

9th EISA Pan-European Conference

Wednesday 23 - Saturday 26 September 2015, Giardini Naxos, Sicily, Italy

Violence, Security and Civilisation
A Socio-Historical, yet Critical, Theory of the State
(Formerly)

**Violence and *Civilité*: The Ambivalences of the State
In Norbert Elias's Theory of Civilizing Processes
(New title)**

Chapter to be published in *Elias and Violence*, Palgrave (2015)

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Abstract

The concern expressed by Elias about the increase in incivilities in Germany in the Thirties makes violence a clear political motive of his famous *Civilizing Process* (1939). Reversing the problem, he comes to question the general evolution from which the German Nation-State, if not Europe as a whole, seems to be diverging. As he would write later in *The Germans* (1996), what is indeed “astonishing and unique” in contemporary societies is not the persisting or growing violence but rather “the relatively high degree of nonviolence.” The first part of this chapter, “State (monopolies) and *civilité* against violence,” discusses the role that Elias gives to the State as a first-rank historical reducer of social violence. The monopoly of legitimate physical force does indeed entail a containment of physical violence that is undoubtedly progress. On the other hand, civil pacification inside States goes along with multiplied violence between States. Symbolic and psychological violence have also been reinforced. However, all these forms of violence are in a way due to a “normal” civilizing process, where profits seem more important than losses. That is not always the case. Civilizing and decivilizing processes often go hand in hand and the latter can outweigh the former. The second part of the chapter, “State violence against *civilité*,” focuses on the denials of *civilité* that are tolerated by or due to the State. At their pinnacle, Nazi barbarity, which was only apparently an exception, revealed the ethical core of the civilizing process, *i.e.*, the widening scope of mutual identification due to a growing learned repulsion to others’ suffering and pain that was centuries in the making, through the very attempt at its destruction. The authors end by positing that, according to Elias, the State is not always the guardian of civil security and *civilité* cannot be reduced to the opposite of violence or to an attribute of a bounded community.

Introduction

According to John Keane, “among the paradoxes of this long century of violence is the paucity of reflections within contemporary political theory, including democratic theory, on the causes, effects and ethico-political implications of violence” (Keane 1996, 6). If Hannah Arendt offers one of the few striking exceptions, in another field Elias’s “discussion of the strength – and weaknesses – of the so-called civilizing process...” is, as Keane (1996, 26) writes, “of vital importance to a theorization of violence and civil societies”.

The interest expressed by Elias in the increase in incivilities and violence in the Weimar Republic retrospectively makes violence a clear political motive of his masterwork, *On the Process of Civilization* (1939, 2012), written while in exile in London in the second half of the 1930s. Elias himself more or less explicitly validated this interpretation later (Elias 2013). Indeed, the centrality of the violence issue is already quite obvious in the conclusion of the 1939 text (Elias 2012), where the author seems very concerned as he confronts the “constant danger of war” (Elias 2012, 488). One of Elias’s originalities is to reverse the problem. Instead of questioning the causes of growing (or persisting) political and social violence in the German national society, he comes to question the general evolution from which Germany, if not Europe as a whole, seems to be diverging. As he writes later in *The Germans* (Elias 1996), what is definitely “astonishing and unique” in contemporary political societies is not the persistence or resurgence of violence, but rather, quite the opposite, namely, “the relatively high degree of non-violence that is characteristic of the social organizations of today” (Elias 1996, 174). This is the perspective from which Elias started studying the long-term evolution of individuals’ behaviors, feelings, and ways of thinking and changes in social and power structures in Europe — a study originally grounded in the handbooks and other treatises devoted to courtesy, *civilité*, and politeness in different European countries from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century.

Elias points out particularly well that the state's monopoly on violence is an ambiguous innovation, that states are "positively dangerous instruments of pacification" (Keane). While within their boundaries states are, according to Elias, rather "peace-enforcing and peace-keeping agencies," interstate relationships continue to be caught up in a *bellum omnium contra omnes*, for more and more powerful states force each other into an escalating spiral of extending or strengthening their positions of power. States are "two-sided" (Mennell 2004, 160). War, the essence of which is violence, therefore constantly threatens the non-violent civil conditions promised by the state monopoly on violence.

However, still according to Keane, a weakness in Elias's analysis would be to see the social danger concentrated quasi exclusively in interstate wars. The state is not deprived of ambivalence; the wars and colonization that it fosters are ample evidence of its destructive nature, a fact on which Elias particularly insists. Nevertheless, at the end of the day, its role seems to be considered, as in Thomas Hobbes's (1651, 1909) or even in Carl Schmitt's (1932, 2009) thoughts, as rather or even very "positive" for the pacification of civil society, if we look at social relations within states. Most of the time, Elias does not seem to consider that monopolizing the legitimate use of physical force (or claiming to do so) could *in itself* be a problem, a source of danger for the civilians, for the people living on the state's territory.

His position seems to contrast greatly with that of a majority of the liberal authors such as John Locke, but also with another great twentieth-century thinker on these questions: Michel Foucault.¹ Foucault's *Surveiller et punir (Discipline and Punish, 1977)* begins indeed with a long description of a torture, acknowledging the incredible taming of violence due to the modern state compared with what prevailed earlier, and at the same time forcefully depicting the extraordinarily more powerful means of social and political controls – and potential violence – that the sovereign state has acquired over its own subjects. Moreover, this control

¹ For more about contraposing Elias and Foucault theories, see Spierenburg 1984, Van Krieken 1991, and Mennell 1992, 58.

extends well beyond the exceptional, limited context of war and the military obligations that war entails.

Does that mean that Elias, for his part, missed the point? Not really. Instead of considering “civilizing” (progress) or, its opposite, “decivilizing” (barbarism) to be part of the very *nature* of the state (or of modernity), Elias proposes a sociohistorical investigation of the *conditions* in which the state can alternately or simultaneously play opposite roles in matters of violence² within the state society, including towards its own citizens or inhabitants. In “The Breakdown of Civilization,” Elias points out that “civilizing processes and de-civilizing processes” often go “hand in hand” and the latter can outweigh the first, culminating in the Nazis’ barbarity (Elias 1996, 308). This apparent “pathology” or German “exception” reveals at the same time, through the Nazis’ attempt to destroy it, the “ethical” core of a process rather “coldly” reconstructed in the 1930s text, namely, a more encompassing consciousness of other people’s suffering and pain, that, depending on the context, can be fostered or, on the contrary, threatened by the state.

This chapter thus questions the ambivalence of the role given to the modern state in Elias’s political work in matters of *civilité* and violence. It takes place in the framework of an ongoing reflection on the irreducibility of the political to the state in Elias’s thought (Delmotte and Majastre 2015), and consecutively on the way Elias’s theory of the civilizing process invites us to think about *civilité* apart from, outside, or beyond the Nation-State (Delmotte 2014). Some of his late essays (Elias 1996; 2007a; 2010; 2010a) definitively help us to understand better or complete Elias’s major opus, fine-tuning rather than refuting its statements regarding violence, *civilité*, and the state. In our view, a comprehensive approach to interrelations between these three concepts also fosters the dialog between Elias’s historical

² According to Jonathan Fletcher, “what Elias actually means when he uses the term violence is still unclear” and “violence can only be defined in context.” At the same time, we agree with Fletcher that Elias first and foremost “refers to physical force when employing the term violence,” especially regarding the role of state controls and monopolies (Fletcher 1997, 47). Keane, for his part, defines violence “crudely” as “any uninvited but intentional act of physically violating the body of a person who previously had lived ‘in peace’” (Kean 1996, 6).

sociology of the political and important related current issues in political theory and philosophy (see Balibar 2010).³ We ultimately submit that, despite its own ambiguities, not only does Elias's historical sociology stress that the state is far from always being the guardian of civil security; it also suggests that *civilité* cannot be reduced to the opposite of violence or to the attribute of a state-bounded community.

I. State (monopolies) and *civilité* against violence...

That Elias puts great emphasis on the historical role of the state in pacifying social relations inside a given set of territorial boundaries cannot be denied. The stability of this social structure, as he puts it, is “one of the most prominent features of Western history” (Elias 2012, 350). To discover under what historical conditions such a large-scale pacification has been made possible and what its long-term consequences on the individual psyche are is indeed the very design of *On the Process of Civilization*. This purpose leads him to look for a model of a successful process of monopolization, which is provided by the study of French history. In what follows we show that Elias's emphasis on the historical role of the state as a reducer of violence also highlights some normatively problematic dimensions of the “process of civilization.”

Although Elias's analysis is carefully sociological and stresses the processual and historical nature of every social phenomenon, including the emergence of the state and pacification of social relations, his reconstruction of such a crucial “moment” or phase in the delimitation of violence that is the institutionalization of *civilité* hints at a conceptual link between *civilité* and the state. Far from challenging the general model he proposes, we posit that the forms of violence that take place in a situation of state monopolization can be interpreted as part of a “normal” process of civilization, a part of the process of civilization itself. Indeed, the far-

³ We have already been trying to foster such a dialogue between Elias's historical sociology and political philosophy on the topic of European integration and post-national citizenship (Delmotte 2002; 2007; 2012).

ranging regulation and sublimation of violence must necessarily – if we push this interpretation to its limit – take place in a bounded civic community under the guidance of a state monopoly.

The above-mentioned conditions of pacification are summarized briefly in the first point of our development, where we focus on the “decisive” emergence of *civilité* in the transitional period from feudal to modern society. In the second point, we stress the forms of regulation and sublimation that are enforced once the state’s monopolization of affairs is in place. Thus, we illustrate the carefully sociological vantage point that Elias develops on violence and more specifically the conflicts arising between the individual psyche and social structure as a driver of social change and “locomotive” of the civilization process. This historical and non-essentialist perspective notwithstanding, Elias’s analysis of violence, when considered from the standpoint of its normative aspects, could seem to stand up the criticism of some apologists of the state, such as Carl Schmitt and Hobbes. In the third point, we try to determine in what way and how far this apparent proximity is justified.

I.1. The state as violence reducer

The delimitation of violence, which is produced by the imposition of a state monopoly over the use of legitimate physical force, is of great importance in Elias’s work. Indeed, this delimitation is a precondition for the gradual unfolding of the process of civilization *per se*. Like many other sociohistorical accounts of the state, and in a very Weberian way, Elias describes this process of monopolization as occurring through the violent dispossession of the means of violence from private hands. In other words, the main driver of the process of monopolization is war-making between like-sized and (at first) “private” units. That is the apparent paradox that “without violent actions, without the motive forces of free competition, there would be no monopoly of force, thus no pacification, no suppression and control of

violence over larger areas” (Elias 2012, 346).⁴

The outcome of a successful monopolizing process is thus described as a simultaneous rollback (*Zurückdrangung*) and regulation (*Regelung*) of the use of violence:

...the discharge of affects in physical attack is limited to certain temporal and spatial enclaves. Once the monopoly of physical power has passed to central authorities, not every strong man can afford the pleasure of physical attack. This is now reserved to a few legitimised by the central authority (for example the police against the criminal), and to larger numbers only in exceptional times of war or revolution, in the socially legitimised struggle against internal or external enemies (Elias 2012, 196).

In Elias’s chronology, *civilité* takes over from medieval courtesy as the behavioral regulating principle that matches the now established monopoly of physical power. It is thus undoubtedly linked to the emergence of the state monopoly, if only in a historicized, not absolute way, as it represents only a particular equilibrium between the individual’s psychic economy and the power structure. Elias stresses the pivotal nature of *civilité*: If “[C]ourtoisie, *civilité* and *civilisation* mark three stages of a social development, [...] the actual change in the behaviour of the upper class, the development of the models of behaviour which would henceforth be called ‘civilised’ [...] took place in the middle phase” (Elias 2012, 107).

The transition from courtesy to *civilité* is thus highly reflective of the more general historical preconditions that Elias had in mind regarding the containment and regulation of violence. Of course, the civilizing process does not end with *civilité* or the successful monopolization of physical violence. Rather, the civilizing process *stricto sensu* takes place in the interplay between social structures and the individual’s psychological structures. It can be regarded as a shift in the balance between external and internal individual controls in favor of the second.

Yet *civilité* presents itself as a decisive step because it implies a much more *stable* regulation

⁴ We can note that, for Elias, this intricacy of war-making and pacification is paradoxical only if a moral judgment is cast from the standpoint of “civilized” individuals. Indeed, trying to cast such a judgment is misleading, the product of a “subjectivistic or partisan view of the past” through which “we usually block our access to the elementary formative regularities and mechanisms, to the real structural history and sociogenesis of historical formations” (Elias 2012, 346).

of violent impulses, as is well illustrated by the contrast that Elias draws between *civilité* and the unrestrained expression of violence in the medieval upper classes.

In feudal societies, according to Elias, individuals present themselves with “a lesser degree of social regulation and binding of the life of drives” (2012, 189). The behavioral model of certain social groups – such as knights – rests on the unrestrained expression of aggressive impulses. The psychic structure behind such a behavioral model, according to Elias, corresponds to the particular stage of the division of social functions, in which no external authority can sanction and control the expression of these affects. In contrast, “The peculiar stability of the apparatus of psychological self-restraint that emerges as a decisive trait built into the habitus of every ‘civilised’ human being stands in the closest relationship to the monopolisation of physical force and the growing stability of the central organs of society” (2012, 407-408). The stability of this habitus is severely conditioned by a relatively pacified social environment, a social and political context in which the dangers threatening the security of existence are predictable and reduced as much as possible. As much as the violent discharge of the aggressive impulse is necessary for the knight in medieval society, self-restraint is necessary for the civilized individual in a later stage of the process.

On the one hand, the difference between the habitus of a free knight and that of a “civilized” individual is not a difference in nature, but a difference of degree, a shift in the general direction toward stronger and more complex mechanisms of self-restraint. According to Olivier Agard (2009), for instance, the basic hypothesis of the *Process of Civilization* lies in this movement of intensification of constraints on the individual mind, a hypothesis that Elias would only subsequently amend and enrich. On the other hand, we can put forward that Elias already presents in the 1939 *Process of Civilization* the emergence of *civilité* as bringing about a substantive transformation in the relation of the individual with itself:

In order to be really “courteous” by the standards of *civilité*, one was to some extent obliged to observe and pay attention to people and their motives. In this, too, a new

relationship of person to person, a new form of integration is announced (Elias 2012, 85).

The increased tendency of people to observe themselves and others is one sign of how the whole question of behaviour was now taking on a different character: people moulded themselves and others more deliberately than in the Middle Age. [...] All problems concerned with behaviour took on new importance (2012, 86).

These quotes illustrate how far-reaching the transformation fostered by the successful monopolization of physical violence is. If we place it back in Elias's more general chronology, we can note that it also takes place in a process of the bounding and, later, nationalization of a community of individuals. The historical importance of *civilité* as a regulating principle rests above all on its capture by the emerging national elites linked to the established state monopoly. In the context of the emergence of the modern states in Europe, at a time when "knightly society and the unity of the Catholic Church were disintegrating," that is, in a highly transitional period, it helped to shape a new ruling class in Europe (Elias 2012, 61). In Elias's model, where the masses gradually take over behavioral norms from the ruling class, it forms one of the underlying conditions of processes of "democratization" of the monopolies that would culminate in the formation of the fully-fledged Nation-State some centuries later.

In the second point, we focus on how the process of monopolization entails the regulation of violence through its displacement and official sanctioning by the state.

I. 2. The state as violence regulator

If we now turn to the concrete description of the reduction of violence and production of security by the state, we can see that the "regulation" of violence has more than one meaning. First, the use of violence must be sanctioned by a central authority that decides on its legitimacy. A crucial capacity to distinguish between legitimate struggle against an (internal or external) enemy and illegitimate private uses of violence is introduced. Second and

consequently, the use of violence becomes generally more predictable: “The monopolisation of physical violence, the concentration of arms and armed troops under one authority, makes the use of violence more or less calculable [...]” (Elias 2012, 411). Physical violence is confined to “enclaves” where it is subject to certain rules, *e.g.*, in wars or, differently, in sport. Third, it is the very outcome of the monopolization by a central authority that physical violence also becomes the object of *self*-regulation in the self-regulation of individuals’ drive. In all of these meanings, violence is displaced rather than suppressed. Above all, it is displaced toward the outside in the waging of war against an external enemy. In *The Germans* and other late essays (“The Fishermen in the Maelström”, 2007a, for example), Elias points out “the duality of the normative codes” that characterizes state-building. The pacification inside states goes along with multiplied, exacerbated violence between states. An argument that would be endorsed by Charles Tilly when he stressed the fact that “interpersonal violence outside of the state’s sphere has generally declined” is intimately connected with the fact that, at the same time, “the world has grown more warlike:” “in most of the world, the activity of states has created a startling contrast between the violence of the state’s sphere and the relative non-violence of civilian life away from the state” (Tilly 1992, 68). For his part, Elias points out that the state survival unit is always at the same time a destructive unit for its enemies, as well as for its members (soldiers and others civilian victims of external wars). That means that even physical violence does not disappear in the state system. It is only “put in the barracks” (*enkaserniert*). It also means that the division between inside and outside security matters is not so clear-cut.

Elias does not minimize the inner conflicts that might arise in the course of this learning process. He acknowledges that, to an extent, the violence that is taken away from the individuals is turned inward, moving “the battlefield [...] within,” as “the passionate affects, that can no longer directly manifest themselves in the relationship *between* people, often

struggle no less violently *within* the individual against this supervising part of themselves (2012, 414). Thus, the development of a “super-ego,” “a controlling agency,” is, according to Elias, a historical and social phenomenon that must be explained, as much as the “inner” violence it entails, in relation to the social structure, and, in later essays, to the specific features of the structure of (political) authority (see “Civilization and Violence: On the State Monopoly of Physical Violence and its Transgression,” Elias 1996, 171-297).

What is suggested is that not all violence must be regarded as pathological. Indeed, the successful displacement of violence toward the outside and inside the individual signals a successful process of civilization (whatever its moral sense might be, thus including its most neutral, descriptive acceptance). In this sense, just as war “is not the opposite of peace” (2012, 488), violence is not the opposite of *civilité* and *civilité* is not at all the opposite of violence. Court society was evidently extremely “violent,” although violence of *etiquette* was precisely not physical violence (Elias 2006, 86-126)⁵. It proves that the persistence of violence in other forms is indeed highly characteristic of the process of civilization.

In a way, and although Elias insists on the dynamic, historical and necessarily unstable nature of interactions between the social structure and the individual psyche, we can see that the regulation of violence also involves a more substantive transformation of the ways in which violence is expressed in daily life. This is where, as we show in the following section, Elias’s thesis joins some normative postulates about the ontology of the state that brings him close to some theorists and apologists of the state.

I.3. A positive ontology of the state?

⁵ Here, Elias appears to fail to think out fully the relationship between physical violence and symbolical violence in the sense of Pierre Bourdieu, that is to say a form of constraint that “rests on an unconscious accordance between mental and objective structures” (Bourdieu 2012, 239). Bourdieu’s central suggestion is precisely that, in order to produce a sociological theory of the state, the Weberian (and Eliasian) priority of physical violence must be reversed. Shortly, it is the monopolization of symbolical violence that constitutes, in Bourdieu’s view, the central process that enables pacification (and, crucially, for the state to usually avoid using physical violence): “L’État est doté d’un instrument de constitution de la paix intérieure, une forme de cela-va-de-soit, d’un *taken for granted* collectif à l’échelle d’un pays” (Bourdieu 2012, 268).

We now ask if Elias's thesis, when examined from a certain angle that steps back from its sociological foundations, does not lead him, like it or not, to attribute to the state an irreducible originality and to instantiate it as the only form of integration able to sublimate and contain violence in a successful, progress-oriented way. This reading brings Elias close to other classic accounts of *civilité* understood as freedom from violence, such as that of Thomas Hobbes. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes puts forward the idea of an *ultima ratio* as a justification of state and civil government. Chapter XVII, "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Common-Wealth," for instance, opens with these words: "The finall Cause, End, or Designe of men, (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which wee see them live in Common-wealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby" (Hobbes 1909, 128). When we look at the conditions that Elias explores in order to foster the process of civilization, we can say that the provision of security by the state is a crucial dimension: It allows the development of behavioral norms, as the individual's existence is no longer threatened by immediate physical attack. When contrasting feudal society with later stages in the development of state monopolies, Elias depicts in Hobbesian terms a society where "the future was relatively uncertain, even for those who had fled the 'world', only God and the loyalty of a few people who held together had any permanence. Fear reigned everywhere; one had to be on one's guard all the time" (Elias 2012, 189). In contrast, the security-providing function of the state further enables the development of a civic community that would be unthinkable otherwise.

To be provocative, we can also put the substantive transformation of violence pointed by Elias in parallel with Carl Schmitt's ontology of the state, where the emergence of the state would mark a transformation from unbridled, unbounded, and destructive interpersonal violence to limited, codified, and legally sanctioned violence (both within and between

states). For instance, in his 1963 preface to *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt states, “...the classical state achieved something totally implausible: establishing inner peace and excluding enmity as a concept of law. It succeeded in eliminating the feud, an institution of medieval law; ending the religious civil wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which each camp believed itself to be particularly justified to wage war; and enforcing tranquility, security, and order within its borders” (Schmitt 2009, 11)⁶. For both authors, the transformation from private violence to sanctioned, legitimate and public forms of violence is a criterion of progress towards civilization – a transformation only the state appears able to perform. As Schmitt puts it in what could have been an Eliasian expression, “the domestication and clear delimitation of war make enmity relative. Each instance of such relativizing is a great advance towards more humanity”⁷.

For Schmitt, however, this containment supposes a community of states (as opposed to a stateless universal union of people) that enables a demarcation between the friend and the enemy (Schmitt 2009 (1963): 52). Therefore, universalistic values and normative set of principles, such as human rights, can only threaten this demarcation and, if enforced, unleash unlimited violence (Schmitt 2009 (1963): 51). Here Elias’s and Schmitt’s visions of post-national integration reveal a clear divergence that is not reducible to an opposition between (Eliasian) optimism and (Schmittian) pessimism. As we will show later, in the “Changes in the We-I balance” (1987), Elias insists that the discourse of human rights and its progressive institutionalization rather signals that the locus of identification is necessarily displaced beyond (and above) the state, announcing a new stage in the process of civilization. Hence, the divergence lies in Elias’s refusal to follow in the logical consequences of Schmitt’s

⁶ Authors’ translation of “dem klassischen Staat war etwas ganz Unwahrscheinliches gelungen: in seinem Innern Frieden zu schaffen und die Feindschaft als Rechtsbegriff auszuschließen. Es war ihm gelungen, die Fehde, ein Institut des mittelalterlichen Recht, zu beseitigen, den konfessionellen Bürgerkriegen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts, die auf beiden Seiten als besonders gerechte Kriege geführt wurden, ein Ende zu machen und innerhalb seines Gebietes Ruhe, Sicherheit und Ordnung herzustellen.”

⁷ Authors’ translation of “Die Hegung und klare Begrenzung des Krieges enthält eine Relativierung der Feindschaft. Jede solche Relativierung ist ein großer Fortschritt im Sinne der Humanität.”

conceptualization: that the entanglement of violence in a set of norms is made possible only by the state in its “classical” form.

II. State violence against *civilité*

So far, we focused mainly on Elias’s central work *On the Process of Civilisation*. This focus leads to make to general points or provisional conclusions. First, Elias’s original insistence on the reduction of violence might have led him to omit some more problematic forms of violence that would come to the fore in the 20th century, that is to say, forms of violence that are at the same time on a larger-scale, more extreme, and *fostered* by the states themselves. As we shall show in the first point below, his reflections on the Holocaust that were published later in his life would come up to a certain point as an amendment (Agard), or at least as a clarification, of his theses and a strict refutation of the interpretation we have just presented. Second, a tension runs through Elias’ *Process of Civilization* between a carefully thought-out, historical and sociological model and a model that remains partly indebted to a tradition of ontologizing the state as a unique and original phenomenon. Discussing it is not within the scope of this chapter, but we can say that such a tempting hypothesis is counterbalanced by the strong historical dimension of Eliasian thought: The civilizing process does not culminate in the state, nor does the civilizing process begin with the state. This is a second reason why *civilité* and the state cannot be confused, as we contend in the second point of this section, which presents a more relationally open and ethical definition of *civilité* that is compatible with its historical meaning.

II.1. About Nazism and uncivil state violence

In his essay written around the time of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and critically titled “The Breakdown of Civilization” (Elias 1996, 299-402), Elias directly confronts the

extermination of the Jews by the Nazis during the World War II. He specifies that it “was not by any means the only regression to barbarism in the civilized societies of the twentieth century” but “perhaps the deepest” (Elias 1996, 308). What matters therefore is “to investigate the conditions in twentieth-century civilizations, the *social* conditions, which have favoured barbarisms of this kind and which might favour them again in the future.” For Elias, “The Eichmann trial has momentarily lifted the veil which hides the darker side of civilized human beings” (1996, 303-304). Among the revelations that come out of the Holocaust, we should like to point out in which sense *civilité* could be concerned by the very breakdown of civilization or regression itself, and how state violence is invoked in order to characterize and explain such breakdowns.

According to Elias, there are indeed different kinds of wars, some of which are more threatening to civilization than others:

“Every war was clearly a regression to barbarism. Up till then, however, European wars had always been relatively limited regressions. Certain minimum rules of civilized conduct were generally still observed even in the treatment of prisoners of war. With a few exceptions, a kernel of self-esteem which prevents the senseless torturing of enemies and allows identification with one’s enemy in the last instance as another human being, together with compassion for his suffering, did not entirely lapse. In the attitude of the National Socialists towards the Jews none of this survived. At least on a conscious level, the torment, suffering and death of Jews did not appear to mean more than that of flies” (Elias 1996, 309).

These sentences are extremely important for the civilizing processes theory as a whole. Elias points out that Nazism and genocide reveal negatively, with particular acuity due to their relative exceptional character, the *ethical* core of the civilizing process, which Elias did not really mention in the 1939 text⁸ and to which we shall come back later, namely, the “growth of mutual identification” of most modern people with their fellow human beings, “simply *as*

⁸ For the French political theorist Philippe Raynaud (2013), Elias was, however, consciously moved by the same questions about the ethical and legal significance of the development of civility concurrently with Western state-building as Hume, Rousseau, and Kant (Raynaud 2013, 246).

fellow human beings” (Mennell 1992, 248).⁹ Here we are forced to admit that the civilizing process cannot be reduced to pacification inside state (although inner peace largely remains – or became, to be more exact, as the civilizing process did not begin with the state – a kind of condition for its continuation). Indeed, something else, something “more,” civilization in a different, more “progress-oriented” meaning, crumbled or collapsed in the Nazi period.

Now, our core question is: To what extent is the civilizing role of the modern state put into question by the Nazi “barbarity or to what extent could the state be partly responsible for the “breakdown” of the human being’s self-esteem? We can address the question in evoking the respective positions of Elias and Zigmunt Bauman (De Swaan 2001). Elias wrote about “breakdown.” If we caricature his position, the Holocaust was for him a paradox, a paradoxical development in the civilizing process, whereas Bauman considered it to be just the reverse, a paroxysm, for “the modern era has been founded on genocide, and was proceeded through more genocide” (Bauman 1993, quoted in De Swaan 2001). But Elias is not an anti-Bauman before the fact. He (more) explicitly recognized that civilizing and decivilizing processes were partly due to the same causes. The differentiation of social functions and lengthening of the chains of interdependence, for instance, called for social pacification. But they were also required to make possible the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and its rational, bureaucratic organization, including the emotional detachment of an Eichmann establishing timetables for trains to Auschwitz (Arendt 2006) and the organization of the mass killing in the gas chambers (Elias 1996, 307). If modernity does not create or aggravate barbarism and violence, it might rationalize, bureaucratize, and organize it.

⁹ Talking about “ethics” is not very Eliasian. However, it is hardly possible for once *not* to validate morally, in terms of progress, such a “progressive,” although relative and reversible, trend. Better stated, the growth of mutual identification and empathy can quite clearly be considered to be something that *can* be morally validated, and such a position *is* more or less implicitly validated by the author. To be clear, the point is not about an innate character of empathy or compassion, qualities that are learned in any event and evolve in line with the standards of behavior and feelings. The point is that the civilizing process would have been marked little by little by the widening scope of identification due to the growing repulsion of death and suffering of people more and more remote and different from “us.” “We watch football, not gladiatorial contests,” Elias wrote to sum up such an evolution in “The Loneliness of the Dying” (2010, 4), the title of which does not precisely suggest a blind optimism about social change, by the way.

Nevertheless, one of Elias's tacit assumptions in his theory of civilization is that the state and its monopolization of violence (and taxation) "will lead to more civilized modes of intercourse and expression, i.e. a lessening of all forms of violent behavior, *state violence included*" (De Swaan 2001). The "normal" civilizing process (namely, the process in which civilizing trends prevail) entails an "equalization" process and a functional democratization process characterized by minimal equality, equality before the law, increasing equalization in living standards, and growing mutual identification. What Nazism (among other regressions) proved, he contends, against Elias's theory or main interpretation of it, is that the twin processes of "the monopolization of the means of the violence *and* the overall civilization of society" could be "pried apart:" in a "dyscivilizing society" (De Swaan), an overall degree of civilization seems to prevail, and at the same time "the full violence of the state is unleashed against specific categories in well demarcated local, temporal, social and mental compartments" (De Swaan 2001, 276).¹⁰

We should like to make two additional remarks regarding the role of the state in the "breakdown of civilization" that Elias analyzed in *The Germans*. Even though the breakdown is to be related to certain "social conditions" that could be found in numerous other contexts (humiliating military defeats, economic and political crisis, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, etc.), Nazism, war, camps, and genocide first and foremost seem to have had something to do with a specific German national habitus and thus with the specificity of the German Nation-State's historical trajectory. According to Elias, these trajectory and habitus have notably been marked by not the strength but, to the contrary, the *weaknesses* of a state monopoly on violence that had been consolidated very late and shakily, compared with the other great European powers (see the enduring institution of dueling in the Wilhelmine Empire, which tolerated and encouraged interpersonal private violence in some contexts, in Elias 1996, 44-

¹⁰ In the text "The expulsion of the Huguenots from France," first published in 1935, Elias shows the enduring risk of personal use of legitimate violence, namely by a Catholic king against the Protestant (Agard 2009). However, the episode relates to a very ancient period, that of the state's inception.

64). In Germany, the lack of a state monopoly or a state monopoly that was too feeble for too long or too young and immature yielded a state that was not able to democratize in time and thus unable to really “civilize” society, fostering the need for authoritarian rule and highly fanciful political discourses such as Hitler’s (Mennell 1996, 112). After such a historically hesitant monopoly crumbled under the Weimar Republic, which is described as the most decivilizing period regarding the growth of “private” violence (Fletcher 1995), Hitler restored a kind of highly effective monopoly of the means of violence,¹¹ a monopoly that finally permitted the genocide to be organized so efficiently in a context of war.

In other words, in *The Germans* Elias partly recycles the *Sonderweg*’s theme by considering the peculiarity of the German state and habitus formation to be of major importance. That argumentative strategy contributes to exonerating the “normal” state building path *partially*.¹² “Partially” because, at the same time, Elias firmly insists on the guilty incredulity and passivity of the other European powers regarding the rise and crimes of Nazism that they were neither able nor keen to prevent due to their misunderstanding of the civilizing process itself:

Contemporaries did not then conceive of civilization as a condition which, if it is to be maintained or improved requires a constant effort based on a degree of understanding of how it works. Instead, like their “rationality”, they took it for granted as one of their permanent attributes, an aspect of their inborn superiority: once civilized, always civilized (Elias 1996, 314).

A second point about what happened under the Nazi regime should also be considered in relation to the state and violence issue. It concerns the efforts made by the Nazis to transform

¹¹ Of course, we can wonder, for example with Martin Broszat (1981), if the Nazi regime was really a “state” dictatorship or rather a party dictatorship.

¹² Wacquant’s analysis of the decivilizing processes at work in the black ghettos in some American cities gives another example of valuing, through the negative example, the “normal” trajectory of the space. Decivilizing is largely envisioned by the French sociologist as a de-pacification, a resurgence of private violence and rise in killings due directly to the withdrawal of the state, first from education and law enforcement (schools and police). State violence against citizens in these areas is of course noted but the accent put on the decivilizing penal or “American” model of the state helps to validate, by the contrast that it creates, the civilizing social or “European” model of the state (Castell 2013) that is weakening or disappearing. Moreover, Wacquant suggests that the decivilizing processes at work in the ghettos go as far as to cause the disintegration or shortening of interdependence chains, the growth of which is a kind of driver or *causes* for the civilizing process. For instance, in black American ghettos, decivilizing processes caused by the withdrawal of the state favor the return of an informal economy, people not daring to move out of their immediate neighborhood, etc.

Jews into “enemies” of the German people and justify “war” against them – a very costly and “irrational” war that caused the Nazis to lose the other one (Elias 1996). It required diminishing the feelings of identification with the Jews that many non-Jewish Germans had developed. The Nuremberg Laws adopted for that purpose prove that the Nazis had assimilated the need to legalize their apparently unbridled violence towards the Jews. The decisions taken early to remove Jews first to ghettos and then to camps, most of which were situated *outside* Germany, prove the necessity of (hiding and) turning genocide into a war with an enemy that culminated in the creation of extermination camps *outside* the state’s territory. Last but not least, the Nazis remained curiously apprehensive of German public opinion regarding the treatment of the Jews. Of course that does not minimize the violence of the Nazi State at all. Rather, it shows that more or less “civilized” standards, standards more or less related to state-building, such as shunting violence to the side of war and external conflict, are not so easy to ignore and dismantle, for even the Nazi regime had to come to terms with these standards within German society. At the same time, such standards do not guarantee civilization at all by themselves. By singling it out, an Eliasian reading helps *situate* Nazi State violence instead of confusing it with the very “nature” of the modern state, or on the contrary, with its very negation. Rather, Nazi violence appears to be an example of state violence resulting from specific historical (de)civilizing processes that could have been developing elsewhere in other ways and should be explained (Elias 1996, 304).

II.2. Civilité against and beyond state (violence)

A core hypothesis of this chapter is that the most adamant denials of civility envisioned by Elias himself –first among them being Nazi violence against Jews – deeply question the civilizing role supposedly attributed to the state by the civilizing process theory. These denials also consequently complicate and enrich the significations of the terms “civilization” and

“*civilité*.” As we have recalled above, *civilité* is usually understood from the 1939 text as a behavioral regulating principle that was crucial to the development of court society in Europe and thus intimately associated with state-building and the specific elites it required (Elias 2012, 61). In this last section, we should like to stress that *civilité* can be understood by Elias as something more demanding, ethically speaking, and slightly different from this first historical meaning.

In our view, the analysis of the decivilizing processes proposed in *The Germans* reveal, by negative example, the normative, evaluative, prescriptive or moral meaning that Elias often claimed to deny the term “civilization.” The 1961-62 text describes indeed what collapsed or came close to collapsing in Europe between 1933 and 1945: not the state, definitely not the links of interdependence, not all kinds of reserve or politeness or civilized manners, but this capacity for mutual identification. “The breakdown of civilization” gives moreover precious insights into the very conditions that threaten the most progressive, desirable aspects of civilization. At the end of the day, this text clearly contributes to downgrading, if not the importance of the internal pacification, secure existence, and predictability of danger to which the state gives rise, at least the bounded and sovereign community nature of the modern state, which allowed such pacification but proved unable to guarantee it definitively and for every citizen.

As we have pointed out, what crumbled under Nazism and in World War II was, in a nutshell, the growing ability to put oneself in someone else’s place, referring to a civilized self-esteem that Elias does not mention in *On the Process of Civilization*. This mutual identification very clearly has something to do with compassion and empathy, which have no reason to be limited by the borders of a political unit, survival unit or community. On the contrary, such feelings are revealed precisely when they concern strangers, prisoners of war, supposed enemies; in a word “the other,” someone from outside one’s political community or survival

unit. The widening of the scope of identification circles mentioned by Elias and his followers thus directly participates in an enlarging consciousness of the self that defines a kind of cosmopolitanism in Elias's late texts. In our view, this cosmopolitanism is absolutely incompatible with the Schmittian nationalist model we evoked at the beginning, a model that refers to a concept of the political as being founded on a demarcation between friend and foe. Elias could not have agreed with this conception, given that he firmly and constantly rejected every kind of nationalism (see for example Elias 1996, 315).

The development of modern political communities ruled by law obviously favored the evolution towards a *civilité* understood as a broadened awareness founded on both norms and particular psycho-affective capacities. However, the question is whether the state model does or does not give its own, inherent limits (those of sovereignty, for instance) to this evolution. In an Eliasian perspective, the state model itself rather calls for overstepping these or, better said, its own limits. In other words, the process of civilization always described without a beginning and an end is also to be considered as having no ultimate "foundation," in the Nation-State or in anything else. In his *Civilité and Violence* (2010), the French philosopher Etienne Balibar gives *civilité* a *negative* foundation only, in opposition to violence. Elias, for his part, might have been inclined to see one more time, in the constantly increasing interconnectedness of the human network, the very functional motive of considering *civilité* as an open relational concept instead of a closed community-based one.

Conclusions

In Elias's more political texts, the need for a world state is a recurrent issue. In some passages, from the conclusion of *On the Process of Civilization* until "The Fishermen in the Maelstrom" (1981), the very survival of mankind in the nuclear era seems to be contingent on such a state's existence. Establishing a global monopoly of violence is the only way to

prevent ultimate destructive violence and put an end to the global war that partially results from state-building, as already advocated by Rousseau.¹³ According to Elias, without a compelling force – a military monopoly – international law would be unable to pacify international relations (Elias 2007a, 138-150), which, for that reason, are not civilized or civilizing, but, on the contrary, constantly threatening. In those passages, Elias seems rather close to the eighteenth century cosmopolitanism that was built against and at the same time upon Thomas Hobbes's model of sovereignty.¹⁴

Challenging the global state solution to fight against global violence, another interpretation of Elias's "reality-congruent" cosmopolitanism can be found at the end of the "Changes in the We-I Balance" (1987), where Elias carefully evokes human rights, instead of the quite illusory solution of a global world state.¹⁵ He put particular emphasis on the rise of individual rights against state prerogative related to violence:

In speaking of human rights, we say that the individual as such [...] is entitled to rights that limit the state's power over the individual, regardless of the laws of that state. These rights are generally thought to include the individual's right to seek accommodation or work where he or she wishes [...]. Another well-known human right is protection of the individual against imprisonment by the state unless legitimised by public judicial procedures (206-207).

He finally insists:

Perhaps it has not yet been stated clearly enough that human rights include the right of freedom from the use of physical force, and the right to decline to use or threaten to use force in the service of another. [...] The transition to the primacy of the state in relation to clan and tribe meant an advance of individualisation. [T]he rise of humanity to become the dominant survival unit also marks an advance of individualisation. As a

¹³ "Since each of us is in the civil state with his fellow citizens and in the state of nature with all the rest of the world, we have forestalled private wars only to ignite general ones, which are a thousand times more terrible; and [by] uniting ourselves to several men, we really become the enemies of the human race," Rousseau writes in his *Abstract of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's Plan for Perpetual Peace* (1761, 1995), at the direct opposite of what Schmitt will write. As we have been trying to demonstrate, Elias's position is much more ambiguous.

¹⁴ See, for example, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre's *Plan for Perpetual Peace* (1713, 1987). More broadly, this cosmopolitanism conceives of a political entity enlarged to the borders of the human community, a citizenship that, although universal, is still based on belonging to a political community with which one should be identified.

¹⁵ Elias also could have written: "Deadly danger to any civilization is no longer likely to come from without. (Arendt 1958, 302). However, Arendt's warning is indeed much more explicit about the dangers of a world government: "For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude democratically – namely by majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof" (Arendt 1958, 298-299).

human being an individual has rights that even the state cannot deny him or her. We are only at an early stage of the transition to the most comprehensive stage of integration, and the elaboration of what is meant by human rights is just beginning. But freedom from the use and threat of violence [in the service of another] may so far have received too little attention as some of the rights which, in course of time – and contrary to the opposing tendencies of states – will have to be asserted for the individual in the name of humanity (2010, 207-208).

To conclude, the co-reading of the *Process* with later essays and other sociology-of-knowledge (2007) texts stresses that *civilité* from its very origin should not be reduced to an attribute of power for a ruling upper class, or as a set of norms, rights and obligations coming to bind people to a definite historical, political community pacified through the state's monopoly of physical force. It could be the starting point of another paper to show how since the emergence of court society, *civilité* also has always had something to do with the development of an observation method aimed at managing social relations and conflicts in contexts of social and institutional uncertainty, a method that potentially encourages self-detachment and the recognition of interconnectedness in a quasi-sociological perspective (Elias 2006, 116-126). In its relational meaning, *civilité* reminds us of the initial conditions of a critical and reflexive approach to the political and might enable its own questioning. According to Elias, that is what the increasing claims about human rights have been doing since the end of the twentieth century. These claims do not only signify the further progression of individualisation. They are also tentative signs of a developing common "sense of responsibility" for the fate of others far beyond the borders of one's own country or continent. And both could have emancipating effects, including with regard to state violence.

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