

Review Essay

HISTORICAL SOCIOLOGY AND THE MYTH OF MATURITY

Norbert Elias's "Very Simple Formula"

A discussion of Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners* (New York: Urizen, 1978), and idem, *State Formation and Civilization* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

CHRISTOPHER LASCH

First published in German in the inauspicious year of 1939, untranslated into French or English until the 1970s, Norbert Elias's newly discovered masterpiece, *The Civilizing Process*, has been rightly acclaimed as a work that brilliantly anticipates the subsequent development of sociologically inspired historical scholarship.¹ It is hard for an English-speaking reader, coming across this work for the first time, to appreciate Elias's originality, when so many of his themes and his manner of approaching them have now become the stock-in-trade of social history. New perceptions of childhood; their connection with changing standards of decorum and a "rising threshold of repugnance"; the growth of privacy; the internalization of moral constraints; increasing awareness of the family's role in their development; links between changing manners and a more fundamental "change in the structure of drives and emotions" (1: 127) – all these themes in early modern social history, familiar enough today, even to undergraduates, were unheard of, at least in the United States, when *The Civilizing Process* first appeared in German.

Long before American scholars had discovered the idea of historical sociology, Elias understood the possibilities of this new genre and worked them out with an imaginative boldness that still surpasses later studies in this vein. Combining theoretical speculation with close attention to historical nuance, he showed how apparently insignificant subjects like the history of table manners could be rescued from antiquarian scholarship – the old social history, which obsessively collected trivia without finding a way to explain their significance – and made to yield revealing and wide-ranging generaliza-

tions. He mined unpromising sources – conduct books, manuals of etiquette, treatises on childrearing – and came up with gold. Not content to show how historical scholarship can be enriched by sociology, he also drew on psychoanalysis and traced changes in the organization of emotional life, an elusive subject seemingly impervious to historical analysis.

Many years before the advent of “psychohistory,” Elias saw that the unconscious has a history of its own; but he also saw what escaped those who later welcomed psychohistory as a panacea: that this history complements and deepens our understanding of social and political history but does not replace older approaches to the study of the past. He understood that psychoanalysis sheds a flood of light on certain subjects – the internalization of authority, for example – and no light whatsoever on others. His easy assimilation of psychoanalytic insights provides an illuminating contrast, say, to William E. Langer’s famous presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1957, in which a scholar previously known for dry studies of political and diplomatic history fell on Freud with the misguided enthusiasm of a convert, greeting psychoanalysis as a brand-new tool kit with the help of which historians could finally reduce complex events to manifestations of collective hysteria and other ready-made psychological formulas.²

The Civilizing Process contributes to an understanding of a wide span of subjects usually treated by specialists who miss the connections between them: the emergence of the modern family, the rise of capitalism, and the emergence of the modern state, to name only the most obvious. In one of these areas, the history of the family, Elias’s study not only anticipates the findings of later scholars but may have exercised an indirect influence on the course of historical study through Philippe Ariès’s *Centuries of Childhood*, which revolutionized historical study of the family in the early sixties.³ Ariès never refers to Elias or cites his work, but it is hard to believe that he was not familiar at least with its general outlines, since his own study is remarkably similar in several respects.

Like Elias, Ariès insists on the “modernity of the idea of the family.”⁴ He uses the same kind of unconventional sources, including genre paintings and advice books. His central theme – the emergence of a clearly differentiated idea of childhood – is already present in Elias’s study, which shows how the “civilizing process” widens the social distance between children and adults. But a comparison with *Centuries of Childhood* merely underscores the rigor and comprehensiveness of Elias’s historical imagination. Brilliant as it is and amply deserving of its fame, *Centuries of Childhood* seldom rises to the level

of its more obscure predecessor. A few examples will illustrate the superiority of Elias's interpretation. Even more convincingly than Ariès, he demonstrates that the "distance between adults and children, measured by that of today, was slight" in medieval society; but he does not rest his case, as Ariès does, on the somewhat dubious claim that medieval children were treated as little adults. His point is more modest but at the same time more suggestive: that medieval instruction in manners addressed "unequivocally to adults" admonitions later addressed only to children: "not to snatch whatever they want from the table, and not to scratch themselves or touch their noses, ears, eyes, or other parts of their bodies at table" (1: 141). The absence of such elementary advice in later manuals, except for those addressed specifically to children, indicates the emergence of a new definition not only of childhood but of adulthood as well, one that stressed the importance of self-control as opposed to socially imposed controls and relied on new psychological sanctions: an internalized conscience instead of the fear of ridicule or punishment.

Elias's account enables us to see more deeply than Ariès sees into the growing importance of the family in early modern society. For Ariès, the family came to serve the bourgeoisie as a retreat from the social "promiscuity" that characterized the old regime. But the real significance of the early modern family, as we can understand with Elias's help, is that it was now charged with training the internalized habits of self-control on which civilization appeared to rest. In the Middle Ages and even in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the family shared with other social groupings, such as the neighborhood or the court, the responsibility for enforcing good manners and emotional controls. Public ridicule, moreover – institutionalized in the *charivari* – served as the most effective sanction of good behavior. When emphasis shifted to inner controls, moral and behavioral training came to be specialized in the family. "Sexuality too is increasingly removed behind the scenes of social life and enclosed in a particular enclave, the nuclear family" (2: 180). These developments coincided with a gradual rejection of class-specific standards of conduct in favor of a universal standard. Formerly a person might do things in the presence of his servants that he would be ashamed to do in the presence of his peers. Civilization, however, demanded that people observe the same standards of modesty in all situations, just as it demanded the same standards in private that people observed in public.

As an explanation of the origins of the modern family, Elias's work takes us further than Ariès's because it puts the history of the family and the history of childhood, manners, and emotional life in a much larger context. Ariès

explained how perceptions of childhood and the family underwent a series of important changes, but he found it hard to account for these changes. Elias accounts for them as part of a shift from external to internalized social constraints, which also produced a new type of “social personality,” one governed by a “strict and stable superego” (2: 72). The recent publication of an English translation of the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* makes it even clearer than before that Elias’s work is conceived on a grand scale and seeks to link the inner history of emotional life to the history of nations, the “pacification” of European society, and the growth of bureaucracy. This second volume, entitled in English *State Formation and Civilization*, also makes it clear that although Elias’s work anticipates later developments in social history, in many ways it belongs to an earlier intellectual climate, the climate of Darwinism, positivism, and scientific optimism. We can see now that it needs to be read not merely as one of the first examples of historical sociology but also as the last of the great nineteenth-century syntheses. Even more than the first volume, the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* abounds in confident, sweeping generalizations in the nineteenth-century manner. It brims over with confidence also in the upward movement of historical change. Elias takes for granted what many of us have come to doubt, that history records the triumph of order over anarchy. There is no irony or ambiguity in his account of the civilizing process. Even today, he retains an optimism increasingly alien to our age. “I don’t share the pessimism which is today à la mode,” he said in an interview in 1974.⁵ Alas, pessimism is no passing fad; more and more, it looks like the only tenable attitude in the face of our century’s horrors.

Elias’s debt to earlier thinkers and to an earlier style of social thought appears most clearly, perhaps, in the analogy between feudalism and modern capitalism on which he builds so much of his argument. At the beginning of the twentieth century, this analogy served as the staple of a certain kind of criticism of cutthroat capitalist enterprise. Writers like Thorstein Veblen, W. J. Ghent, Matthew Josephson, and doubtless many European social critics as well liked to compare modern industrialists to the “robber barons” whose private wars ravaged Europe in the Middle Ages.⁶ The analogy between industrial warfare and feudalism served polemical as well as analytical needs. It called into question the moral pretensions of the “captains of industry,” exposing them as predators on a grand scale. It stigmatized free enterprise as a relic of barbarism. Best of all, it held out the hope that the competitive free-for-all, once its atavistic inspiration was clearly recognized, would give way to a “cooperative commonwealth” based on public regulation and planning of economic life, just as feudalism had given way to the well-ordered modern state. As royal authority had disarmed the nobles and put an

end to their depredations, so the welfare state would disarm the Rockefellers, Rothschilds, and Morgans; such was the promise that informed the muckraking social thought of the early twentieth century and redeemed its otherwise discouraging indictment of business enterprise.

In *State Formation and Civilization*, Elias works out rigorously and systematically, in effect, the implications of an analogy previously used mainly for journalistic effect. Like his predecessors, he finds hopeful possibilities in a line of speculation that seems at first only to deplore the anarchy and ruthlessness of competitive capitalism. Capitalist competition already represents a moral and sociological advance over feudalism, Elias claims, precisely because it takes economic instead of political form. If “free enterprise” represents a kind of private warfare, it nevertheless represents a highly sublimated kind of warfare.⁷ It is waged with credit and contracts, not with foot soldiers and cavalry. It already presupposes the suppression of private violence by the state and the elimination of rival centers of political authority. It presupposes the differentiation of the political realm from the economic, the state from civil society. The establishment of these distinctions, in Elias’s view, is one of the most important consequences of state-formation. The rise of the modern state amounts to the abolition of “private enterprise” in politics and its relegation to the sphere of civil society. We take for granted the separation of politics and economics, public and private life. Elias reminds us, however, that kings once regarded the kingdom as their private domain. Even after they had eliminated competing chieftains and established their exclusive right to levy taxes and raise armies, they did not immediately grasp the implications of the “monopoly mechanism,” as Elias calls it, that operates at every stage in the history of political centralization. But as kings monopolized taxing and police powers, these powers lost their private character and became public. It is an inflexible rule of historical development, according to Elias, that competition leads to monopoly and that monopoly powers, in turn, inevitably escape the control of individuals. The assumption that sociological study of the past can lead to the discovery of historical laws provides further evidence of the positivistic framework of Elias’s argument, which reaches its climax in a kind of iron law of aggregation.

Skeptical about the status of scientific laws in historical studies, we can nevertheless admire the ingenuity and imagination with which Elias raised the “functional analogy” between private warfare and modern capitalist competition into a general principle of historical explanation. The initial force of the analogy, like any other, depends on our recognizing unsuspected similarities between seemingly unrelated objects or events: in this case, on our recognizing that the “social event of monopolization is not confined to

the processes which normally come to mind today when ‘monopolies’ are mentioned” (2: 151). But the full explanatory power of an analogy emerges only when we take the further step of grasping the difference between otherwise similar situations. Thus Elias wants us to see that “social functions which have become separated in recent times were still more or less undifferentiated” in earlier times and that the modern differentiation between economics and politics, for example, had no meaning in the Middle Ages (2: 149).

Just as Marx historicized political economy by showing that capitalist relations of production originated not in some natural propensity for trading and exchange but in a specific line of historical development, so Elias historicizes Marx. Instead of reading the modern separation of economics and politics into earlier epochs, he insists that it took shape only once the state achieved an effective monopoly of political power – of finance and violence – and banished competition from the political realm to the economic. “Only when a centralized and public monopoly of force exists over large areas, can competition for means of consumption and production take its course largely without the intervention of physical violence; and only then do the kind of economy and the kind of struggle exist that we are accustomed to designate by the terms ‘economy’ and ‘competition’ in a more specific sense” (2: 150).

Max Weber defined the state as a monopoly of the means of violence; here again, Elias’s originality lies in a more systematic exploration of ideas thrown out in passing by his predecessors. He asks himself how this monopoly of violence came into being in the first place, and his answer to this question sheds new light, he thinks, on the sociological “mechanisms of integration” that govern the entire course of history. Like Spencer – another intellectual ancestor to whom he owes a great deal – Elias believes that a “general competition for limited resources” underlies all forms of social life (2: 151). This competition culminates in “elimination contests,” in which the weak go to the wall. In the Middle Ages, the struggle for survival centered on the right to levy taxes and raise armies, claimed not only by kings but by other nobles as well. When the kings prevailed in this struggle, they reduced the warrior nobles to courtiers and bureaucrats. The absolute monarchy’s taxing powers represented the expropriation or monopolization of the nobles’ feudal claims to tithes and services from the peasants; its police powers, the monopolization of violence. In the “elimination contest” leading to the consolidation of royal authority in the sixteenth century, the units of competition became larger and larger, while the number of competitors steadily declined. Eventually a single individual, the absolute monarch, extended his control over the entire nation.

Competition, then, leads inexorably to monopoly. It does not lead, however, to ever-increasing autocracy, as the analysis so far might seem to suggest. On the contrary, centralization eventually depersonalizes and democratizes the exercise of power, according to Elias. “One might suppose that, with advancing centralization and the stricter control and supervision of the whole social process by stable authorities, the rift between rulers and ruled would be deepened” (2: 164). Instead, centralization creates an “immense human web” of dependence and interdependence (2: 109). The absolute monarch depends on his administrators, whose bureaucratic routines gradually escape his personal control:

The human web as a whole, with its increasing division of functions, has an inherent tendency that opposes increasingly strongly every private monopolization of resources. The tendency of monopolies . . . to turn from “private” into “public” or “state” monopolies, is nothing other than a function of social interdependence. A human web with high and increasing division of functions is impelled by its own collective weight towards a state of equilibrium where the distribution of the advantages and revenues from monopolized opportunities in favour of a few becomes impossible (2: 111).

Centralization leads in the long run not to autocracy, a mere way station on the road of historical progress, but to democracy, which, indeed, “pre-supposes highly organized monopolies” (2: 115). The absolute monarchies of the early modern period contained the germs of their own demise. The “intertwining chains of interdependence” led to a new “dependence of all on all”; and the same principle, Elias adds, governs “every major civilizing process” (2: 247, 249, 259). “The general direction of the change in conduct, the ‘trend’ of the movement of civilization, is everywhere the same” (2: 248). Not only does interdependence transform private into public power, it makes social relations increasingly ambivalent. The “unmoderated enmity” characteristic of feudalism gives way to an awareness of the common interests that unite even warring nations. In modern warfare, the victorious power can no longer afford to annihilate its enemies. Wars of extermination give way to “inconclusive struggles” (2: 170). The same softening of social antagonisms moderates domestic conflicts as well. “In the struggles of highly complex societies each rival and opponent is at the same time a partner at the production line of the same machinery, [and] every sudden and radical change in one sector of this network inevitably leads to disruption and changes in another” (2: 168–69). Competition is sublimated into antagonistic cooperation, in which neither party to a given conflict can destroy the other, and the “different parts of society hold each other roughly in balance” (2: 173).

Because the process of political integration and centralization obeys certain “imminent regularities” and “anonymous figurational dynamics,” indifferent

to the “long-term conscious plans of individuals,” it will continue indefinitely, Elias thinks, until the whole world is united under a single state (2: 161, 175, 214). “We may surmise that with continuing integration even larger units will gradually be assembled under a stable government and internally pacified, and that they in their turn will turn their weapons outwards against human aggregates of the same size until, with a further integration, a still greater reduction of distances, they too gradually grow together and world society is pacified” (2: 88). This process may take a long time, but it rolls on relentlessly. In Elias’s scheme of things, the march of historical progress may encounter “obstructions,” but it never reverses itself; and its “overall movement can be reduced to a very simple formula” (2: 112, 115).⁸

The most arresting but also the most dubious parts of *The Civilizing Process* deal with the psychological repercussions of political consolidation and social interdependence. The “pacification” of existence has an internal as well as an external dimension, according to Elias. The state’s monopolization of violence deprives individuals of socially acceptable outlets for aggressive impulses and makes it necessary for them to learn how to control their emotions. Interdependence, moreover, requires “foresight, more complex self-discipline, more stable super-ego formation” (2: 257). The increasing differentiation of social functions produces “increased differentiation within the personality” (2: 294). The “seemingly immutable psychological structure” (2: 282) of the individual undergoes a series of subtle changes in response to social change. Tighter controls over affect, postponement of gratification, and the internalization of external constraints produce a self-controlled, inner-directed type of personality very different from the impulsive type that flourished in earlier times. Internalized control of affect eventually becomes “second nature” (2: 235). Control of aggressive and libidinal drives becomes habitual, and its social origin is forgotten.

Whereas the first half of Elias’s interpretive synthesis, the theory of monopoly, derives from Weber’s definition of the state, the second half – the theory of the “civilizing process” strictly speaking, of the “social regulation of the emotions” – derives from Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1: 187–88). Unlike Freud, however, Elias ignores most of civilization’s discontents and treats increased control over nature (and over human nature) as an almost unmitigated blessing. He concedes once or twice that men and women pay a psychic price for civilization. “The learning of self-controls, call them ‘reason’ or ‘conscience’, ‘ego’ or ‘super-ego,’... is never a process entirely without pain; it always leaves scars” (2: 244). He does not examine the nature of those scars, however.⁹ He calls for a “historical psychology” (2: 282), and his attempt to integrate psychoanalytic insights

into sociology identifies him, once again, as a pioneer of methodologies that have gained widespread acceptance only in the decades following the original publication of *The Civilizing Process*; yet he takes little interest in the finer points of psychoanalysis. He can speak of the ego and superego as if they were interchangeable synonyms for self-control and he ignores the difference between repression, which condemns for bidden impulses and drives them underground, and sublimation, which reshapes them and directs them toward socially acceptable objects. He equates the civilizing process with sublimation alone or, more simply still, with the substitution of peaceful social controls for violence. His essentially untroubled view of civilization owes more to nineteenth-century ideas of social progress than it owes to Freud.

For Elias, civilization means maturity: renunciation of the direct and simple pleasures of childhood. Thus he depicts the medieval character as childlike and impulsive, given to emotional extremes, incapable of delayed gratification, and governed only by the fear of social ridicule.¹⁰ Drawing heavily on the disparaging account of medieval society presented in the works of Achille Luchaire, Elias argues that a warrior nobility, rough and uncouth, set the tone of that society. Only when the nobles lost their military power and became a class of courtiers did they begin to cultivate more refined manners. As courtiers, they learned to eat with forks instead of knives, to conceal bodily functions, to adopt a deferential attitude toward women, and to subordinate animal impulses to the comfort and convenience of others. They learned to see as shameful things formerly accepted unthinkingly: nudity, for example, or the practice of serving whole animals at a banquet.

At the same time that the range of shameful conduct gradually widened, the sense of shame was internalized. Courtiers learned to be ashamed of doing even in private what they were ashamed of doing in public. The new conditions of court life, according to Elias, called for a “change in the structure of drives and emotions” (1: 127). “Increasing integration in a network of interdependencies” made nobles more sensitive to the needs and opinions of others (2: 257). Good manners served, moreover, to set them apart from their social inferiors and to make up for the loss of their power. In the long run, however, the moral refinements introduced by the nobility spread to other classes and reduced the appeal of class-specific codes of honor. The new code of manners had a universalizing bent. Conduct formerly considered impermissible only in specified social situations came to be considered shameful in itself. The internalization of moral sanctions encouraged a disposition to regard them as binding on everyone, at all times and in all places.

The transformation of personality structure in the early modern period, as Elias understands it, reflected a rising “threshold of repugnance” and the internalization of a new sense of propriety (1: 120). “The fear of transgression of social prohibitions takes on more clearly the character of shame,” he argues, “the more completely alien constraints have been turned into self-restraints” (2: 293). There is a good deal of truth in the contention that civilization came to be more and more closely identified with the internalization of social constraints.¹¹ Still, Elias’s interpretation is far too simple. For one thing, it directs our attention to the most superficial features of personality change. It emphasizes manners at the expense of morals. Moreover, it places so much stress on “privatization” that it obscures the countermovement against privacy that is so characteristic of industrial societies – the subjection of private life to relentless investigation and exposure. According to Elias, the rising standard of shame created a split between “an intimate and a public sphere” (1: 190). In many ways, however, the civilizing process weakened the distinction between private and public life. It made the daily maintenance of life, formerly assigned to the household, an important object of public policy. At the same time, it undermined the older conception of the political realm as a source of moral inspiration and enlightenment. People no longer expected to find the meaning of a life exemplified in public actions. They no longer looked to politics to see the “disclosure of the agent in the act,” as Hannah Arendt has written.¹² The modern age found almost incomprehensible the older conception of politics as an ethical undertaking having as its rightful end the shaping of a proper character and the promotion of a good life. The “good life” now came to mean a superabundance of material comforts. The public world became an arena in which men encountered each other not as actors but as buyers and sellers, each seeking his own advantage. The market replaced the forum as the focus of public life, and the “laws” of the market discovered by political economists treated public life merely as the pursuit of private gain.

It was this demoralization of the public world that led men and women to seek meaning almost exclusively in private life – not in private life as it had formerly been understood, but in the new realm of domestic intimacy and personal relations. In the premodern world, private life, organized around the household economy, defined itself, in contrast to the realm of politics and public action, as the realm of material necessity and biological reproduction, dominated by the provision of the requirements of daily subsistence and organized hierarchically. The modern conception of intimacy, on the other hand, implied equality between men and women and between children and adults. It implied, moreover, that people reveal themselves most fully not in

public but in relationships with intimate friends, lovers, and members of their immediate families. The ideal of intimacy assumed, in other words, that ethical meaning is to be found in the revelation of one's innermost emotional secrets, not in the performance of public actions the consequences of which, though unforeseeable, cannot be undone and therefore become part of a rich public record. Shame and honor, which figured so prominently in the ethical thought of premodern societies, reflected the revelatory importance assigned to public actions. The point is not that a sense of shame, unlike guilt, rests on purely external sanctions, but that public actions alone were thought to distinguish honorable men from cowards, liars, and cheats.

By the nineteenth century, "civilized" peoples had come to believe that participation in public life was dishonorable almost by definition. Thus they assumed that politicians were dishonest and self-seeking until proved otherwise. The qualities thought to assure success in politics or business – boundless ambition, skill in "calculation," carelessness about means, indifference to human considerations – could not command much moral enthusiasm or respect. Even though their rising standard of living rested on acquisitive enterprise, industrial societies accordingly idealized the domestic virtues: sincerity, forgiveness, "benevolence." They assumed that men and women could become fully human only at home.

But this did not mean that they shrouded home life in secrecy. Far from it: they opened up the whole sphere of intimate relations to the most intensive investigation – literary, medical, sociological. Elias takes it for granted that an internalization of social constraints – a misleading formula in its own right – required the construction of a "thick wall of secrecy" around the nuclear family (1: 182). He thinks that sex in particular became a shameful subject, surrounded by a "conspiracy of silence" (1: 182). But this is a superficial view. The nineteenth century tried to protect private life from public contamination, but it found increasingly incomprehensible the suggestion that there was something shameful about private life, something at least that might lose its value if exposed to public scrutiny. Since intimacy had taken unprecedented ethical importance, it became the object of the same attention formerly reserved for public life. Not even sex was exempt from the glare of publicity. A growing body of historical studies makes it clear that the modern world thinks of sexual life not as something that needs to be hidden but, on the contrary, as something that needs to be revealed as fully as possible, not only to intimates but to interested observers as well.¹³ The civilized world has conspired not to silence discussion of sex, as alleged by critics of sexual repression, but to incite people to speak of sexual experiences in abundant detail. Even the romantic revolt against science has helped to open emotional

life to investigation by reinforcing the assumption that it is only here that men and women fully disclose the meaning of their lives.

According to Elias, the substitution of internal controls for external controls, the growth of privacy, the “socially generated restrictions on speech,” and the growing reticence about bodily functions have strengthened the superego at the expense of the id (1: 182). “The prohibitions supported by social sanctions are reproduced in the individual as self-controls.... Social commands and prohibitions become increasingly a part of the self, a strictly regulated superego” (1: 188, 190). Nor does the “relaxation of morals” in our own time signal any reversal of the “ever stricter” control of emotions demanded by civilized life (1: 187–88). It indicates only that controls are now so deeply internalized that they no longer need to be reinforced by social prohibitions at all:

It would have meant social ostracism in the nineteenth century for a woman to wear in public one of the bathing costumes commonplace today. But this change, and with it the whole spread of sports for men and women, presupposes a very high standard of drive control.... It is a relaxation which remains within the framework of a particular “civilized” standard of behavior involving a very high degree of automatic constraint and affect-transformation, conditioned to become a habit (1. 187)

Elias misunderstands the direction of psychological change. Modern societies seek to strengthen ego controls, not the superego. They distrust the superego, just as they distrust arbitrary authority in general. They appeal not to authority or duty but to reality, promising health and happiness as the reward of moderation, self-discipline, and delayed gratification. Instead of attempting to coerce or terrorize people into good behavior, they appeal to enlightened self-interest. They urge people to exorcise their inner demons and to heed the voice of reason. They insist that authority deserves a hearing only if it can give a reasonable account of itself. They refuse to be bound by arbitrary commandments and prohibitions. “Thou shalt not” carries no weight in a world where every commandment has to justify itself as a contribution to social order or to the sum of human happiness. In modern societies, it is forbidden to forbid, except when the authorities can show that a particular commandment serves the needs of those on whom it is imposed. Authority is never accepted unconditionally, and obedience is always voluntary and conditional. Such is the prevailing ethic, however imperfectly it is reflected in practice.

By emphasizing the internalization of authority, Elias exaggerates the importance of superego controls and misses the emergence of the modern ego. Freud’s description of the superego finds its social equivalents in the absolute seventeenth-century monarch or the angry God of Jonathan

Edwards, not in the secularized modern conscience. Even the term “conscience” misrepresents modern morality. Strictly speaking, a phrase like “the modern conscience” is a contradiction in terms. Conscience originates in the capacity for forgiveness and the desire to make amends, whereas modern morality is based on the expectation of rewards – not necessarily money and power but health, peace of mind, and emotional fulfillment.

Such a morality is tenable, of course, only as long as it is supported by a working consensus about values, by habits of self-denial inherited from the past, by the strength of character that enables people to resist easy answers and quick solutions, and above all by a fairly equitable distribution of social rewards. In the long run, ego-centered systems of social control erode the very ego strength they attempt to consolidate. The most obvious reason for this is the failure of modern societies to deliver the rewards on which the whole system of self-interested morality depends. But even those who enjoy the rewards of comfort, health, and safety find them increasingly unsatisfying. Material progress has not banished the fear of death and all its attendant uneasiness, including the fear that human life, measured in the scale of eternity, has neither dignity nor meaning. The progress of reason holds out as its ultimate promise a promise it can never keep, the vicarious conquest of death. But the discovery that technological reason has failed to assuage the existential pain and terror of human life has not caused our society to reexamine its faith in technology. Instead it has led to an intensified search for technologies that will free mankind, if not from death itself, from the reminder of limitations inherent in the human condition.

Modern technological rationality carries with it the expectation that men can achieve complete control over nature and over the biological constraints under which the human race has labored in the past. Evidence that natural constraints nevertheless continue to govern much of human life – always an offense to pride – becomes doubly offensive in societies led to expect that science would eventually achieve the final conquest of nature. Instead of liberating us from a superstitious dread of the unknown, science and technology have generated false expectations and made it more difficult than ever to live with the evidence of human weakness and dependency. Far from encouraging psychological growth and maturity, as Elias argues, the civilizing process thus encourages psychological regression. It activates infantile illusions of omnipotence and infantile defenses against dependence and inferiority. Science and technology come to serve as a new form of magic, with the help of which men and women hope to realize the primordial fantasy of absolute self-sufficiency, absolute independence from nature. Neither the ego nor the superego reigns over the modern mind, which is dominated instead by the narcissistic dream of total control.

The totalitarian state gives this fantasy political form. Totalitarianism, however, is by no means the most characteristic political expression of the modern technological impulse and the regressive psychology behind it. This impulse finds a more benign expression – and for that very reason a more insidious expression, perhaps – in the bureaucratic welfare state and the apparatus of consumerism with which the welfare state is so closely associated. The welfare or consumerist state holds out a vision of ever-increasing abundance, redefines the citizen as a consumer, and relies on the insatiable appetite for consumer goods to sustain economic growth. It creates a democracy of consumers, but it also undermines democracy by defining decision making as the prerogative of technical expertise.

According to Elias, the “monopoly mechanism” collectivizes power formerly held by individuals and thus leads to the dispersal and democratization of sovereignty. But the replacement of the feudal lord by the state and the captain of industry by the corporation have created a technical and professional oligarchy, not a democratic polity in which important decisions are made by the citizens as a whole. Other developments, as we have seen, have tended to drain the political order of its moral and educational content, thereby eroding the very conception of citizenship. The transformation of private power into public power has not put an end to the “distribution of [social] advantages ... in favour of a few,” as Elias argues (2: 111). This formula sheds no more light on the history of the state than phrases like privatization and internalization shed on the affective history of modern times. In the long run, the civilizing process – if we insist on calling it that – undermines the private and the public realms alike, abolishing the distinction between them. In doing so, it reveals for the first time their dependence on each other.

NOTES

1. Originally published in two volumes, the work has appeared in two installments in the English translation. The first volume, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*, was published by Urizen Books (New York) in 1978. The second was published by Basil Blackwell (Oxford), in 1982, under the title *State Formation and Civilization*. Both volumes were translated by Edmund Jephcott. In citing page numbers, I shall refer to them as 1 and 2, in order of their publication. For an account of the work's publishing history, together with a biographical sketch of the author, see Rod Aya, “Norbert Elias and ‘The Civilizing Process,’” *Theory and Society* 5 (1978): 219–28.
2. William L. Langer, “The Next Assignment,” *American Historical Review* 63 (1958): 283–304. Writing of the Black Death, Langer argued: “It is perfectly clear that disaster and death threatening the entire community will bring on a mass emotional disturbance, based on a feeling of helpless exposure, disorientation, and common guilt.” But why these effects would enhance historical understanding remained unclear. Nor was it clear why an enumeration of Martin Luther's psychopathological symptoms would help us to grasp his historical significance. Endorsing the reductionist biography by Preserved Smith – himself the author of conventional historical studies before he suddenly converted to psycho-

analysis in 1913 – Langer claimed that Smith's work had been sustained by later investigations in its diagnosis of Luther's "manic-depressive psychosis."

3. Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood. A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962), originally published in 1960 under the title *L'enfant et la vie familiale sous l'ancien régime*
4. *Ibid.*, 10.
5. Stanislas Fontaine, "The Civilizing Process Revisited: Interview with Norbert Elias," *Theory and Society* 5 (1978) 249.
6. See Matthew Josephson, *The Robber Barons* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938), Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Macmillan, 1899), and William James Ghent, *Our Benevolent Feudalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1902).
7. This idea links the two parts of *The Civilizing Process*. The sublimation of warfare and of aggressive drives in general requires a new system of internalized social controls, according to Elias. In other words, it requires a broad series of cultural and psychological changes.
8. A sociological history that dissolves everything into "mechanism" and "process" becomes as misleading and one-sided as the historical narratives it replaced. Elias's methodology has no room for ideas. It requires us to believe that the "great thinkers of the West," although they expressed what other people had on their minds more clearly than they could have expressed it themselves, "were not on their own the originators of the type of thought prevalent in their society. They did not create what we call 'rational thought'" (2: 290-91). If this means only that ideas have to be considered in their social context, that ideas alone never change history, or that even the most abstract and rarefied types of thought often address questions made pertinent in the first place by social and political conflicts (as Hegel's philosophy, for example, becomes fully intelligible only against the background of the French Revolution), we can hardly object to such formulations. Nor can we object to the general statement that civilization, instead of being seen as a "process within a separate sphere of 'ideas' of 'thought,'" has to be seen as a series of "changes in the whole human make-up, within which ideas and habits of thought are only a single sector." But a sociological approach to historical study that seeks to explore connections between social change and personality structure becomes illuminating only if it pays attention not so much to "habits" as to the conflicts that disrupt long-established habits and thus give rise to attempts to interpret these conflicts and to justify a particular course of action or policy.
9. Only in the conclusion to *State Formation and Civilization* does Elias address himself, almost as an afterthought, to the "fears" and "anxieties" generated by modern life. These anxieties originate, according to Elias, in the conflict between the "overall demands of man's social existence on the one hand, and his personal needs and inclinations on the other" (2: 333). But the demands of group life, he insists, do not in themselves explain the psychic suffering that afflicts those who are surrounded from childhood with too many "commandments," "taboos," and "fears." The "fears which grown-ups consciously or unconsciously induce in the child" go beyond the "basic necessities of human co-existence" (2: 328). Many of the rules of conduct these parentally imposed fears are intended to enforce represent anachronistic "remnants of the power and status aspirations of established groups, and have no other function than that of reinforcing their power chances and their status superiority" (2: 332). It is not so much the civilizing process that leads to psychic suffering, in other words, as status anxiety and the "tensions between and within states," which the civilizing process will eventually reduce or eliminate.
10. This interpretation makes few concessions to cultural relativism. It extends to an earlier phase of European history the same mistake that Europeans have always made about non-Western peoples: the tendency to see alien customs as evidence of immaturity. "I clearly remember," says an Indian writer, "my English landlady's inability to understand that *belching* and *blowing one's nose in public* are just different habits" (S. N. Ganguly, *Tradition, Modernity and Development: A Study in Contemporary Indian Society* [New Delhi: Macmillan, 1977], 21).
11. This was the nineteenth-century view of civilization, which Elias uncritically adopts as his own. Middle-class reformers in the nineteenth century proposed to replace an outmoded morality based on the external sanctions of shame and ridicule, as they saw it, with a new morality that appealed either to the inner constraints of conscience or simply to enlightened self-interest. Because the new morality took shape in the heat of conflicts between the middle classes and both the aristocracy and the peasantry, its champions seldom looked very deeply into the old morality or even took the trouble to understand it. They had no insight into the psychology of shame, which cannot be understood as a purely external psychology, or into the idea of honor. Their demand for the internalization of social controls went hand in hand with the claim that modern societies had found peaceful methods of resolving disputes formerly resolved by force of arms. Nineteenth-century liberals took much the same view of the civilizing process that Elias takes. Exaggerating the violence and lawlessness of former times, they saw civilization as a process of pacification, in which moral self-regulation gradually took the place of physical force. Here as

elsewhere, Elias's interpretation of history betrays the lingering influence of nineteenth-century misconceptions, nineteenth-century illusions, nineteenth-century complacency.

12. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 180.
13. See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), Jacques Donzelot, *The Policing of Families* (New York: Pantheon, 1979), and William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union: The Feminist Reform of Sex and Society* (New York: Basic Books, 1980). Even studies that miss the movement for sexual publicity and disclosure inadvertently document its importance for instance, Carl Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), and Peter Gay, *The Bourgeois Experience*, vol. 1, *Education of the Senses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984).