TIME AND TABOO, CIVILISATION AND SCIENCE: THE WORK OF NORBERT ELIAS[1]

Since the belated publication in English of the first volume of *The Civilising Process*,[2] the work of Norbert Elias has excited considerable interest among Anglophone social scientists. In this, his *magnum opus*, Elias traces the development of personality structure in European societies since the Middle Ages, identifying through changes in manners a general trend towards greater control over the expression of affect - as observed in the growth of taboos governing the handling of bodily functions, table manners, aggression and overt emotion. Elias is thus using the word 'civilisation' in a sense which has been unfashionable in anthropology since early this century. Since then, anthropologists have on the whole adjusted to the non-historical character of the societies they chiefly studied by contenting themselves with the depiction of *differences* in patterns of taboo from one human group to another. Being short of information about how modes of behaviour in these societies actually developed, many anthropologists would feel some inhibition about saying that restraints in particular societies are not just

---

1 I should like to thank Norbert Elias himself for his helpful comments on the first draft of this article; responsibility for its final form remains, needless to say, my own.

2 Norbert Elias, *The Civilising Process* (vol.I: *The History of Manners*), Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1978; originally published as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, Basel: Haus zum Falken 1939 (2 vols.).

different, but greater or less than in others.[3] Elias, in contrast, studying European historical societies, traces what he claims to be not simply *changes* in patterns of taboo, but changes in a specific direction, a structured process of growth or development. This brief article is intended to sketch Elias's argument and set it in the context of his other writings and the research which his work has inspired.

I

Norbert Elias was born in Breslau in 1897. After studying at Breslau and Heidelberg, he was in 1930 appointed Karl Mannheim's assistant at Frankfurt, where, as the principal members of the University's Department of Sociology, they were not members but tenants of the Institut für Sozialforschung. In 1933, Elias fled first to Paris and later to London, where he was for some years a Research Fellow at the LSE. In 1954 he went to Leicester, where he became Reader in Sociology. After retirement in the early 1960s, he was briefly Professor in Ghana. He has now returned to Germany and, at the age of 83, is still teaching and writing very actively at Bielefeld.

Über den Prozess der Zivilisation was the product of his first years in London; as Bryan Wilson has remarked in *New Society* (1977), that was not a propitious moment for the reception of a two-volume work in German on, of all things, civilisation. In fact it did not attract widespread attention until its reissue in 1969. Since then, it has been widely discussed in

---

[3] It will be obvious that in this article I am not using the word 'taboo' in the normal technical sense current among anthropologists. Paul Kapteyn has pointed out that the word is used in two different senses, and distinguishes between 'primitive' and 'civilised' taboos. The former, associated with *Fremdzwang*, is that to which twentieth-century anthropologists have paid most attention. They have on the whole neglected taboos in the latter sense, which are associated with *Selbstzwang* and which, despite being closer to the sense in which the word 'taboo' has come to be used in everyday speech, stand in need of further investigation See Paul Kapteyn, 'Taboo: One Word, Two Concepts', a paper presented at the conference on 'The Civilising Process and Figurational Sociology', Balliol College, Oxford, 5-6 January 1980; and, at greater length, *Taboe, Macht en Moraal in Nederland*, Amsterdam: Arbeiders Press 1980.

Germany, the Netherlands and France.[4] But it is important to see the work as the product of its time: like several other notable books of the period, it was a response to the problem of Nazism.[5] How could the German people, so proud of their 'civilisation', treat so many of their fellow human beings in so barbarous a way? More generally, how did people, how do people, become more - or less - 'civilised'? Elias, far from seeing the 'civilising process' as an inevitable, irreversible, iron law of history, sees it as highly contingent and precarious, a matter of delicate balances too easily disturbed. That is not surprising, for the greatest single intellectual influence, among many underlying *The Civilising Process*, was Freud, whose *Civilisation and its Discontents* (London 1930) had depicted the internalisation of the demands of social life as a difficult process fraught with tensions.

The essence of Elias's argument is that the long-term processes of social and political development which gradually, and with many reverses, promoted the internal pacification of European societies, were associated with changes which, again gradually and with many reverses, took place in patterns of individual behaviour and personality structure. The theory of state-formation processes given in Volume II[6] is essential to understanding the argument about manners in Volume I, and it is just as original. State-formation is one aspect of the more general process of the weaving of more and more extensive webs of social interdependence. Elias traces the emergence of larger and larger territorial units out of the patchwork of tiny feudal fiefs which formed the map of

---

[4] For a study of its reception, treated as a problem in the sociology of knowledge, see J. Goudsblom, 'Responses to Norbert Elias's Work in England, Germany, the Netherlands and France', in P.R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (eds.), *Human Figurations: Essays for Norbert Elias*, Amsterdam: Stichting Amsterdams Sociologisch Tijdschrift 1977.

[5] For example, much of the work of members of the Frankfurt School is a response on various levels to the same issue: see T.W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York: Harper 1950; T.W. Adorno and M. Horkheimer, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, London: New Left Books 1978; H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation*, Boston: Beacon Press 1955. In anthropology, some of the works of the 'culture and personality' school such as Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin 1946) represent a related if less enduring response.

[6] An English translation is to be published by Basil Blackwell in 1981.

Western Europe at the end of the first millennium AD. These small political units were, or soon became, unequal in power-chances, as a result of being selected as victors or vanquished in the qualifying rounds of the contest over the distribution of resources. As they competed amongst each other, some grew territorially larger by defeating and absorbing their neighbours. The larger they became, the more easily could they support larger and more effective military and administrative forces, which made it still more probable that bigger units would grow still bigger. This continuing process endowed those who had gained mastery of larger resources with two related monopolies: a monopoly of the use of physical force, which could be used both externally and internally - that is, both for war and for the internal pacification of their own territory;and a monopoly of taxation, since a fiscal monopoly was necessary to support the first. Elias's theory of the 'monopoly mechanism' is closely analogous to Marx's conception of the development of economic monopolies out of competitive markets. From an early stage, the beginnings can be discerned of the 'depersonalisation of the exercise of power', with the growth of administrative and fiscal apparatuses. This went hand in hand with the growing complexity of society - itself at least in part made possible by the internal pacification of larger territories. Its consequence was that conflicts between groups within a given territory would normally be conducted without violence, or, if violence were used, conflicting parties had to contend with the use of the monopoly forces on one side or the other. In this complicated series of inter-dependently-developing power-balances - between neighbouring territorial units, between lords and vassals, and between the landed nobility and the rising bourgeoisie - kings were often able to increase the royal power by balancing the conflicting groups against one another. There emerged the absolutist states of post-Renaissance Europe,[7] exemplified most perfectly in France, and in Versailles under Louis XIV and XV. In France too, from the sixteenth century can be most clearly seen the process of *Verhöflichung* ('curialisation' or 'courtisation'), the transformation of the old warrior nobility, which for so long had had its own territorial power bases, into mere courtiers.

Elias has in fact written a separate book entirely about the sociology of the French court-society.[8] He shows how, as their

---

[7] For an interesting discussion from a Marxist viewpoint of absolutism and the power-balances between classes which it involved,see Perry Anderson, *Lineages of the Absolutist State*, London: New Left Books 1974.

[8] N. Elias, *Die Höfische Gesellschaft*, Neuwied & Berlin: Luchterhand 1969. Although not published until a quarter of a century later, this was to have been Elias's Frankfurt *Habilitationschrift*.

own revenues and political power declined, and as those of the bourgeois *noblesse de robe* increased, parts of the old *noblesse d'épée* acquired positions at court, and thus became entrapped in an elaborate 'system of expenses' which ruined many if the king did not help them. The system of fine distinctions and involvement in status battles was too closely connected with their social identity for them to be able to economise like good bourgeois. Their increasing dependence on royal favour and patronage also enabled the king to use as a means of control the related system of ritual, precedence and etiquette for which Versailles is famous.

The theory of state-formation processes does not, of course, end with the absolutist states; but let us now turn to the question of how these macroscopic processes might be connected with changes in personality structure. Internal pacification would seem most obviously and plausibly connected with increased self-control over the expression of aggression. Elias (in Volume II of *The Civilising Process*) makes the point in a characteristically vivid illustration. Travelling by road was dangerous in medieval times, and it remains so today - but the nature of the danger has changed. The medieval traveller had to have the ability - temperamental as well as physical - to defend himself violently from violent attack. Today, the chief danger is from road accidents, and the avoidance of these depends to a great extent on high capacity for self-control in the expression of - and skill in warding off - aggression, whether in overt or disguised form. Elias is thinking not just of modern motorists, but also of Versailles, where so much depended on the courtiers' extreme self-control and alertness to the niceties of courtly intrigue - mostly non-violent status- and power-battles - depicted so memorably in the diaries of the Duc de St Simon.

But,if we concede Elias's argument with respect to aggression, does it also follow that he is right about the taming of affect in the much broader sense? Here, his principal sources are the numerous 'manners books', whose authors (from Tannhäuser in the thirteenth century through Erasmus and Castiglione in the Renaissance to their numerous successors down to the nineteenth century) set out the changing standards of acceptable social behaviour. They were addressing at first very small literate upper classes, and later somewhat larger audiences. They tell their readers how to handle food and conduct themselves at table; how, when, and when not to fart, burp or spit; how to blow their noses; how to behave when passing someone in the act of urinating or defecating; how to behave when sharing a bed at an inn; and so on. In earlier centuries such matters - discussion of which now causes embarrassment, or at least the sensation of a taboo having been broken - were discussed openly and frankly, without shame, and apparently needed to be discussed. Then gradually, from the Renaissance, a long-term trend becomes apparent towards standards of greater restraint and more differentiated codes of behaviour. For example, the fork and the handkerchief slowly came into use at courts, and in time spread gradually to lower ranks of society.

One may ask whether the fork and the handkerchief represent greater restraint or merely a change of fashion. Both were originally expressions of the greater 'refinement' of upper classes,and of their social distance from lower social groups; as part of an overall pattern of increasing demands of 'good manners', they can be seen as requiring greater restraint. And both are part of what Elias calls a 'sequential order' through time: the use of the fork or other utensils for eating temporally follows rather than precedes the use of the hands, just as the use of the handkerchief follows the use of the fingers. A general reversion to eating with the hands, and certainly to wiping one's nose on one's sleeve, is more or less inconceivable in the absence of some catastrophic and comprehensive regression in the structure of contemporary society. The regulation of defecation is perhaps a more clear-cut illustration of the thesis. As late as the sixteenth century, courts were making rules against the seemingly widespread practice of urinating and defecating in case of urgency in the corners and corridors. As time went on, the manners books could take such basic matters for granted, devoting less space to the niceties of how to blow one's nose with the fingers of one hand only, or to use only one (the other!) to take food from the common bowl. Later books would be concerned more with the refined etiquette governing the use of a plethora of cutlery.

In tracing the effect of developing patterns of social interdependence on personality structure, Elias is not of course arguing that behaviour in small-scale societies or in the medieval period lacks all social patterning.

> The expression of feeling by people in the Middle Ages was altogether freer and more spontaneous than in the subsequent period. But it certainly did not lack social patterning and control in any absolute sense. There is, in this sense, no zero-point. But the type, the strength and the elaboration of the taboos, controls and interdependencies can change in a hundred ways. And as these change, so does the tension and equilibrium of the emotions and, with it, the degree and kind of gratification which the individual seeks and finds. (*The Civilising Process*, i, 215)

So though there is no zero-point in self-control and 'civilisation', Elias does contend that the Superego becomes stronger - gradually, precariously and with regressions - as more elaborate social interdependence exerts increasing pressures on the individual. One corollary is that the distance between adult and childhood behaviour increases. Whereas Philippe Ariès in *Centuries of Childhood* places the emphasis on 'the discovery of childhood' from the seventeenth century, the changes Ariès observes would be explained by Elias rather as the effects of changes in adult standards of self-control.

To the modern layman, if not the modern anthropologist, it may seem obvious that many of the changes Elias describes must have come about for reasons of hygiene. But Elias is able to

show that in each case thresholds of shame and embarrassment rose first; only later were reasons of hygiene advanced as *post facto* justifications of the new standards. For instance, when spitting was accepted and frequent, it was said to be unhealthy to retain sputum; only after spitting became socially unacceptable was it declared unhygienic. Siding in effect with Freud against Max Weber, Elias declares that '"Rational understanding" is not the motor of the "civilising" of eating or of other behaviour.'[9] The justification most frequently given initially for new standards of restraint was that the former unrestricted behaviour shows a lack of respect for associates, particularly social superiors. Reasons of hygiene became prominent only in the later period when upper-class standards of shame and restraint were spreading to all ranks of society.

Elias's account of the connection between changes in manners and in social stratification and social power is complex. He argues that from the Renaissance onwards, 'feelings and affects are first transformed in the upper class, and the structure of society as a whole permits this changed affect standard to spread slowly throughout society.'[10] This is in marked contrast to the medieval period, when the social figuration was less conducive to the permeation of models of behaviour through society as a whole. A code of behaviour, like knightly chivalry, might apply to one estate throughout Christendom, without much affecting the quite different behaviour of other strata. In early modern Europe, transitionally, forms of behaviour were often considered distasteful or disrespectful in social inferiors which the superiors were not ashamed of in themselves. Thus it was disrespectful for a man to appear unclothed before a man of superior rank, yet for the superior to do so before the inferior could be a sign of affability. Yet by the twentieth century, symmetry was established, and largely similar patterns of shame and restraint expected equally of all classes. Elias's explanation - to simplify it greatly - is in terms of the advancing division of labour creating much closer and less unequal interdependence between social strata, a process of 'functional democratisation' leading to more equal power-balances. For example, as de Tocqueville noted long before Elias, in a highly unequal society, members of powerful strata have no real conception of physical

---

9 *The Civilising Process*, i, 116. See also J. Goudsblom, 'Zivilisation, Ansteckungsangst und Hygiene', in P.R. Gleichmann, J. Goudsblom and H. Korte (eds.), *Materialien zu Norbert Elias's Zivilisationstheorie*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1979, pp. 215-253; and J. Goudsblom, 'Rationalisation and Civilisation', paper presented at the conference on 'The Civilising Process and Figurational Sociology', 1980.

10 *The Civilising Process*, i, 115.

suffering in lower strata - nor, in times of rebellion, do lower strata exercise much restraint in cruelty towards their masters.[11]

II

A thesis on so large a scale as *The Civilising Process* plainly calls for testing through comparative studies aimed at discovering whether analogous processes have occurred in other cultures. Elias himself has hinted that they can be observed in the classical world. And it would be extremely interesting to know whether they were found in China or Japan; one would expect to find similarities, but also differences - the use of chopsticks rather than forks would scarcely constitute a refutation of the theory! So far, however, such studies have not been undertaken. One obstacle is that many historians appear to be affronted by the sheer boldness of Elias's hypothesis. As for anthropologists, perhaps they are too far gone in relativism to give the thesis the initial credence which is necessary to justify an inevitably difficult comparative study.

Nevertheless, sociologists, anthropologists and historians especially in Holland and Germany have begun to explore in a more limited way particular implications. One of the most obvious issues is whether the relaxation of many taboos and the relatively easier manners of the present century represent a reversal of the civilising process. Elias noted this development when writing between the wars, and he considers that while the long-term trend of the civilising process has been clear, in the shorter term there have always been waves and spurts in both directions, and that these are normal and still possible. Elias rejects one interpretation of contemporary trends which might find popular favour, that 'law and order' is breaking down in Western societies, and that 'civilised standards' are declining in consequence. His own tentative interpretation is that relax-

---

11 See John Stone and Stephen Mennell (eds.), *Alexis de Tocqueville on Democracy, Revolution and Society*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1980, pp. 36, 102-106. For evidence on the decline of judicial torture in Europe (interpreted from a very different theoretical perspective) see Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, London: Allen Lane 1977. Elias also comments on cruelty to animals - see *Civilising Process*, i, 203-204.

ation of controls in *specific* instances depends upon the internalisation of self-restraints *generally* having proceeded still further and become less problematic than they were then. There is, as he puts it, a 'highly controlled decontrolling of emotions'. Two examples of specific relaxations which might illustrate this principle are the trends towards scantier dress on the beach (and elsewhere) and towards easier divorce laws. Notable essays by Cas Wouters and by Abram de Swaan have explored this issue of the 'informalisation process'.[12]

Much of the work now being done in Germany and the Netherlands on aspects of the civilising process remains for the moment either unpublished or untranslated into English.[13] Two substantial studies which are readily accessible, however, are Anton Blok's *The Mafia of a Sicilian Village 1860-1960* (Oxford 1974) and Eric Dunning and Kenneth Sheard's *Barbarians, Gentlemen and Players* (Oxford 1979). Blok's book, subtitled 'A Study of Violent Peasant Entrepreneurs', is a good example of an historically-orientated anthropology. He interprets *mafia* as a social *process* in which people willingly resort to the private use of violence as a means of control; the incidence, patterning and fluctuations of violence are related to the failure of the Italian state (except to a large extent under Mussolini) to establish an effective monopoly over the internal use of violence. Dunning and Sheard, on the other hand, present a sociological study of the development of rugby football. They show how the public schools and the structure of Victorian society in general provided a favourable milieu for the 'civilising' of the unbelievably violent traditional folk games and their codification into the modern games of football.

---

12 Cas Wouters, 'Informalisation and the Civilising Process', in Gleichmann, Goudsblom and Korte (eds.), *Human Figurations*, *op. cit.*, pp. 437-453; Abram de Swaan, 'The Politics of Agoraphobia', paper presented at the conference on 'The Civilising Process and Figurational Sociology', 1980.

13 It is hoped that a collection of papers will eventually be published under the editorship of Eric Dunning and myself.

III

Though *The Civilising Process* remains his pivotal work, Elias has in more recent years written extensively on many other subjects. A minor work, but one of some interest to anthropologists, is *The Established and the Outsiders*, a study of a community near Leicester.[14] It depicts three neighbourhoods, the residents of two of them being working-class groups of very similar social composition but differing in length of settlement, and remaining in conflict over several generations along this established/outsider axis. Gossip networks are one of the interesting means by which the three groups are distinguished. Elias advances the established/outsider distinction as a pair of categories more general in scope than such conventional concepts as class and status-group, and he employs it again in his recent work on scientific establishments.[15]

The sciences - or, to be more exact, theories of knowledge scientific and non-scientific - have been the subject of many essays by Elias in recent years. One of the earliest, 'Problems of Involvement and Detachment' (*British Journal of Sociology* VII, 1956, pp. 226-252), shows clearly the link between *The Civilising Process* and his interest in the sciences. He presents detachment (or what used to be called 'objectivity') not as some heroic psychological quality of individuals, nor as any finally attainable terminal state, but as the collective achievement of many generations: the gradual development of relatively autonomous communities of scientists makes possible greater social control over the expression by scientists of individual affect and fantasy with respect to physical, biological and - eventually - social data. Though again there is no final state, scientific knowledge gradually becomes more 'object-adequate'. That may sound rather Comtean, and indeed Elias in *What is Sociology?* (London 1978) is not afraid to acknowledge the value of some ideas found in the work of the founder of positivism; but his reading of Comte, as of Marx, is highly critical and selective.

---

[14] N. Elias and J.L. Scotson, *The Established and the Outsiders*, London: Frank Cass 1965. See also Elias's important essay, 'Towards a Theory of Communities', Foreword to C. Bell and H. Newby (eds.), *The Sociology of Community*, London: Frank Cass 1974.

[15] Forthcoming in R.D. Whitley (ed.), *Sociology of the Sciences: A Yearbook*, 1981.

However, it is certainly true that Elias would see Western science as more 'civilised' and 'advanced', more 'object-adequate', than the cosmologies of tribal societies; in terms of anthropologists, one might say he is with Jack Goody (*The Domestication of the Savage Mind*) and against Evans-Pritchard (*Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*) and Lévi-Strauss (*The Savage Mind*).

IV

When sociologists write about the sciences, they are usually implicitly concerned to say something about the nature of their own discipline. And indeed Elias has developed a highly coherent view of the social sciences which in many respects makes him an 'outsider' in relation to some present-day tendencies. It is impossible in a still briefer conclusion to a brief article to do more than hint at this view. Let it suffice to say that his central categories are interdependence rather than interaction, and power-balances and processes rather than static structures - though it is possible to speak of the structure of processes.

Unlike the over-used concept of 'interaction', which leads the social scientist into difficulties as soon as he attempts to go beyond the small face-to-face group, creating an artificial gap between micro and macro 'levels of analysis', the idea of interdependence can be used in investigating human figurations from the smallest to the largest. Interdependence leads directly to the idea of power-balances, which may be more or less unequal, more or less unstable, and which are found in figurations of every scale. Thus Elias's was one of the first sociological attempts to discuss within the same framework inter-state, intra-state, inter-group and interpersonal processes.

'Interdependence' has further significance in relation to the nature of social scientific theories. Elias argues that the greater the degree of interdependence, integration or interconnection found in a science's subject-matter, the more inappropriate is methodological atomism - by which in this context he means the attempt to explain the properties of complex wholes in terms of the properties of their constituent parts. The method is less appropriate in the biological than the physical sciences, and less in the social sciences than the biological. Timeless, reversible laws on the model of physics, the science which has inappropriately been taken as the model for all the sciences by generations of philosophers, are not a fruitful goal for social scientists. They should seek instead 'process-theories'.

Human societies are unintended, blind social processes which, though produced by the interweaving of intended actions of countless individuals, are unintended and unplanned by any particular individuals. They nonetheless possess structure; the division of labour, the monopoly mechanism and the civilising process are three of many strands of such processes. All attempts at conscious planning - as for 'development' - must be made against the background of such unplanned processes. This processual view, Elias tries to show, overcomes the sterile traditional problem of 'the Individual' and 'Society'; that is a chicken-and-egg issue, the result of using concepts which falsely isolate and freeze two aspects of one process. These concepts have their origin in the egocentrism of Western philosophy since the Renaissance. The old issue of freedom (or 'free-will') versus determinism is seen in similar terms: 'it is usually forgotten that there are always many mutually interdependent individuals, whose interdependence to a greater or lesser extent limits each one's scope for action.'[16] The static polarities of voluntarism and determinism can be replaced by the investigation of the constraints exerted on individual people as a result of their location in a particular network of interdependence, and of the compellingness of particular social processes. As for whether there are long-term 'laws of historical development', Elias characteristically again turns the question into one with empirical reference. He argues that social figurations differ in their 'potential for change'; study of a past figurational sequence may always show that figuration B *had* to be preceded by figuration A. But it is not always very easy to show that figuration A *had* to be followed by figuration B. In some cases, it may be possible to show convincingly that an earlier figuration had so little potential for change that a later figuration was the only conceivable outcome, but in many cases alternative outcomes were possible. Once again, in a typical way, Elias here turns the dichotomous poles of an old quasi-philosophical controversy - his target here, of course, is Popper - into a more subtle, processual form.[17]

Perhaps the notion of *Zustandsreduktion* ('process-reduction') is as central as any to Elias's thinking.[18] By it, he means

---

16 *What is Sociology?, op. cit.*, p. 167.

17 See *ibid.*, ch. 6, 'The Problem of the "Inevitability" of Social Development'.

18 There are some parallels between Elias's use of the idea of *Zustandsreduktion* and Adorno's use of 'reification' (*Verdinglichung*) - see Gillian Rose, *The Melancholy Science*, London: Macmillan 1978. However, there are also striking differences between their concerns: most obviously, though Elias's work shows the influence of Marx, it is not Marxist, and its style is far less metaphysical in tone.

the tendency in everyday and social scientific thought to reduce processes to states. Whorf suggested that this pattern (as seen in an expression like 'the wind blows') was inherent in the linguistic structure of Standard Average European. Elias would also see it as inherent in the egocentric and ultimately solipsistic philosophical tradition which runs from Descartes through Kant to Husserl and Popper. Elias rejects the search for the universal and timeless structures underlying the flux and diversity of social processes - a search which Lévi-Strauss for one elevated to the cardinal principle of his anthropology.

STEPHEN MENNELL