

FROM AN AMERICAN POINT OF VIEW, one is inclined to react to a book titled *The American Civilizing Process* with: “America civilized? We’re uncivilized and proud of it!” Americans burst onto world consciousness between the 1920s and 40s primarily as gum-chewing, slangy citizens, famous for gangsters and *film noir*, breaking the tired old crust of European “civilization” and setting the tone for the 20th century after old Europe had destroyed itself in the world wars. From the point of view of the Norbert Elias theory, the US would seem to be leader of the decivilizing process. This gives Mennell’s book a special theoretical significance.

Elias’s theory of the civilizing process is a trend theory. Mennell’s book talks too much about who is behind or ahead of the trend – even though both Elias and Mennell make admirable statements about avoiding being caught in a moralizing frame. But even as a non-judgmental model, it has the disadvantage of being single track. The path goes from spontaneous instinctual expression, to external social control, to the internalization of controls as self-restraint. In effect, Elias presents a historicization of Freud, a social history of the growth of the superego.

The worst kind of trend theory asserts an inevitable movement along a single track. Elias is better than this because he does allow for (apparently temporary) movements backwards. More importantly, he turns this into the realm of social science by providing a causal model for the movement. There are two main causes.

1) State monopolization of force tames the warriors and their violent ferociousness, producing at first a society of courtiers and refined manners; courtly manners in turn are spread throughout the other ranks of society by a process of emulation. But the taming of the warriors and the creation of a courtly society is a one-time transition; it can hardly be expected to go on pushing the trajectory of ever-increasing self-control throughout the centuries. Elias adds a culture-imprinting corollary, that a nation is forever stamped with the marks of its origins, but he seems uneasy about this, and makes another causal claim.

2) Increasing interdependence among persons, locales and institutions leads to an increasing feeling of constraint and reliance on others,

* About Stephen MENNELL, *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2007).

hence to “functional democratization” – greater sensitivity to the needs of others, and hence to greater democracy and equality. This proposition resembles Durkheim’s theory that the increasing division of labor shifts the collective conscience from the “mechanical solidarity” of local groups to the “organic solidarity” of universalistic religions and altruistic moral standards. Elias was very critical of Talcott Parsons – a major theoretical rival at mid-20th century – but ironically the second part of Elias’ theory is quite similar to Parsons’, and both shared the same view of the long-term trajectory of modern societies. Perhaps this helps explain why Mennell, who was a student of Parsons’ at Harvard in the mid-1960s, is drawn to the project of showing that the civilizing process, on the whole, applies to the American trajectory as well.

A third component of Elias’s theory actually comes before 1), the courtier transition – namely (1a) the elimination contest among states, whereby they attack and defend each other until large states are built up out of smaller ones, resulting in an ever-growing sphere within which force is monopolized. This area of internal pacification is where the civilizing process of individual self-restraint takes place.

One consequence brought out in Mennell’s concluding chapter is that the civilizing process is still going on, as the world heads towards a global monopoly of force. Given that Mennell has the usual left-liberal sentiments of sociologists today, he views with unease the spectre of an American unipolar monopoly of first-class military power in the early 21st century; but true to his analytical aims, he takes this as harbinger of the final phase of the elimination contest, that should result in the ultimate omni-pacification of the world. It follows that still further levels of civilizing should take place on the personal and cultural level. This is a very optimistic prospect, given that Elias’ trend includes functional democratization – increasing levels of altruism and equality. Presumably in the future we shall have not only world government but benevolent socialism and universal love.

Since the civilizing process, in the Elias paradigm, is such a wonderful thing, encompassing all the liberal hopes from the Enlightenment through today, a number of hedges are inserted into the theory to explain why everything does not always look so marvelous. Many trends, especially in popular youth culture, in sports violence or crime, raise the challenge of whether there is a decivilizing process. Hedge (A) is the quest for excitement: assuming that there is an underlying human need for excitement, high levels of pacification and self-control make people bored leading them to invent new ways of stirring up

trouble just to entertain themselves. This looks like an evolutionist version of Marcuse's notion of repressive sublimation, except that the latter was cast in terms of the dynamics of the late-capitalist markets, a line of economic emphasis which is alien to Elias's mode of thinking.

Hedge (B) is that the prime mover in the whole process, monopolization of force, may be reversed, at least locally; when this happens, people in the face of danger quickly revert to uncivilized instincts. I doubt this is a useful explanatory principle. In part, it is tautological: if the monopoly of force breaks down, that means, by definition, that there are now more users of force, and more violence happens. Moreover, to refer to this as reversion to uncivilized instincts is over-generalized. The fact that in the black ghettos of American cities there is a great deal of gang violence, does not mean that gang members spit on the table or eat with their knives.

With this theoretical apparatus, Mennell takes on all aspects of the American historical experience, with the aim of showing that it is consistent with the principles of Elias' theory. Mennell is most successful in the series of chapters dealing with the state: the elimination struggle on the North-American continent and its connection with the struggle among the colonial powers in Europe; the geopolitics of US territorial expansion; and the struggles for internal "integration" – here the term is much broader than the assimilation of immigrants and racial minorities, including also the growth of the financial system and other national-level institutions linking the whole together. These chapters are not only the best part of the book, but as succinctly informative a statement of these matters as anything I have ever read. Non-Americans can grasp the macro-structural development of the US better than those of us who were educated in the American school system, probably because it blinded and bored us with its rhetoric of the inevitable teleology of national history. Mennell is the best expositor of the pattern of American geopolitics, along with British military historian John Keegan's *Fields of Battle: the Wars for North America* (1996). This part of Mennell's book is a triumph.

But here we are still in the causal variables, not the outcome in the form of civilized characteristics. Mennell is convincing in that the early colonists are no exception to the civilizing path, that they were an offshoot of European manners and continued to use European elites as their cultural frame of reference. Material conditions on the frontier made it more difficult to perform much of the etiquette but, as wealth grew, the usual civilizing process took hold. Some areas, such as the very widespread provision of plumbing, gave the US by the early 20th

century a standard of civilized cleanliness that outstripped many other parts of the world. But is plumbing, and the snobbish disdain for poorly-equipped foreign toilet facilities that has been the chief complaint of American tourists, the essence of the civilizing process of a high threshold of repugnance, and more importantly, of internalized self-control?

Here Mennell gets into the vexed question of national character. Vexed, because the empirical evidence is for the most part extremely sloppy. National character has been a staple of travelers' small talk, and as far back as Francis Bacon one finds the clichés of the polite Frenchman, the haughty Spaniard, and the bluff beef-eating Englishman. But even if these clichés were true – and the sort of thing one finds in travelers' accounts of Americans is full of biases of class viewpoints, unspoken frames of comparisons, and tacit self-praise – I see no reason why these differences are evidence of varying levels of advance in the civilizing process. Is the polite Frenchman frozen at the middle stage of courtly manners, allegedly only externally imposed but not internalized? Is the proud Spaniard lacking in internal self-control? On the contrary, it is consistent to argue that the contents of character can vary, but that the mechanisms which produce the patterns are all equally internalized, or externally imposed, or a mixture of the two. Or, coming to Americans, why should we say that people who are friendly or unfriendly, happy or unhappy, talkative or quiet, are at different levels of the civilizing process? This seems to illustrate a penchant for trying to put everything in terms of a trend, whereas these are really independent dimensions, that demand some other theory to explain them. It is not even clear that Elias himself had a clear sense of the long continuum of civilizing personality types; he documents a contrast between the medieval warrior and the courtier, and accounts for it with his theory. But after that particular point in history, there were a wide variety of personal styles, and for that matter national types (if they exist), all of which are compatible with being “civilized” – *i.e.* no longer being medieval warriors or peasants.

Mennell, like Cas Wouters and Elias himself, tries to tread on more reliable ground by using etiquette books as evidence. But etiquette books have probably become increasingly weak indicators of actual manners, especially in the latter 20th century. The trends in popular manners have been precisely those which are not covered by expositors of etiquette; of course such writers still exist and have some kind of market, but they look increasingly like emulators of the old-fashioned upper class fighting a rear-guard action, and losing. Take

for instance Elias's original stronghold, table manners. The innovations in American cuisine in the 20th century have all been in what we now call "fast foods": hamburgers, hot dogs, chips – all of which are eaten without silverware but with the fingers. The archetypal American drink, Coca-cola (and its many imitators) is usually drunk from the can; and younger Americans generally drink beer (a European import, of course) from the can or bottle. America has expanded its food imports, but the most popular of these have again been in an anti-table-manners direction: Mexican tacos and burritos, Italian pizza slices – all eaten with the fingers. This is rather different even from the way pizza is eaten in Italy – with silverware, not to mention the still dominant Italian style of a sit-down meal of multiple courses – the very opposite of the American style of fast snacking. Of course there is also a high-culture sector of America restaurants and dinner parties, where sophisticated trends have been imported from Europe and Japan. What this demonstrates is that American eating culture is strongly split, with a healthy minority of upper-middle class sophisticates, but a very strong mass culture of anti-sophisticates.

Is the dominant food culture a de-civilizing trend? Before deciding this, consider that American fast food practices are not a return to the poverty-based medieval culture of eating out of the communal bowl. On the contrary, it is a new form of non-etiquette, and a bigger change in ritual than the one Elias described as communal eating shifted to elegant table manners. A major American eating pattern has shifted to not eating together at all – the abandonment of the very old ritual of enacting group solidarity by commensality. Already in the 1950s David Riesman was shocked at statistics showing the substantial portion of American meals that were eaten in cars. Now the sit-down meal of family or guests at a dining table has to a considerable extent given way to casual eating without a social ritual. Working class people in particular are likely to eat in front of the TV set, using the television as a substitute for another social ritual of the table, a shared conversation. Lower class black children, ethnographers report, apparently never sit down to a meal together; in these complex and shifting households of quasi-kin, children are likely to be given a small amount of money and sent out to get snacks for themselves. The pattern is also found in mainstream middle and upper-middle class, especially in recent youth culture. Many students and young professionals do not cook food at all, but buy something like ramen noodles which they eat raw at their computers, even dispensing with the age-old civilized ritual of cooking.

This may be connected with another trend in youth culture: many middle class youth are ostentatiously messy. They not only do not clean their room (when they are living at home), but try to prevent parents or housekeepers from cleaning the room for them; they deliberately leave trash all over the bedroom floor – or when they have their own apartment, all over everything. This goes well beyond older traditions of temporary student poverty or Bohemian lifestyle; there is a deliberate concern not to follow tidy, clean standards. It is a culture of rebellion.

The same pattern is found in prestigious styles of grooming and clothing. About 20 years ago, it became popular for celebrities – famous athletes, actors, singers – to appear at public ceremonial gatherings unshaven. This was not just a shift towards growing beards, since the style has been to have a perpetual grizzled look, a “five-o’clock shadow” – which must demand a certain amount of careful planning to always be in the intermediate stage of hairiness. Among women, the style of wearing torn clothes became a fad. This is not merely a shift to casual clothes formerly associated with the working class, such as blue jeans and T-shirts – which is plausibly interpreted as egalitarian and democratic informalization – but deliberate transgression for its own sake. It has been led by middle and upper-middle class youth. In contrast, working and poverty level youth try to dress up when they can (including by robbing clothes from better-dressed peers), with a preference for athletic warm-up suits and jackets; and lower class athletes who become successful professionals are the last bastion of very elaborate wealthy clothing styles. No, this is an aggressive counter-culture coming from the middle class.

Another version can be found in the American style of talking. By the 1920s through to the 40s, Americans were famous for using slang expressions. Of course slang has always existed in many countries, but it was largely confined to the lower classes and disparaged by dominant etiquette. In America it became more and more visible in the public arena, even acquiring a kind of vogue. In the 1944 *Battle of the Bulge*, the American general whose troops were cut off refused the German request to surrender with the brief message “Nuts to you!” – causing great puzzlement for the German officers. In the 1960s student uprising, young people began using hitherto tabooed words like “shit” and “fuck” in public speeches, causing some conservative critics to call them the “filthy speech movement”. Use of such obscenities in middle class speech became common in the following decades. In part this became an aspect of the militant feminist movement and a sign of

female equality with men, but it was also an aggressive shock tactic; and in general it has been more common among educated sophisticates than in the working class. Obscene speech has been an object of contention, with efforts at prohibition by government broadcast agencies and by public schools – *i.e.* a reversion to external constraint, not internal standards of repugnance.

Cas Wouters, whose book *Informalization* (2007) Mennell draws upon, has made a heroic effort to bring this counter-culture under the Elias paradigm with the argument that this is just a further stage of egalitarianism, and thus a continuation of the civilizing process to a higher level of internalized concern for other people. But this is just what it seems to me not to be. The aggressive counter-culture is a move towards asserting one's superiority. A notable American characteristic since about the 1920s has been what we call "cool" – that's really cool, man, as compared to that's really square, nowhere, nerdy, etc. Mennell glosses cool (p. 75) as relaxed, easy, and egalitarian. But that misses the point. Cool is what Goffman, in a famous 1961 essay called "role-distance" – showing that you are not playing the normal, expected role. It is intrinsically contentious. It does not aim for an end point at which everyone is equal, but quite the opposite. Gang-style interaction is full of this ostentatious role-distance, along with the show of belligerence (a frontstage performance more than backstage reality) that Elijah Anderson calls the code of the street. It is deliberately provocative; not "we are all cool" – but "I am more cool than you". Good data on these matters is hard to find, and certainly it is not mentioned in etiquette books, but Murray Milner's *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids* (2004), on the culture of American high schools, shows that the crucial lines of ranking among American youth are not economic class distinctions (since that would invoke one's parents, an un-cool thing to do), nor showing lots of Bourdieu-esque cultural capital (*ditto*), but being part of the cool group, lordling it over the other internal statuses of the youth world.

Mennell is clear that America has no unified elite or cultural ideal, but he fails to grasp just how deep this culture war goes. He clings to the belief that pretty much everything, and certainly the dominant trends, go in the direction of "functional democratization". But that seems precisely what is not happening. Americans are trying hard to construct their own forms of superiority, at the same time that they largely ignore growing economic inequality (Mennell is right about this). In Weberian terms, they have elaborated a set of status-groups, independent of class, and above all in antagonism to the "straight"

world of those who are hard-working, studious, polite, nice, and civilized. At the same time, this is also a Goffmanian show, since they are stuck in a series of bureaucratic institutions – the lengthening school sequence, the escalation of police surveillance, the increasingly desperate job market – that constrain them, at the same time that it gives them something to rebel ostentatiously against. Menell quotes Elias to the effect that the trend in individual styles is diminishing contrasts, increasing varieties of benign individualism. But this seems wrong, perhaps because these authors were thinking of contrast in terms of old-fashioned class cultures, whereas the US invented a new form of contrast, between cool and un-cool, or counter-culture versus straight culture. Both pretend to be democratic, but both have a strong subtext of claimed superiority.

The underlying theory, that increasing interdependence brings democratization of everyday life, is a poor explanation in general. Increasing chains of interdependence can just as well bring hostility and alienation from long-distance forces (which may be part of what is going on with the youth culture). It is face-to-face interactions that produce solidarity, and one aspect of rise of altruistic or liberal movements has no doubt been the spread of the mass media which present distant people as close-up individuals; but this is not because of greater interdependence but because of a leap across distances through mediated Goffmanian performances that purport to make remote people into pseudo-face-contacts. Thus it has been shown that statistics on mass suffering are far less effective in evoking sympathy than showing a detailed story of a specific suffering individual. Moreover, altruism works largely as a collective process, not by isolated individual consciousnesses; joining in social movements through personal ties to other participants has a much stronger effect on commitment to a cause – including an altruistic cause – than prior individual beliefs. It is true that altruistic movements have been strong in America, but this has more to do with the spread of material conditions, which facilitate social movement mobilization than with an alleged trend to functional interdependence. The same conditions mobilize movements on all sides, on the right as well as the left. All claim their own form of altruism and their support of worthy victims singled out through the telescopic lens of the media – whether it is right-wing movements of sympathy for farmers who have been pushed out of their farms or gun-carrying individualists persecuted by the government, or left-wing movements for the poor or discriminated minorities whether ethnic or sexual. This is not a shift in modern individual *habitus* but the result of increased conflict mobilization.

Mennell puzzles over the growth of economic inequalities in the US, including disparities in health care. He does a good job in describing these inequalities and uncovers some of their proximate causes, but he keeps trying to argue that this fits within the frame of functional democratization. Proof of the argument is vague insofar as the causal variable is un-quantified and impressionistic; can one really say that functional interdependence was growing during the history of the US during just those times when inequality was declining, and interdependence was declining during those years (such as 1970 to the present) when inequality has been increasing? Here relying on Elias as if he were a general theory of everything is the wrong choice of theory. The civilizing process does not explain everything; it is largely a theory of the early modern period. And it is not really a theory of the causes of stratification in its many forms; for this we need to widen out of the Elias enclave and into the realm of other sociologies, above all theories of social conflict instead of the tacit functionalism of the interdependence argument.

That brings me to a basic complaint. Mennell's argument is too focused on trying to find ways of arguing that Elias is always right, instead of trying to develop the best possible theory for the patterns observed. The result is scrambling to adjust after-the-fact interpretations. In the area of manners, if people had gone on being polite emulators of the old courtiers, Elias would have been straightforwardly right; if precisely the opposite happens, Elias is still right. A theory that appears to predict anything at all, no matter what happens, is not a good theory. (To be fair, Mennell makes an occasional critique of Elias and adjustment in the theory, notably p. 264.)

The theory of the civilizing process, taken in the large, is an optimistic theory of social evolution along the lines of the Enlightenment liberals. For Elias, religion is magic-mythical thinking, doomed to disappear as functional interdependence creates greater "reality-congruence". Hence Mennell puzzles over the increasing strength of American religion in the 20th century, against the trend of the advanced, *i.e.* European, parts of the globe. But he rejects the structural theory of Stark and Finke, that the open marketplace for religions in the US allows the more religious-customer-pleasing, emotionally appealing religions to out-compete the liberalizing religions that turn transcendence into mere worldly altruism; and that the weakness of European religion is its constraining of the market by privileging stodgy state-supported churches. Mennell criticizes this line of argument on the grounds that it assumes an eternal human desire for the supernatural. Instead he

suggests that American religion is part of the quest for excitement, paralleling the rise of modern sports. There may be something to this line of argument, but it too assumes an eternal human desire, in this case for excitement. Apparently good liberals can find it palatable that sports come from an eternal part of the human make-up, but not that religion does.

We arrive at a deep weakness in the Elias position. The civilizing process starts with spontaneous impulses, essentially Freud's Id, which are gradually brought under social control and then internal control. But it is better-supported sociology to say that human motives and actions are almost entirely socially constructed. Do basic human drives consist of uncontrolled spontaneous impulses to fart, spit, eat with one's hands, be dirty, and so on? Perhaps some of these are primal (maybe one could prove this with sufficient comparative research on babies). But if one looks at the great historical variability in sexual practices – Freud's special concern – it is apparent that whether people have desires for kissing, cunnilingus, love bites and scratches, anal intercourse, homosexuality etc., or for any particular frequency of sexual activities and number of partners, is a matter of huge socially determined variability. And that variability does not fall on a single dimension of whether natural drives are unrepressed or social controlled.

The same applies to violence. Elias documented, from a narrow period of the European middle ages, the pleasure that some people took in torturing their enemies. But this is not primal; it is a characteristic of certain kinds of warrior societies. It is not found in most early hunting-and-gathering tribes, for instance; torture grows historically in extremely class-stratified societies where the ritual focus of attention is on the warriors' dramatizing their powers of domination. My own research, in *Violence: A Micro-Sociological Theory* (2008), shows that humans' main emotion in violent situations is not spontaneous aggression, but on the contrary tension and fear; special social conditions are necessary for people to become successfully violent, and in no situation are more than a minority of persons violent activists. This means that violence is socially constructed, right down to its micro-mechanisms. We cannot assume that all that is needed is for the state monopoly of violence to be taken off, and everyone will return to the Hobbesian state of natural belligerence. Thus when the state monopoly of violence disappears in the urban ghetto, gangs do not revert to medieval torturing of enemies. Instead they have constructed their distinctive forms of violence such as drive-by shootings. We need a much more proximal theory of the determinants of violence.

The strongest part of Elias's theory is where he is most Weberian, exploring the processes and consequences of the elimination contest by which state monopolies of violence were expanded. But marrying this with a historicized Freudian theory of the social repression of spontaneous instincts causes more problems than it solves. And the optimistic functionalist theory of all good things flowing from increasing interdependence sounds like Parsons as tacit liberal ideologist. These same strengths and problems emerge in Mennell's application to American social history.

R A N D A L L C O L L I N S