civility more than health repress natural sounds' (2012a: 66).

This brings out clearly the 'Janus-faced' character of this stage in the development of Western manners. On the one hand, Erasmus does not hesitate to use the word 'snot' which is embarrassing to us. On the other, he uses circumlocutions instead of referring directly to the genitalia or, to use words which are still largely taboo in 'polite company', 'belching' and 'farting'.⁴⁰ This leads Elias to suggest that:

[I]n following back the concept of civilisation to its ancestor *civilitéé*, one suddenly finds oneself on the track of the civilising process itself, of the actual changes in behaviour that took place in the West. That it is embarrassing for us to speak or even hear of much that Erasmus discusses is one of the symptoms of this process of civilisation. The greater or lesser discomfort we feel towards people who discuss or mention their bodily functions more openly, who conceal and restrain these functions less than we do, is one of the dominant feelings expressed in the judgement 'barbaric' or 'uncivilised'. Such, then, is the nature of 'barbarism and its discontents' or, in more precise and less evaluative terms, the discomfort with the different structure of affects, the different standard of repugnance which is still

to be found today in many societies which we term 'uncivilised', the standard of repugnance which preceded our own and is its precondition. (Elias 2012a: 66–67).

This raises the question, said Elias, of how and why Western societies actually moved from one standard to another, how they became more 'civilised'. In seeking answers, he wrote, feelings of discomfort, embarrassment and superiority will inevitably be aroused in us. The generation of such feelings, argued Elias, anticipating one of the central and frequently misunderstood planks in his treatise on 'involvement and detachment' (1987a), is a valuable part of the exercise. It is necessary, however, to try to control these feelings, 'to attempt to suspend all the feelings of embarrassment and superiority, all the value judgements and criticisms associated with the concepts "civilisation" or "uncivilised"' (2012a: 67). They refer to a 'beginningless' and still ongoing process. Our descendants may well be embarrassed by aspects of our behaviour. They may well regard us as part of an extended 'feudal' or 'medieval' era or even, as Elias later put it, as 'late barbarians' (1991b). Let us look at some of the evidence which formed the backbone of what one might call the 'microsociological' basis of Elias's theory, what has misleadingly been called 'the history of manners'.

'Courtesy', 'civility' and 'civilisation' as stages in a process

'Courtesy', 'civility', and 'civilisation' are, as we have seen, a temporal series. That is, 'courtesy' emerged first, in the medieval/feudal period. 'Civility' emerged second, in the era that historians, depending on whether they want to emphasise religious or secular aspects, conventionally call 'the Reformation' and 'the Renaissance'. It was a time when 'knightly society and the unity of the Catholic church were disintegrating' (2012a: 61). 'Civilisation' followed. Like 'civility', it can be traced to a specific individual: the elder Mirabeau in the 1760s (2012a: 47). '(A)t the moment of its formation', said Elias, it was 'a clear reflection of reformist ideas', those of 'the Physiocrats', the precursors of modern economists, a court clique (not yet a political party in the English sense) who wanted monarchs to become 'enlightened' and to rule according to 'rational' principles rooted in an understanding of the demonstrable dynamics of 'civilisation' which they believed they had discovered (2012a: 52).

According to Elias, 'two ideas were fused in the concept of "civilisation"'. On the one hand, it formed a 'counter-concept' to an earlier stage of development, 'barbarism'. On the other, it was perceived as a process which had to be taken further. This latter aspect, said Elias, was an expression of the interests of the rising middle class. In this sense, the term reflected the 'specific social fortunes of the French bourgeoisie to exactly the same degree that the concept of *Kultur*' reflected that of its German counterpart (2012a: 57).

So, the concept of 'civilisation' started 'life' as a middle class weapon.⁴¹ As the middle classes gained in power, however, it came to express the national

self-image and serve as a means of justifying French (and English) aspirations to national expansion and colonisation. For example, when Napoleon set off for Egypt in 1798, he admonished his troops: 'Soldiers, you are undertaking a conquest with incalculable consequences for civilisation' (2012a: 57). From that point on, said Elias, the French, and the English whom they were fighting, came to consider their own processes of civilisation as complete. He continued:

the consciousness of their own superiority, the consciousness of this 'civilisation' from now on serves at least those nations which have become colonial conquerors, and therefore a kind of upper class to large sections of the non-European world, as a justification of their rule, to the same degree that earlier the ancestors of the concept of civilisation ... had served the courtly-aristocratic upper class as a justification of theirs. (2012a: 57)

To refer to the terms 'courtesy', 'civility' and 'civilisation' as a temporal series, as expressing stages in a process, is not to imply that each time a new term emerged, the earlier one or ones fell into disuse. All three continue to be used (along with synonyms such as 'politeness') to the present day.⁴²

But the 'civilising process', according to Elias, has not involved merely a linguistic change. Using a variety of literary and pictorial sources, but primarily manners books aimed at the secular upper classes, the knights, the courtiers, and the bourgeoisie, Elias demonstrates the long term-term occurrence of a trend towards the increasing elaboration and refinement of manners and etiquette. This process was full of short-term and medium-term discontinuities, 'civilising' and 'decivilising spurts', and periods which were experienced at the time as stasis but in which the immanent dynamics were leading in the long-term to change. This went hand-in-hand with an increase in the social pressure on people to exercise stricter, more continuous, more even, more moderate and more nuanced self-control over a growing number of aspects of their feelings and behaviour in more and more social situations. The comparatives here are significant and all five adjectives are needed. That is, the trend involved pressure towards stricter, *more* continuous, *more* even, *more* moderate, and *more* nuanced self-control in a *greater* number of social situations. At the levels of personality and habitus, this resulted in a deeper internalisation of social norms and taboos, that is, the emergence of a conscience which operates automatically and at an 'unconscious' level, much like the Freudian superego.⁴³ Today, we blush automatically if we violate a deep taboo in public, for example, if a man on a bus is told his fly-buttons are undone or if he realises that his penis is visibly erect. Together with the emergence of such a conscience, there has occurred what Elias called a raising of the 'threshold of repugnance' (*Peinlichkeitsschwelle*) and an advance in the 'frontiers of modesty and shame'. This means that people today are liable to experience feelings of revulsion and to get embarrassed more easily in relation, for example, to bodily functions than was the case with people in the Middle Ages. The evidence also suggests that medieval people were more liable than ourselves to experience sudden

and extreme mood-swings. A present-day psychiatrist might well label them as having suffered from 'manic-depression' or 'bi-polarity'.

As we saw, the standard of 'good behaviour' in the European Middle Ages was expressed through the concept of 'courtesy'. It represented more clearly than the later terms, 'civility' and 'civilisation', a definite social location. It meant: this is how people behave in the courts of kings and other great feudal lords. It did not, says Elias, represent a beginning or the bottom rung in the 'ladder of civilisation' (2012a: 57). Elias ignored the small national differences that there were in courtesy codes and their spread to somewhat broader strata and stressed, instead, their simplicity. There were, he suggested, 'as in all societies where the emotions are expressed more violently and directly, fewer psychological nuances and complexities in the general stock of ideas. There were friend and foe, desire and aversion, good and bad people' (2012a: 71).

Let us give a few examples of changing manners to illustrate the long-term trend and its sequential order. *On The Process of Civilisation* is an empirically rich sociology book. What follows is nothing more than a selection from the mass of data presented by Elias. Following his practice, our time-series starts with a few items of table manners. It is important to remember in this connection that the courtly ruling strata in the Middle Ages were warrior leaders who took part directly in battles themselves. More often than today, a whole animal, fish or bird, including its head, was carved at table. They took meat from a common bowl with their fingers. The knife was the main implement for transferring food to their mouths. Contrasting these medieval warrior leaders and their courtly subordinates with ourselves, Elias wrote:

What was lacking in this *courtois* world, or at least had not developed to the same degree, was the invisible wall of affects which seems now to rise between one human body and another, repelling and separating. This wall is often perceptible today at the mere approach of something that has been in contact with the mouth or hands of someone else, and which manifests itself as embarrassment at the mere sight of many bodily functions of others, and often at their mere mention, or as a feeling of shame when one's own functions are exposed to the gaze of others, and by no means only then. (2012a: 77)

Selected examples of 'the courtesy', 'civility' and 'civilisational' codes

Thirteenth century

A man who clears his throat when he eats and one who blows his nose in the table cloth are both ill-bred, I assure you.

You should not poke your teeth with a knife, as some do; it is a bad habit.

It is not decent to poke your fingers into your ears or eyes, or to pick your nose while eating. These three things are bad.

(All three extracts in Elias 2012a: 92–94; from Tannhäuser's *Hofzucht* (Courtly Manners))

Do not spit over or on the table. Do not spit into the bowl when washing your hands. (Elias 2012a: 151; from *Stans Puer ad Mensam*)⁴⁴

Fifteenth century

Do not put back on your plate what has been in your mouth.

Do not offer anyone a piece of food you have bitten into. (Elias 2012a: 94; from *S'ensuivent les contenance de la table* (These are good table manners))

Before you sit down, make sure your seat has not been fouled (ibid., Elias 2012a: 129)

Do not touch yourself under your clothes with your bare hands. (Elias 2012a: 129; from *Ein spruch der ze tische kêrt*)

It is unseemly to blow your nose into the table cloth. (ibid., Elias 2012a: 142)

Sixteenth century

It is impolite to greet someone who is urinating or defecating ... A well-bred person should always avoid exposing without necessity the parts to which nature has attached modesty. (Elias 2012a: 129; *De civilitate morum puerilium*, 1530)

It does not befit a modest, honourable man to prepare to relieve nature in the presence of other people, nor to do up his clothes afterwards in their presence ... [I]t is not a refined habit, when coming upon something disgusting in the sheet, as sometimes happens, to turn at once to one's companion and point it out to him. It is far less proper to hold out the stinking thing for the other to smell... (Della Casa, *Galateo*, Geneva, 1609: 32; quoted in Elias (Elias 2012a: 130–131). Della Casa's text originally appeared in 1558)

One should not, like rustics who have not been to court or lived among refined and honourable people, relieve oneself without shame or reserve in front of ladies, or before the doors or windows of court chambers or other rooms. (Elias 2012a: 131; from the *Wernigerode Court Regulations*, 1570)

Let no one, whoever he may be, before, at or after meals, early or late, foul the staircases, corridors or closets with urine or other filth, but go to suitable, prescribed places for such relief. (Elias 2012a: 131; from the *Brunswick Court Regulations* of 1589)

Seventeenth century

Let not thy privy members be
layd open to be view'd,
it is most shameful and abhord,

detestable and rude.

Retaine not urine nor the winde

which doth thy body vex

so it be done with secresie

let that not thee perplex.

(Elias 2012a: 131; from Richard Weste, *The Booke of Demeanor and the Allowance and Disallowance of Certaine Misdemeanors in Companie*, 1619)

The smell of the mire is horrible. Paris is a dreadful place. The streets smell so badly that you cannot go out. The extreme heat is causing large quantities of meat and fish to rot in them, and this, coupled to the multitude of people who piss in the street, produces a smell so detestable that it cannot be endured. (From the correspondence of the Duchess of Orleans, October 9, 1694; date also given as August 25, 1718. Quoted in Elias 2012a: 132)

[At table] to blow your nose openly into your handkerchief, without concealing yourself with your serviette, and to wipe away your sweat with it ... are filthy habits fit to make everyone's gorge rise ... You should avoid yawning, blowing your nose and spitting. If you are obliged to do so ... do it in your handkerchief, while turning your face away and shielding yourself with your left hand, and do not look into your handkerchief afterwards. (Elias 2012a: 144; from Courtin, *Nouveau Traité de Civilité*, 1672)

Eighteenth century

At table you should use a serviette, a plate, a knife, a spoon and a fork ... It is improper to use the serviette to wipe your face; it is far more so to rub your teeth with it, and it would be one of the greatest offences against civility to use it to blow your nose... (Elias 2012a: 100; from La Salle, *Les Régles de la bienséance et de la civilité Chrétienne*, Rouen, 1729: 7)

It is a part of decency and modesty to cover all parts of the body except the head and hands. You should ... not ... touch with your bare hands any part of the body that is not normally uncovered ...

It is far more contrary to decency and propriety to touch or to see in another person, particularly of the other sex, that which Heaven forbids you to look at in yourself. When you need to pass water, you should always withdraw to some unfrequented place. And it is proper (even for children) to perform other natural functions where you cannot be seen.

It is very impolite to emit wind from your body when in company, either from above or from below, and it is shameful and indecent to do it in a way that can be heard by others.

It is never proper to speak of the parts of the body that should be hidden, nor of certain bodily necessities to which Nature has subjected us, nor even to mention them. (ibid., Elias 2012a: 132; from La Salle, 1729, *loc. cit*)

It is very impolite to keep poking your finger into your nostrils, and still more insupportable to put what you have pulled from your nose into your mouth ...

It is vile to wipe your nose with your bare hand, or to blow it on your sleeve or your clothes ... You should always use your handkerchief... (Elias 2012a: 145–6; from La Salle, 1729, *loc. cit*)

You should not abstain from spitting, and it is very ill-mannered to swallow what should be spat. This can nauseate others ... Nevertheless, you should not become accustomed to spitting too often ... When you are with well-born people ... it is polite to spit into your handkerchief while turning slightly aside. (Elias 2012a: 153)

Nineteenth century

Forks were undoubtedly a later invention than fingers, but as we are not cannibals, I am inclined to think they were a good one. (Elias 2012a: 103; from *The Habits of Good Society*, London, 1859)

no epicure ever yet put a knife to an apple, and ... an orange should be peeled with a spoon. (Elias 2012a: 125; *The Habits of Good Society*, *ibid*)

Spitting is at all times a disgusting habit ... besides being coarse and atrocious, it is very bad for your health. (Elias 2012a: 154; *The Habits of Good Society*, *ibid*)

Elias's use of literary and other sources

Although they constituted his major source of systematic time-series data, Elias did not rely solely on manners books in his attempt to shed light on the Western 'process of civilisation'. He used literary and pictorial sources to great effect as well. Take, for example, what we now call 'sex' and 'gender relations', that is, respectively, the unlearned biological and the learned social aspects of the relations between males and females. The shame feelings surrounding sexual relations, says Elias, have become noticeably stronger in the course of the civilising process. This fact is 'manifested particularly clearly in talking about these relations to children' (Elias 2012a: 167). In his *Colloquies*, for example, a book intended, like *De civilitate morum puerilium*, for the instruction of young boys and dedicated to his six- or eight-year old godson, Erasmus depicts a young man wooing a girl, a woman complaining about her husband's bad behaviour, and a discussion between a young man and a prostitute. An influential nineteenth century German pedagogue called Von Raumer fulminated against this by saying: 'Erasmus here paints fleshly lust in the basest way' and proceeds to ask: 'How could such a book be introduced in countless schools? What had boys to do with these satyrs?' (Elias 2012a: 167). This example of what we in Britain today might call 'Victorian morality' provides an illustration of the social and psychological distance which had grown between adults and children. It is also marked by the growing length of childhood/adolescent dependency, childhood and adolescent socialisation and by such facts as that the clothing of adults and children used to be far less

different in the Middle Ages and early modern period than is the case today. Although this has more recently changed somewhat as a consequence of the so-called 'permissive revolution' of the 1960s – a better term would be the 'era of informalisation' (see Wouters 1977; 1986; 2008) – sex, sexuality and childbirth were hidden from children and spoken of mainly through circumlocutions.

Also pointing in the direction of lower inhibitions and a different standard of shame regarding the body, sex and sexuality than our own are the wedding customs of the upper classes. In the courts of the early Middle Ages, for example, there was a procession into the bridal chamber led by the best man. The bride was undressed by her bridesmaids and the bridegroom had to mount her in the presence of witnesses, otherwise the marriage was invalid. 'Once in bed you are rightly wed' was the old saying. Later on, this custom changed in that the couple were allowed to lie on the bed fully clothed. Even in the French absolute courts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, this custom persisted with the couple being taken to bed by the guests, undressed and given their nightclothes (Elias 2012a: 174).

Members of the court aristocracy often regarded the restriction of sexual relations to marriage as 'bourgeois' and, according to Elias, women in that context experienced a degree of liberation that was lost in the bourgeois society of the nineteenth century. What was involved was a changing balance between freedom and constraint. As Elias put it:

[T]he bourgeoisie as a whole became freed from the pressures of the absolutist-estates social structure. Both bourgeois men and ... women were now relieved of the extended constraints to which they were subjected as second-rate people in the hierarchy of estates. But the interweaving of trade and money, the growth of which had given them the social power to liberate themselves, had increased. In this respect, the social constraints on individuals were stronger than before. The pattern of self-restraint imposed on the people of bourgeois society through their occupational work was in many respects different from the pattern imposed on the emotional life by the functions of court society. For many aspects of the 'emotional economy', bourgeois functions – above all, business life – demand and produce greater self-restraint than courtly functions. (Elias 2012a: 181)

Other things which point towards there having been a more relaxed outlook on sex and the body in the Middle Ages and early modern period were attitudes to prostitution, illegitimacy, and public nakedness. Take the case of prostitution. It was a low status occupation but more open than is the case today. A telling illustration is provided by the fact that, in 1434, the (Holy Roman) Emperor Sigismund 'publicly thanked the city magistrate of Berne for putting the brothel at the disposal of himself and his attendants for three days' (Elias 2012a: 173). In similar fashion, 'illegitimate' upper class men in the Middle Ages often allowed themselves to be called 'bastard', or called themselves by this label 'expressly and proudly' (Elias 2012a: 179). They did not seek to hide it. A somewhat more advanced stage of shame-feeling,

however, says Elias, is revealed by the fact that, in the eighteenth century, the Marquise de Châtelet, Voltaire's mistress, could sit naked and unconcerned in her bath with her manservant there and scold him for not pouring in the hot water properly. Given his low status, she did not regard him as a man in any sexual sense (Elias 2012a: 138). In the absolute courts, whether or not a person became embarrassed was evidently in large part a matter of relativities of rank.

Changes in the standards regarding violence and aggression point in the same direction. In the 'civilised' nations of the West, says Elias, aggressiveness – he was referring primarily but not solely to the aggressiveness of males – has become bound, 'even in directly warlike actions, by the advanced state of the division of functions, and by the resulting greater dependence of individuals on each other and on the technical apparatus. It is confined and tamed by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints' (Elias 2012a: 187). During the Middle Ages, by contrast, even though that period was nowhere near constituting a zero-point of standards in this or any other regard, 'rapine, battle, hunting of people and animals', all formed part of the pleasures of life for the knightly ruling classes. 'The only threat, the only danger that could instil fear was that of being overpowered in battle by a stronger opponent' (Elias 2012a: 189).

Medieval knights lived for battle. They had been trained for it from an early age. They took pleasure in torturing and killing others. Indeed, social conditions to some extent pushed them in this direction. According to Elias:

What, for example, ought to be done with prisoners? There was little money in this society. With regard to prisoners who could pay and who, moreover, were members of one's own class, one exercised some degree of restraint. But the others? To keep them meant to feed them. To return them meant to enhance the wealth and fighting power of the enemy. For subjects (that is, working, serving and fighting hands) were a part of the wealth of the ruling class of that time. So prisoners were killed or sent back so mutilated that they were unfitted for war service and work. The same applied to destroying fields, filling in wells and cutting down trees. In a predominantly agrarian society, in which immobile possessions represented the major part of property, this, too, served to weaken the enemy. (Elias 2012a: 189)

Given the relative instability of their lives, medieval knights were less emotionally stable, more prone to sudden mood shifts, than tends to be true of their counterparts today. They were liable suddenly to switch between extremes of joy and sadness, love and hate, anger with and pity for others. Starting around the fifteenth century, the open and unalloyed joy they took in battle began to be tempered by feelings for their war comrades, the code of chivalry (Elias 2012a: 207), and beliefs in the justice of a cause. Later still, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nationalistic ideologies and the belief that fighting and dying for one's nation was a supreme value increasingly took pride of place.

According to Elias, similar patterns prevailed among the nascent bourgeoisie. Feuding, belligerence, hatred, and joy in tormenting others were all more uninhibited among rising members of the 'Third Estate' than later became the case. Echoing Marx on this, Elias suggested that it was not only 'the weapon of money that carried the burgher upward. Robbery, fighting, pillage, family feuds – all this played a hardly less important role in the life of the town population than in that of the warrior class itself' (Elias 2012a: 192). Elias went on presciently to comment on the much touted role of religion in this connection as follows:

Much of what appears contradictory to us – the intensity of their piety, the violence of their fear of hell, their guilt feelings, their penitence, the immense outbursts of joy and gaiety, the sudden flaring and the uncontrollable force of their hatred and belligerence – all these, like the rapid changes of mood, are in reality symptoms of one and the same structuring of the emotional life. The drives, the emotions were vented more freely, more directly, more openly than later. It is only to us, in whom everything is more subdued, moderate and calculated, and in whom social taboos are built much more deeply into the fabric of our drive economy as self-restraints, that the unveiled intensity of this piety, belligerence or cruelty appears to be contradictory. Religion, the belief in the punishing or rewarding omnipotence of God, never has in itself a 'civilising' or affect-subduing effect. On the contrary, religion is always exactly as 'civilised' as the society or class which upholds it. (Elias 2012a: 194–5)

Summing up, the overall direction of the microsocial and psychogenetic changes in habitus, norms and behaviour documented by Elias was towards:

- (i) the 'privatisation' or 'pushing behind the scenes' of the performance of major bodily functions. They, and the associated body parts, came over time to be viewed as distasteful, and Elias wrote in this respect of the 'rising threshold of repugnance' and advances in the 'frontiers of modesty and shame'. People began in this connection to feel uncomfortable at the sight of blood and, correspondingly, animals which were to be eaten came to be killed in abattoirs and butchers' shops. The performance of toilet functions was confined to the bathroom and specially designated public buildings, and sex and sleeping were confined primarily to the bedroom. During the Middle Ages and early modern periods, executions had been public spectacles attended by large animated crowds but, as part of the same overall trend, they began during the nineteenth century to be carried out behind closed doors and, during the second half of the twentieth, were widely abolished. The United States forms an interesting exception in this latter regard.⁴⁵
- (ii) also as part of this overall complex of changes, the fork and the spoon came to be the main eating implements, the only ones allowed for

transferring food from plate to mouth. Correlatively, the knife came to be increasingly surrounded with prohibitions out of proportion to its actual danger. This, explained Elias, was on account of the fact that knives are not only eating implements but also weapons and are thus symbols of aggressiveness and violence, forms of behaviour, which were coming increasingly to be subject to controls.

- (iii) the courts of kings, queens, princes and dukes etc. were the principal model-making centres where the standards of good behaviour associated with the courtesy, civility, and civilisational codes developed, and from which they spread through processes of downwards diffusion. According to Elias: 'What slowly began to form at the end of the Middle Ages was not just one courtly society here and another there. It was a courtly aristocracy embracing Western Europe with its centre in Paris, its dependencies in all other courts, and offshoots in all other circles which claimed to belong to the great world of "Society", notably the upper stratum of the bourgeoisie and to some extent even broader layers of the middle class' (Elias 2012a: 218). This Europe-wide 'court-society' was characterised by what one might, using an apparently contradictory term, call 'conflictful integration'. That is to say, despite the political differences among them and the numerous wars they fought against each other, its members were unified by a common language, French, and a common code of behaviour derived from Paris. For a long time, the patterns of social distance and communication within this Europe-wide court society were closer than between them and members of their respective national lower classes. It is worth pointing out that one of the major differences between Elias's understanding of European social development and that of Marx consisted precisely of the fact that the former regarded this court society as a crucial transitional stage, whereas the latter, given the economic tenor of his thinking, failed to see its significance, preferring to think in terms of a direct transition from feudalism to capitalism. Anthony Giddens is one of the few 'non-Eliasian' sociologists to agree with Elias on this score.⁴⁶
- (iv) manners books for upper class adults in the Middle Ages and early modern period included instructions on behavioural rules which adults in the West today take for granted because they have been firmly instilled in them as children. One of the implications of this is that the period of primary socialisation has been extended in the course of contemporary processes of civilisation. This means that the period of childhood dependency has been lengthened, too, and that the social and psychological distance between adults and children has grown correlatively.

Let us turn our attention now to the 'macrosocial' levels of Elias's theory, that is to say, what he had to say about state-formation, pacification under state-control, the lengthening of interdependency chains and related 'macro-social' processes. We do not pretend that what follows details the whole of his case.

State-formation and the lengthening of interdependency chains: the 'macro-social' levels of 'civilising processes' in the West

According to Elias, 'The question why people's behaviour and emotions change is basically the same as the question why their forms of living change' (Elias 2012a: 199). More particularly, it was Elias's contention that the manners, personalities and habituses of the people of Western Europe changed in a 'civilising direction' in conjunction with the following macro-social changes: state-formation, in particular the formation of state monopolies of violence and taxation. According to Elias, these are the 'major means of ruling' in societies with a money economy. Correlatively came growing production, growing trade, and growing wealth. All of these, Elias conceptualised as a complex of interacting processes that involve(d) the lengthening and concentration of interdependency chains, that is, growing social differentiation or division of labour, and the growth of towns; together with demographic growth, that is, the growth of populations. Another way of putting all of this would be to say that, according to Elias, the 'civilising processes' of Western Europe occurred correlatively with the emergence of capitalist-urban-industrial-nation-states, and such social units were initially primarily formed through and for war. In short, 'civilising processes' were conflictful affairs which involved 'hegemonic struggles' *within* the emergent nation states and 'integrational struggles' *between* them.

It was another of Elias's contentions that what we call 'societies' are best conceptualised as 'survival units' or 'attack-and-defence units'. These are self-explanatory terms through which Elias sought to capture the simultaneously military and economic functions of human societies (Elias 2012b). These units have ranged historically from clans and tribal groupings, through city-states and feudal states, to absolutist states and modern nation-states. The phases of European history focused on principally by Elias in *On the Process of Civilisation* involved a shift from feudal states, through absolutist states, to nation-states. More importantly for present purposes, however, such 'survival units' are all multi-faceted with regard to violence. This means that, whilst they typically involve an attempt to limit and control *internal* violence, violence *against* 'outsiders' tends to be condoned and, especially in times of war, even regarded as legitimate and rewarded (Elias 2012b: 164–70). As we have seen, Elias also argued that power is a property of *all* social relations. This means that he held social relations to always involve an element of internal conflict

and competition. Correlatively with this, and implicitly following Lewin (1952) and anticipating Bourdieu (1984) by nearly fifty years, Elias suggested, without explicitly using these terms, that human societies can also be fruitfully conceptualised as ‘social fields’ or ‘fields of forces’.⁴⁷ It is interesting to note that Elias’s *Habilitation* sponsor, Karl Mannheim, developed a concept of ‘structure’ as a dynamic configuration of antagonistic and conflicting forces.

According to Elias, the balance of competitive pressures in a society can range between extremes in which either ‘centrifugal’, that is, disruptive, dis-unifying, de-centralising tendencies, or ‘centripetal’, that is, integrating, unifying, centralising tendencies are dominant. In Part II of *On the Process of Civilisation*, he discussed centrifugal tendencies under the heading of ‘feudalisation’, a kind of ‘decivilising process’ that was dominant in Western Europe following the decline of the Western Roman Empire in the fifth century AD.⁴⁸ Centrifugal tendencies remained dominant until about the eleventh century (Elias 2012a: 263). From then until today, despite fluctuations, centripetal tendencies have been in the ascendant. Elias discussed this dominance of centripetal tendencies under the headings of the ‘monopoly mechanism’ and the ‘royal mechanism’, terms upon which he later cast doubt.⁴⁹ That is, relatively stable central rule by monarchs and later, parliaments, began to become the general norm. According to Elias, however, stable central rule did not emerge as part of a continuous, unilinear process. That is, discontinuities and differences of timing were involved. Let us elaborate.

It is first necessary to examine how Elias dealt with this early ‘decivilising process’ or ‘breakdown of civilisation’. One of his central contentions was that recurrent tendencies towards ‘feudalisation’, that is towards local economic self-sufficiency and independent local rule (economic and political ‘autarky’) were inherent in the structure of the societies of early medieval Europe. Contrary to a Marxist view, he suggested, economic and political processes worked interdependently in this connection. Neither was dominant. Expressed differently, what was happening was as follows. After waves of tribal invasion from the East and North and the correlative breakdown of Roman control in the West – Elias did not see one as ‘cause’ and the other as ‘effect’ – money, trade and towns *virtually* disappeared from Western Europe. They did not disappear *entirely*, however, and in the longer term this helped to speed and spread the ‘recovery’ which began around the eleventh century.

Between the fifth and the eleventh century, centrifugal pressures were dominant. Centripetal pressures did ‘enjoy’ short periods of ascendancy, as was especially apparent during the reign of Charlemagne (768–814). He was the founder of the ‘Carolingian’ dynasty and the most successful ruler during the so-called ‘Dark Ages’ which followed the decline of the Western Roman Empire. At its height, Charlemagne’s empire embraced large parts of what we now know as France, Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, Italy and

Spain. It became 'the Holy Roman Empire' when Charlemagne was crowned by the Pope in Rome in AD 800.

When one takes into account the then available means of transport and communication, the Holy Roman Empire can only be described as huge. It owed its existence largely to Charlemagne's personal warrior charisma and success in war. Economic autarky, however, meant that he did not have tax revenues at his disposal at a level that would have permitted the employment of a civil service and a standing army, essential prerequisites for ruling a state of considerable size. As we have discussed, according to Elias, tax and violence monopolies are the major 'means of ruling' in societies with a money economy. Stable state-societies are also usually ruled from a single centre, for example, London, Paris, or Berlin. Charlemagne and his entourage, however, had to travel from one to another of his estates in order both to feed themselves and maintain control. He had a 'peripatetic' court.

Charlemagne also had to rely on relatives and friends to rule distant parts of his empire and newly conquered territories. However, these 'vassals', even though they had sworn 'oaths of fealty' to their liege lord, recurrently came to see imperial lands as their own. They also lacked Charlemagne's charisma. As a result, when the great king died the empire began immediately to fragment. In 843, in the context of a fierce struggle for the succession, the empire was split into three by the Treaty of Verdun. This failed to resolve matters, and, in 870, a further treaty – the Treaty of Meerssen – came to be viewed as necessary in what proved to be a vain attempt to shore up the crumbling empire. Increasingly insistent centrifugal pressures were once again in the ascendant.

In seeking to explain what happened in that context, Elias focused primarily on the 'Western Franks' who were destined to become what we now call 'the French'. He began by noting how, at the time, centrifugal pressures were weaker in the Eastern parts of Charlemagne's one-time empire with the result that the forerunners of what we now call 'the Germans' were considerably stronger in the early Middle Ages than the forerunners of the French and English. The Germans' strength was forged in the more or less constant battles they had to wage against invading tribes from the North and East. It was not until the Reformation and the beginnings of what is nowadays misleadingly called 'modernisation' that the German medieval empire (the second, smaller 'Holy Roman Empire' which had been consecrated by the pope in the tenth century) started to crumble. By that time, the initially weaker French and English were in the ascendant.

In that early period, too, because of their geographical location, the Western Franks faced no external threats comparable to those which kept their Germanic Eastern counterparts on their toes (apart, of course, from the threat of the Normans, which a lack of space prevents us from dealing with in this context). A consequence was that Western Frankish rulers had less chance of conquering new territories and were compelled to reward loyal vassals by

giving them sections of their own (the central rulers') lands. In that way, the power of the rulers was weakened while that of their vassals grew stronger. Take the case of Louis IV (936–954), one of the last Carolingians and still nominally King of France. When he inherited the crown, he was called 'le roi de Monloon' because little was left to him of his family's once vast possessions other than the castle at Laon (Elias 2012a: 232). He was, in effect, just one feudal lord among others in a society with a cell-like structure of economically self-sufficient, mainly self-ruling units of roughly equal power.

The situation of Louis VI (1108–1137; known as 'Louis the Fat') makes an interesting comparison. It was in some ways similar to that of Louis IV but in others instructively different. After a protracted struggle, the Carolingian house had been succeeded by the 'Capetians', offspring of Hugh Capet (987–996), Duke of Francia (the 'Île de France'), themselves to be succeeded later by the Valois and the Bourbons. 'In the person of Louis VI', Elias tells us, 'the Capetian house struggled against the houses of Montmorency, Beaumont, Rochefort, Montlhéry, Ferté-Alais, Puiset and many others (Elias 2012a: 251). In such a context, the castle of the Montlhéry family proved to be of decisive significance because it commanded the main route between Paris and Orleans, the two most important parts of the Capetian domains. Louis VI felt compelled to mount a series of expeditions against the castle until he finally captured it towards the end of his reign. Montlhéry is only 24 kilometres (about 15 miles) from Paris! Louis needed three further expeditions to subdue the most powerful family in the Orleans district, and it took him fully twenty years to establish dominance over the houses of Rochefort, Ferté-Alais, and Puiset, and add their possessions to his own. In this way, Louis VI became not only the nominal king but also the *de facto* ruler of his territory. He could not have known it but he was taking the first steps towards the crystallisation of what was to become France. According to Elias, 'By concentrating on the small area of Francia, by creating ... hegemony in this restricted ... territory, Louis VI laid the foundations for the subsequent expansion of his house. He created a potential centre for the crystallisation of the greater area of France, even though we may certainly not assume that he had any prophetic vision of this future' (Elias 2012a: 293).

At the roots of the power of the absolute monarchs of Western Europe, lay their monopoly control over what Elias, building on what was originally a conceptual innovation of Max Weber's, described as the major 'means of ruling' in societies with a money economy and a level of structural complexity above that of clans and tribes. As we have seen, these were their monopolies of taxation and military force. Such 'means of ruling', Elias suggested, worked interdependently. The tax monopoly provided central rulers with the financial wherewithal to pay and equip powerful armies and this, in turn, enabled rulers over time to disarm nobles, that is, to prevent the latter from keeping armies of their own. It also enabled the rulers to embark on the general pacification of

the population and to maintain social conditions conducive to more rational government, long-term planning, material production, and the flow of trade.

The violence monopolies of the central rulers simultaneously enabled them to maintain their monopolies of taxation and, as production, trade and wealth grew, so the tax revenues available to central rulers expanded. Further to this, the custom of (especially) males carrying arms in public was abandoned and guns began to be licensed by the state. Specialised 'police' forces also emerged and, in Britain, these moved about the street most of the time armed with only a whistle and a truncheon.

At least three consequences flowed from the tax and force monopolies:

- (i) although this was not a simple, always one-way process but also involved regressions that were usually sparked in connection with internal revolts and/or international wars, more and more people began to be brought up under conditions of relative peace. That is, at an *intra*-societal or domestic level, though not *inter*-nationally, violence became a less frequent part of the lives of growing numbers. People came to be less fearful of violent physical attacks by others. Such processes of pacification came to be reflected in the emergence of a dominant collective habitus in which violence was increasingly regarded with abhorrence at the levels of law, custom, individual conscience and feeling and thus pushed increasingly 'behind the scenes'. As this process ran its course, rulers and socially dominant groups more generally changed in a 'civilising' direction, more particularly from warriors into courtiers, and later into politicians, bureaucrats, business people, and top level military personnel. Also involved, according to Elias, was a shift from private ownership of the means of ruling to more public forms. That is, from a situation in which the apparatus of government had been the personal property of a monarch, more public and eventually more democratic forms of ruling gradually emerged;
- (ii) as pacification increasingly took root, the predictability of social activities increased correlatively. So did the frequency of forward-looking, rational planning. In its turn, this contributed to the emergence of more rational, less emotional ways of ruling and more rational, more effective ways of conducting material production and trade. At the same time, chains of interdependence, which were largely but by no means entirely economic – for example, patterns of friendship were involved as well – grew longer and denser. That is, as we saw earlier, more and more people came to live in heavily populated towns and cities;
- (iii) in conjunction with this, the power of bourgeois groups gradually increased and that of the landed nobility correlatively decreased.

In fact, the bourgeoisie were destined in the longer term to emerge as *the* ruling class and there were signs by the twentieth century of rulers being recruited from the other industrial class, the working class or 'proletariat' as well. At first, however, the interrelated state-formation and 'civilising' processes favoured the great lords – the dukes, the earls, the counts and others with the largest possessions – and the central rulers, leading eventually to the victory of the central rulers who, unlike Charlemagne some seven or eight hundred years beforehand, had at their disposal tax revenues, administrative apparatuses and means of transport and communication which enabled them to expand their territories and pass them on to their successors relatively intact. That is, the Western nation-states we are so familiar with today were gradually emerging. They are currently showing signs of merging into a larger, supra-national unit, the European Community. This process has so far been largely peaceful and it is multicausal and multidirectional in character (at the time of writing, there are signs of increasing disintegration of the European Union). It is also centrally connected with globalisation.

Besides enabling central rulers to prevent other nobles from keeping private armies, the growing power of monarchs, as we have seen, enabled the latter to bring the chief nobles to their courts where they could be kept under strict surveillance. In such a setting, the talents, experience and connections of the nobles could also be exploited in the business of ruling. Elias called this process '*die Verhöflichung der Krieger*' – the 'courtisation of the warriors' – a term which signifies the gradual transformation in the setting of the royal courts of 'knights' into 'courtiers'. In the royal courts, members of the feudal aristocracy became less able to use impulsive violence to secure objectives, protect interests and express themselves than they had been hitherto. They were subjected to more effective control 'from above' and hence forced to engage in longer-term, more 'rational' plotting, dissembling, and intrigue. Their manners and behaviour also grew more polished and urbane, and the 'civility' and 'civilisation' codes gradually took over from the 'courtesy codes'. According to Elias, however, 'court rationality' continued for a long time to be different from 'bourgeois rationality', being more orientated towards status and honorific considerations than money.

As we saw earlier, according to Elias there gradually emerged during the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a Europe-wide 'court society' in which the French court was the major 'model-making centre' and French manners were generally followed. Although members of this court society continued to engage in dynastic and increasingly 'national' struggles with each other, they tended to have more in common than they did with members of the middle and lower classes of their emerging nation-states.

Another mark of this overall process was the gradual transformation of the dwelling places of rulers from fortified castles into palaces and country houses. A parallel process was the gradual disappearance of city walls, both being further marks of domestic pacification. A crucial underlying part of this development all the time was the fact that, in the longer term, internal societal pacification favoured capital-owning, money-earning, bourgeois groups more than it did those aristocrats who remained dependent, in the first instance on the warlike skills and attributes of their medieval forebears and, in the second, on the more fixed, less easily transferable resource of land. This contributed further to the processes of democratisation which were already inherent in the lengthening and growing density of interdependency chains and which were leading to growing pressure on rulers 'from below'. More particularly, rulers began to grow increasingly dependent, first on their middle class 'subjects' and later, as national income grew and to some extent 'trickled down', on their lower class 'subjects' as well. They depended on them for the taxes they paid, for their votes and, in periods defined as times of 'national necessity', for the military services of both groups. As we said earlier, this led over time to a shift from private ownership of the means of ruling to more public forms and, correlatively, to the transformation of 'subjects' into 'citizens', a process which is in some ways less advanced in the United Kingdom than in most Western countries. Elias had much more to say on these subjects but, given limitations of space, we shall conclude this chapter with a discussion of his position on the thorny issue of whether social developments are 'unilinear' or 'multilinear'. As we shall try to show, Elias's views on this and related issues were more complex than those commonly attributed to him by some of his critics.

Social processes: Unilinear or multilinear?

A view of Elias's theory of 'civilising processes' held in different ways by such critics as Armstrong (1998), Bauman (1979), Giddens (Giddens and Mackenzie 1982), Giulianotti (2005), Goody (2002), and Williams (1991) involves problematically projecting onto it an abstract, general character. Such critics have falsely read Elias as having dealt with a simple unilinear and irreversible change, supposedly for the better, from one social 'state', 'barbarism', to another, 'civilisation'. More or less explicitly, according to such critics, Elias saw this process as having taken place at the same time, the same rate, in the same way and with exactly the same 'causes' and consequences in all the countries of Western Europe. In short, these writers see Elias as having proposed a simple 'modernisation' or 'progress' theory, a theory which is Eurocentric, little more than a paean to the West and an expression of 'Western triumphalism'. As they see it, Elias's theory, to repeat one of the issues we touched on earlier, is, in effect, a 'throwback' to the supposedly falsified and discredited 'evolutionary' and

‘progress’ theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which emerged as justifications for Western imperialism and colonial expansion.

The title *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* and perhaps its English translation as *The Civilising Process* – the new title, *On the Process of Civilisation*, is rather better – certainly give an impression of unilinearity. As we have shown already, however, Elias’s study is solidly based on historical data and thus far from abstract. It is easy, moreover, to show that Elias embraced such notions as multilinearity and reversibility all along. For example, he entitled one of the sections in what was originally Volume 2 of *On the Process of Civilisation*, ‘Excursus on Some Differences in the Paths of Development of Britain, France and Germany’ (Elias 2012a: 294–301). He also dealt with these and similar developmental differences in footnotes and on several occasions in his main text. At the time he was writing, of course, England, France, and Germany were still major players on the world stage and Elias, having been born in Germany was then living in England, having just spent almost two years in France. Thus his grasp of the balance of similarities and differences of social structure and habitus between these three countries was formed *in vivo* and not just from books. Let us enquire briefly into what he wrote about the French, the English and the Germans – especially the latter two – before closing this chapter with a short discussion of some of the hypotheses that Elias developed in *On The Process of Civilisation* about non-Western ‘civilisations’.

According to Elias, of all three countries, France was the one – under Louis XIV – where the strongest form of monarchical absolutism developed. It accordingly became the chief model-making centre in the whole of Europe as far as courtly manners were concerned. England, by contrast, experienced the shortest phase of court-absolutism of the three. It was also the first in which a rural population of more or less free peasants emerged and where, along with a class of landowning noblemen, there developed ‘a class of landowners who were untitled, a class who were only “gentlemen”’ (Elias and Dunning 1971: 129). Elias also discussed at some length the hoary old idea that many features of the English/British collective habitus or ‘national character’ are explainable by the fact that Britain is an island. This merits elaboration.

If the national habitus of the English/British were simply a consequence of the fact that they are island dwellers, said Elias, ‘then all other island nations would have to show similar characteristics, and no people should be closer to the English in character and habitus than, for example, the Japanese’ (Elias 2012a: 599). This was a timely comparison because, at the moment of writing, the Japanese were involved in their conquest of South Asia, a context in which the military values and traditions of their nation were being thrown into sharp relief. In England/Britain, however, according to Elias, the nobility were ‘relatively pacified’ early on, a coalition of aristocratic and bourgeois groups succeeded in limiting the monarch’s control over the state monopoly

of violence, and the military enjoyed lower prestige than their counterparts in Japan and on the continent. Elias elaborated on this as follows:

How closely certain features of the British superego ... are bound up with the structure of the monopoly of physical force is shown ... by the social latitude given in Britain to the 'conscientious objector' ... We should probably not be wrong in assuming that non-conformist ... organisations have been able to remain as strong and vigorous as they have ... in England only because the official Church of England was not backed by a police and military apparatus to the same extent as were, for example, the national churches in the Protestant states of Germany. At any rate, the fact that in Britain the pressure of foreign military power on the individual was from an early stage much less heavy than that in any other major continental [European] country is extremely closely connected to the other fact, that the constraint which an individual was expected to exercise on himself, above all in everything connected with matters of state, became stronger and more all-round than in the great continental nations. In this way, as an element of social history, the island character and the whole nature of the country have, indeed, affected the formation of the national character in a whole variety of ways. (Elias 2012a: 599–600)

Elias's principal contention in his 'Excursus on Differences in the Paths of Development of England, France and Germany', however, was that the ease with which centralised states emerged in Western Europe and hence the timing of such state-formation processes depended largely on the physical size of the territories to which they laid claim, the size of their populations, and the extent of the geographical and sociocultural, especially linguistic, differences they contained. He wrote:

The task implied in the struggle for dominance, that is, for both centralisation and rule, was ... different in England and France from that in the German-Roman empire. The latter ... was very different in size to the other two; geographical and social divergences within it were also ... greater. This gave the local, centrifugal forces ... greater strength, and made the task of attaining hegemony and thus centralisation incomparably more difficult. The ruling house would have needed a far greater territorial area and power than in France or England to master the centrifugal forces of the German-Roman empire and force it into a durable whole. There is good reason to suppose, that, given the level of division of labour and integration, and the military, transportational and administrative techniques of the time, the task of holding centrifugal tendencies in so vast an area permanently in check was probably insoluble. (Elias 2012a: 294)

Elias went on to show how the 'Holy Roman' or 'German Roman Empire' crumbled away for centuries at its borders, a process only partly compensated by expansion to the East. Ignoring irregularities, examination of the long-term trend, he suggested, gives an impression of 'the Empire's constant attrition ... accompanied by a slow shift of the direction of expansion, and a drift in the centre of gravity from west to east' (Elias 2012a: 299).

In 1800, at a time when Britain and France were already nation-states with relatively high degrees of unification, the Holy Roman Empire consisted

of more than 400 autonomous or semi-autonomous units. Two of them, however, those of the Hohenzollern and Habsburg dynasties, that is, Prussia and Austria, were larger and stronger than the rest. The Holy Roman Empire was replaced by a Confederation early in the nineteenth century but proved unable to accommodate the tensions caused by the hegemonic rivalries of the Hohenzollerns and Habsburgs. This led to what Germans came to call the '*kleindeutsche Lösung*' (the small Germany solution), that is, the split between Germany and Austria. There was a further diminution after 1918 in consequence of the territorial losses suffered by Germany following their defeat in the First World War. In one of his last books, *The Germans*, Elias went on to show how a major consequence of Germany's defeat in the Second World War was a continuation of this trend: yet another split occurred, this time between the Federal and Democratic Republics.

Elias contended, then, that the large territory occupied by German-speakers and the size and sociocultural heterogeneity of their population led them to encounter greater difficulties regarding state-centralisation and unification than the British and French, the size of whose territories and populations was considerably smaller. This led to stronger centrifugal tendencies and a more discontinuous pattern of history and social development. One mark of this was the comparative recency of Berlin as a capital compared with London and Paris which had grown relatively continuously for something like a thousand years. Vienna and Prague sometimes served as capital of the Holy Roman Empire; and Berlin only became capital with the rise of Prussia. Another mark of discontinuity was the fragmented character of the German middle classes whose power-chances relative to the aristocracy were, as a result, less than those of their counterparts in Britain and France. According to Elias, the weakness of the German middle classes was reinforced by the fact that the old empire lacked a generally acknowledged capital which could have served as a focus for revolutionary action. As a result, they were relatively easy to defeat in the revolution of 1848.

The fragmentation of the Holy Roman Empire also meant that no 'court society' such as emerged in France, and no 'great society' such as grew up in Britain, centred on London, could arise and 'courtise' the German aristocracy. As a result, the latter retained a militaristic ethos for longer than the aristocracies of Britain and France. They also excluded the middle classes from their scattered courts, ensuring that middle class elites obtained little experience of participation in the business of ruling. This, Elias suggested was one of the roots of the originally humanistic ethos of the German middle classes whose orientation was towards philosophy, science, and the arts rather than politics and economics.

Throughout the twentieth century, the dominant outside image of the Germans portrayed them as a warlike people. From the sixteenth to the end of the nineteenth century, however, they tended to be viewed as non-militaristic

and weak. Madame de Staël, for example, wrote of them in 1814 that: 'the nation is by nature literary and philosophical ... the realm of the seas belongs to the English; the realm of the earth to the French; the realm of the air to the Germans' (De Staël 1985: 28–9). She meant by 'realm of the air' philosophy, science and the arts, not domination of the skies by Zeppelins, Messerschmitts, 'flying bombs' (V1s) and V2 Rockets!

Germany experienced a massive power loss in the sixteenth century when, largely in conjunction with wars between Catholic and Protestant princes, the medieval empire began to break up. As a result, in the seventeenth century – remembered by the English and French mainly as a century of glorious achievements – Germany became the 'cockpit of Europe'. This was marked by the devastating 'Thirty Years War' in which it is estimated that Germany lost a third of its human population as well as some 90 per cent of its horses. Towards the end of the seventeenth century, Germany was invaded by Louis XIV, a process repeated by Napoleon at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In consequence, according to Elias, Germans became acutely conscious of their low status in the rank hierarchy of European states and many developed chronic doubts regarding their own and their nation's worth.

Germany did not become a unified nation-state until the second half of the nineteenth century. This process occurred through a series of wars under the leadership of the Prussian king and military caste. In its course, the balance between adherence to 'humanist' and 'anti-humanist' values among the dominant sections of the middle classes began to shift decisively in favour of the latter. According to Elias, Germany's victory in 1871 in the Franco-Prussian war played a decisive part in both this value-shift and Germany's national unification. The liberal *Bürgertum* in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries had aspired to the achievement of national unification by peaceful means. The fact that, in the event, unification was achieved through war under the leadership of the warrior class made such an impression on a majority of middle class Germans that militaristic values increasingly permeated their ranks. As Elias pithily expressed it: 'the victory of the German armies over France was at the same time a victory of the German nobility over the German middle classes' (Elias 1996). In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, German middle class culture had been exemplified by the work of people like Goethe, Kant, and Schiller; after 1871, it was the work of authors such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Ernst Jünger who glorified violence and military values, which came to express and reinforce the dominant view.

Elias described Germany's more unified Second *Reich* – the First had been the Holy Roman Empire and the Third was the *Reich* of Adolf Hitler – as a *satisfaktionsfähige Gesellschaft*, a term which cannot be meaningfully translated directly into English but refers to a society orientated around a harsh and unbending code of honour in which the demanding and giving of 'satisfaction' in duels occupied pride of place. According to Elias, Germany's

unification thus involved a 'brutalisation' of the leading sections of the middle classes. One manifestation of this was the fact that, whereas in France and England, the incidence of duelling declined during the nineteenth century, in Germany it increased. The student fraternities in the universities played an important role in this process of brutalisation. Just like the public schools and Oxford and Cambridge Universities in England, the German universities were institutions where a partial unification between the aristocracy and the middle classes occurred. Membership of a fraternity became a precondition for being regarded as *satisfaktionsfähig* – worthy of being challenged to a duel – and thus for being admitted to the local 'good societies' throughout the Second *Reich*. In this context, according to Elias, the middle classes were even more 'brutalised' than their aristocratic rulers because the latter were subject to greater restraint through the honorific ethos of their warrior code. It was Elias's contention that this ethos of *satisfaktionsfähigkeit* was one of the preconditions for the rise of Nazism. As he expressed it:

I have treated the expansion of military models into parts of the German middle class ... because I believe that National Socialism and the decivilising spurt which it embodied cannot be completely understood without reference to this context ... Above all ... the unbridled resort to acts of violence as the only realistic and decisive vehicle of politics, which was at the centre of Hitler's doctrine and the strategy used already in his rise to power, can be explained only against this background. (Elias 1996: 15)

It was another of Elias's contentions that, whilst the rise to power of the Nazis was by no means inevitable, such a development was more likely to have occurred in Germany than in France or Britain. It is thus also worth briefly examining some of the things that Elias wrote about social developments *outside* Europe.

The theory of 'civilising processes: A 'eurocentric' theory?

As we saw earlier, one of the most frequent criticisms of Elias's theory holds it to be 'Eurocentric', a celebration of the global power and 'progress' of the West rather than a social scientific contribution to its understanding. It certainly is a 'Eurocentric' theory in the sense of being *focused on* Europe and trying to contribute to the understanding of how and why France and Britain became powerful enough to develop global empires, in the process equating themselves with 'civilisation', whilst Germany was a 'late developer' and, latterly, 'prime mover' in the attempted bureaucratic-industrial genocide of Jews which has come to be known as 'the Holocaust'.

However, whilst Elias's theory is mainly *centred on* Europe, it is not 'eurocentric' in the sense of being an exemplification of European or Western

'triumphalism'. On the contrary, it is an observation-based theory concerned, not so much with making value-judgements of this sort, but with advancing a sociological understanding of the processes with which it is concerned. In order to make this crystal clear, Elias cited from a 1935 article on 'social evolution', published in the *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* and written by Alexander Goldenweiser, an American anthropologist who argued: 'If there is a social evolution, whatever it may be, it is no longer accepted as a process to be contemplated but as a task to be achieved by deliberate and concerted human effort' (New York, 1935, Vol 5: 656 ff; cited in Elias 2012a: 592–3). This reflected the empiricist trend in Western sociology we referred to earlier and stung Elias into responding that his 'study of the civilising process differs from these pragmatic efforts in that, suspending all wishes and demands concerning what ought to be, it tries to establish what was and is, and to explain in which way, and why, it became as it was and is. It seemed more appropriate to make the therapy depend on the diagnosis rather than the diagnosis on the therapy' (Elias 2012a: 593). In thus using language which reveals his medical training and psychoanalytic interests, it was not Elias's intention to claim that his theory was fully-fledged or complete, a theory which explains all there is to know about state-formation and 'civilisation' and which can be used for therapeutic purposes whether at the individual or the societal level, but rather, that he had laid down foundations on which he hoped others would be able to build in at least four ways:

- (i) by testing, deepening and elaborating upon his theory by means of further studies of Britain, France and Germany;
- (ii) by studying 'civilising' and state-formation processes in other Western countries, non-European (for example, Australia, Canada and the USA) as well as European;
- (iii) by studying processes of this kind in oriental, other Asian, South American and other non-occidental settings; and
- (iv) by adding to the stock of knowledge through studies of special subjects such as food, fire, art, leisure and sport.

As a means of bringing this chapter to a conclusion, we shall now briefly examine the third of these ways in which Elias hoped that others would build on the foundations he had laid down.

A glance at the index of *On The Process of Civilisation* shows that Elias saw himself as having provided in that book just the first of what he hoped would become a comprehensive series of equally theoretical and empirical comparative-developmental studies which would eventually encompass the 'history' of humanity in its entirety. He referred in particular in this connection at differing lengths and in a preliminary way to China, Ethiopia (Abyssinia),

the Incas, and Japan. Ethiopia and Japan were, of course, hot topics in the late 1930s on account of the Italian invasion of the former and the latter's invasion of South-East Asia. What Elias wrote about China and Japan, and, more generally, about the need for comparative-developmental studies, is of greatest interest for present purposes.

Elias starts by commenting on how astonishing it was that, given the means of transport and communication available to them, the Chinese and Inca empires should have remained comparatively stable for relatively long periods. He claimed in this connection that precise and detailed sociogenetic or 'structural-historical analyses' of the interplay of centrifugal and centralising tendencies and interests in such contexts would be necessary to explain the relative cohesion of such vast agglomerations. He went on to develop the following hypothesis regarding the Chinese:

The Chinese form of centralisation, compared to that developed in Europe, was certainly very peculiar. Here the warrior class was eradicated relatively early and very radically by a strong central authority. This eradication – however it happened – is connected with two main peculiarities of the Chinese social structure: the passing of the control of land into the hands of the peasants (which we encounter in the early Western period only in a very few places, for example, Sweden) and the manning of the governmental apparatus by a bureaucracy always recruited in part from the peasants themselves and at any rate wholly pacified. Mediated by this hierarchy, courtly forms of civilisation penetrated deeply into the lower classes ... [T]hey took root, transformed in many ways, in the code of behaviour of the village ... [W]hat has ... been called the 'unwarlike' character of the Chinese people ... resulted from the fact that the class from which the people drew many of their models through constant contact, was for centuries no longer a warrior class, a nobility, but a peaceful and scholarly officialdom. It is primarily their situation and function that is expressed in the fact that, in the traditional Chinese scale of values – unlike the Japanese – military activity and prowess held no very high place. Different as the Chinese way to centralisation was, in its details, from that in the West, therefore, the foundation of the cohesion of larger dominions was in both cases the elimination of freely competing warriors or landowners. (Elias 2012a: 589.)

It is not within the realms of our competence to say whether or not these suggestions by Elias regarding the Chinese pattern of development held good at the time of writing or whether or not they are now out-dated, having long since been superseded by advancing knowledge. Our point is rather to show that Elias was an imaginative scholar who wrote primarily about European societies because of the readily available data. Hence he cannot reasonably be charged with having been ethnocentric, the proponent of a theory about the inherent 'superiority' of the West. Others of his arguments in *On The Process of Civilisation* point in a similar direction. For example, he contended (Elias 2012a: 601) that we do not yet have a good understanding of why the degree of what he called 'social pressure', that is, the pressure imposed on

one another by interdependent people, varies from society to society, 'cultural area' to 'cultural area', and from time-period to time-period. For example, he suggested that the level of social pressure and hence of social tensions was higher within the figuration of European states than among the states of Central and South America, but concluded that we do not yet have adequate conceptual tools for exploring issues of this kind. However, what is certain in this connection, said Elias, is that such problems are best approached in processual and comparative, dynamic and relational terms. Moreover, social pressures and tensions are generated, not simply 'endogenously', that is, within particular societies, but also by the positions of societies within inter-societal figurations. In the next chapter, we shall explore the significance of some of the insights that Elias developed in relation to his specific empirical work on civilising processes for his more general approach to sociology, particularly his approach to the sociology of knowledge.