

Norbert Elias & Violence

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AMERICAN VIOLENCE, MOVIES, BRAZILIAN
VILIZING PROCESS, FREUD AND ELIAS, HUM
CONDITION, COLONIZATION, IMPERIALISM
EMOCRACY, STATE FORMATION, MEMORY
F VIOLENCE, IRAN, MICHAEL HANEKE,
MBIVALENCE, MODERNITY, POST CONFLICT,
URDER, KILLING, WAR, SELF-RESTRAINT,
ACIFICATION, PEACE, AGGRESSIVE INSTIN
GGRESSION, CIVILIZATION, DECIVILIZATION
VILIZING PROCESSES, DECIVILIZING PROCE
UCLEAR WAR, MASS MURDER, THE GERM
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Violence and *Civilité*: The Ambivalences of the State

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I INTRODUCTION

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

The interest expressed by Elias in the increase in incivilities and violence in the Weimar Republic retrospectively makes violence a clear political motive of his masterwork, *On the Process of Civilisation* ([1939] 2012), written while in exile in London in the second half of the 1930s. Elias himself more or less explicitly validated this interpretation later (Elias 2013). Indeed, the centrality of the violence issue is already quite

The authors warmly thank François Dépelteau and Tatiana Savoia Landini for their attentive reading and helpful comments on a previous version of this chapter.

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obvious in the conclusion of the 1939 text (Elias 2012), where the author seems very concerned as he confronts the “constant danger of war” (Elias 2012, p. 488). One of Elias’s originalities is to reverse the problem: instead of questioning the causes of growing (or persisting) political and social violence in German national society, he comes to question the general evolution from which Germany, if not Europe as a whole, seems to be diverging. As he writes later in *The Germans* (Elias 1996), what is definitely “astonishing and unique” in contemporary political societies is not the persistence or resurgence of violence, but rather, quite the opposite, namely, “the relatively high degree of non-violence that is characteristic of the social organizations of today” (Elias 1996, p. 174). This is the perspective from which Elias started studying the long-term evolution of individuals’ behaviours and feelings, and changes in ways of thinking and in social and power structures in Europe—a study originally grounded in the handbooks and other treaties devoted to courtesy, *civilité* and politeness in different European countries from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century.

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

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

His position seems to contrast greatly with that of a majority of the liberal authors such as John Locke, but also with another great twentieth-century thinker on these questions, Michel Foucault (1977),¹ who shows that the modern and contemporary state's control (and its potential or efficient violence) extends well beyond exceptional war contexts and well beyond military obligations demanded in these contexts. Does that mean that Elias, for his part, missed the point, by mostly insisting on "residual", "tolerable" (in our words) or "exceptional" state violence? Not really. Instead of considering "civilizing" (progress) or, its opposite, "decivilizing" (barbarism) to be part of the very *nature* of the state (or of modernity), Elias rather proposes a socio-historical investigation of the *conditions* in which the state can alternately or simultaneously play opposite roles in matters of violence² within the state society, including towards its own citizens or inhabitants. In "The Breakdown of Civilization", Elias points out that "civilizing processes and de-civilizing processes" often go "hand in hand" and the latter can outweigh the former, culminating in the Nazis' barbarity (Elias 1996, p. 308). This apparent "pathology" or German "exception" reveals at the same time, through the Nazis' attempt to destroy it, the "ethical" core of a process more "coldly" reconstructed in the 1930s text, namely, a more encompassing consciousness of other people's suffering and pain, that, depending on the context, can be fostered or, on the contrary, threatened by the state.

This chapter thus questions the ambivalence of the role given to the modern state in Elias's political work in matters of *civilité* and violence. It is set in the framework of an ongoing reflection on the irreducibility of the political to the state in Elias's thought (see Delmotte and Majastre 2017 and Majastre and Delmotte 2017), and consecutively on the way Elias's theory of the civilizing process invites us to think about *civilité* apart from, outside or beyond the nation state (Delmotte 2014). Some of Elias's late essays (Elias 1996, 2007b, 2010a, 2010b) definitively help us to understand better or complete his major opus, fine-tuning rather than refuting its statements regarding violence, *civilité* and the state. In our view, a comprehensive approach to interrelations between these three concepts also fosters the dialogue between Elias's historical sociology of the political and important related current issues in political theory and philosophy (see for instance Balibar 2010).³ We ultimately submit that, despite its own ambiguities, not only does Elias's sociology stress that the state is far from always being a guardian of civil security; it also suggests that *civilité* cannot be reduced to the opposite of violence or to an attribute of a state-bounded community. To put it differently,

we assume in what follows a double reading of his work, including the *Process* but not limited to this text, dealing with the role of the state facing both violence and *civilité*. Without downgrading the strength and importance of the 1939 text's major these, we want to put forward what, elsewhere in this text and in later ones, challenges this thesis. One can see these challenging hypotheses only or mainly as betraying a kind of ambivalence, ambiguity or contradiction, especially as far as state violence and genocide are concerned (Burkitt 1996). We rather suggest that, while Elias's texts may be read as quite hesitant on these issues, this characteristic openness does not as much contribute to revealing obvious limits of the Eliasian theory as to hallmarking its originality and stimulating character.

2 STATE (MONOPOLIES) AND *CIVILITÉ* AGAINST VIOLENCE

That Elias puts great emphasis on the historical role of the state in pacifying social relations inside a given set of territorial boundaries cannot be denied. The stability of this social structure, as he puts it, is “one of the most prominent features of Western history” (Elias 2012, p. 350). To discover under what historical conditions such a large-scale pacification has been made possible and what its long-term consequences on the individual psyche are is indeed the very design of *On the Process of Civilisation*. This purpose leads him to look for a historical instance of a “successful” process of monopolization. Looking into French history, here, serves to sketch an archetypical historical trajectory against which other cases can be compared.⁴ In what follows we show that Elias's emphasis on the historical role of the state as a reducer of violence also highlights some normatively problematic dimensions of the “process of civilization”.

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

interpretation to its limit—take place in a bounded civic community under the guidance of a state monopoly.

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

2.1 *The State as Violence Reducer*

The delimitation of violence that is produced by the imposition of a state monopoly over the use of legitimate physical force is of great importance in Elias’s work. Indeed, this delimitation is a precondition for the gradual unfolding of the process of civilization *per se*. Like many other socio-historical accounts of the state, and in a very Weberian way, Elias describes this process of monopolization as occurring through the violent dispossession of the means of violence from private hands. In other words, the main driver of the process of monopolization is war-making between like-sized and (at first) “private” units. That is the apparent paradox that “without violent actions, without the motive forces of free competition, there would be no monopoly of force, thus no pacification, no suppression and control of violence over larger areas” (Elias 2012, p. 346).⁵

The outcome of a successful monopolizing process is thus described as a simultaneous suppression (*Zurückdrängung*) and control (*Regelung*) of the use of violence:

... the discharge of affects in physical attack is limited to certain temporal and spatial enclaves. Once the monopoly of physical power has passed to central authorities, not every strong man can afford the pleasure of physical attack. This is now reserved to a few legitimised by the central authority

(for example the police against the criminal), and to larger numbers only in exceptional times of war or revolution, in the socially legitimised struggle against internal or external enemies. (Elias 2012, p. 196)

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

The transition from courtesy to *civilité* is thus highly reflective of the more general historical preconditions that Elias had in mind regarding the relative suppression and control of violence. Of course, the civilizing process neither ends with *civilité*, nor with the successful monopolization of physical violence. Rather, the civilizing process *stricto sensu* takes place in the interplay between social structures and the individual's psychological structures. It can be regarded as a shift in the balance between external and internal individual controls in favour of the second.⁶ Yet, along this underlying displacement, *civilité* presents itself as a decisive step because it implies a much more *stable* regulation of violent impulses, as is well illustrated by the contrast that Elias draws between *civilité* and the unrestrained expression of violence in the medieval upper classes.

In feudal societies, according to Elias, individuals present themselves with "a lesser degree of social regulation and binding of the life of drives" (2012, p. 189). The behavioural model of certain social groups—such as knights—rests on the unrestrained expression of aggressive impulses. The psychic structure behind such a behavioural model, according to Elias, corresponds to the particular stage of the division of social functions, in which no external authority can sanction and control the expression of these affects. In contrast, "The peculiar stability of the apparatus of psychological self-restraint that emerges as a decisive trait built into the habitus of every 'civilised' human being stands in the closest relationship to the monopolisation of physical force and the growing stability of the central organs of society", although modification of psychic economy usually takes time to adapt to new external constraints: the two aspects of the

evolution generally do not march together in time (2012, pp. 407–408). The stability of this habitus is severely conditioned by a relatively pacified social environment, a social and political context in which the dangers threatening the security of existence are predictable and reduced as much as possible. As much as the violent discharge of the aggressive impulse is necessary for the knight in medieval society, self-restraint is necessary for the “civilized” individual in a later stage of the process.

On the one hand, the difference between the habitus of a free knight and that of a “civilized” individual is not a difference in nature, but a difference of degree, a shift in the general direction towards stronger and more complex mechanisms of self-restraint. According to Olivier Agard (2009), for instance, the basic hypothesis of *On the Process of Civilisation* lies in this movement of intensification of constraints on the individual mind and Elias would amend and enrich this hypothesis only in later texts, especially in his studies on *The Germans* (1996). On the other hand, we can put forward that Elias already presents in the 1939 *On the Process of Civilisation* the emergence of *civilité* as bringing about a substantive transformation in the relation of the individual with itself, a transformation he never presented as being only “quantitative”, in the sense of counting (only) “more” and “stronger” self-restraints⁷:

In order to be really “courteous” by the standards of *civilité*, one was to some extent obliged to observe and pay attention to people and their motives. In this, too, a new relationship of person to person, a new form of integration is announced. (Elias 2012, p. 85)

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

These quotes illustrate how far-reaching the transformation fostered by the successful monopolization of physical violence is. If we place it back in Elias’s more general chronology, we can note that it also takes place in a process of the bounding and, later, nationalization of a community of individuals. The historical importance of *civilité* as a regulating principle rests above all on its capture by the emerging national elites linked to the established state monopoly. In the context of the emergence of the

modern states in Europe, at a time when “knightly society and the unity of the Catholic Church were disintegrating”, that is, in a highly transitional period, it helped to shape a new ruling class in Europe (Elias 2012, p. 61). In Elias’s model, where the masses gradually take over behavioural norms from the ruling class, it forms one of the underlying conditions of processes of “democratization” of the monopolies that would culminate in the formation of the fully-fledged nation state few centuries later.

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

2.2 *The State as Violence Regulator*

If we turn to the concrete description of the reduction of violence and production of security by the state, we can see that the “control” (*Regelung*) of violence has more than one meaning. First, the use of violence must be sanctioned by a central authority that decides on its “legitimacy”. Elias does not use the term, but it well refers here to Elias’s central idea that the state (its rulers) gained stable power in order to regulate violence through (state) law and to ensure the binding force of the law (see Woodiwiss 2005, pp. 11–15). Thus, a crucial distinction between legitimate struggle against an (internal or external) enemy and illegitimate private uses of violence is introduced (or, more exactly, dramatically reinforced). Second and consequently, the use of violence becomes generally more predictable: “The monopolisation of physical violence, the concentration of arms and armed troops under one authority, makes the use of violence more or less calculable [...]” (Elias 2012, p. 411). Physical violence is confined to “enclaves” where it is *subject to certain rules*, for example, in wars or, differently, in sport. Third, it is the very outcome of the monopolization by a central authority that physical violence also becomes subject to *self-control* within the self-regulation of individuals’ drives, only after, and sometimes long after, new norms of behaviours have been imposed from outside the individuals by a new ruling class using etiquette books or state law (as far as violence is concerned).

In all of these meanings, violence is displaced rather than suppressed. Above all, it is displaced towards the outside of the state in the waging of war against an external enemy. It can be so precisely because there is, at the international level, no legal monopoly of violence, but rather, and for this very reason, an unavoidable tendency among states to compete

against one another in the frame of a global struggle for hegemony at the end. In *The Germans* and other late essays (“The Fishermen in the Maelström”, 2007b, for example), Elias points out “the duality of the normative codes” that characterizes state building. Briefly, pacification inside states goes along with multiplied, exacerbated violence between states—an argument that would be endorsed by Charles Tilly when he stressed the fact that “interpersonal violence outside of the state’s sphere has generally declined” is intimately connected with the fact that, at the same time, “the world has grown more warlike”: “in most of the world, the activity of states has created a startling contrast between the violence of the state’s sphere and the relative non-violence of civilian life away from the state” (Tilly 1992, p. 68). For his part, Elias points out that the state survival unit is always at the same time a destructive unit for its enemies, as well as for its members (soldiers and civilian victims of external wars). That means that even *physical* violence does not *disappear*, although it severely *decreases*, in the state system. In the best cases, most of (pure physical) violence is, in one (German) word, *enkaserniert* (“put in the barracks”) and, (only) in that sense, “disappears”. It also means that the division between inside and outside security matters is not so clear-cut.

Elias does not minimize the inner conflicts that might arise in the course of this learning process. He acknowledges that, to an extent, the violence that is taken away from individuals is turned inwards, moving “the battle-field [...] within”, as “the passionate affects, that can no longer directly manifest themselves in the relationship *between* people, often struggle no less violently *within* the individual against this supervising part of themselves” (2012, p. 414). Thus, the development of a “super-ego”, “a controlling agency”, is, according to Elias, a historical and social phenomenon that must be explained, as much as the “inner” violence it entails, in relation to the social structure, and, in later essays, to the specific features of the structure of (political) authority (see “Civilization and Violence: On the State Monopoly of Physical Violence and its Transgression” in Elias 1996, pp. 171–297).

What is suggested is that not all violence must be regarded as pathological. Indeed, the successful displacement of violence towards the outside of the state, in relations between enemy states, on the one hand, and inside the individual, on the other hand, signals a “successful” process of civilization (whatever its moral sense might be, thus referring here to the most neutral, descriptive acceptations of what could be a “successful”, “normal” process). In this sense, just as war “is not the opposite of

peace” (2012, p. 488), violence is not the opposite of *civilité*, and *civilité* is not at all the opposite of violence. Court society was evidently extremely “violent”, although violence of *etiquette* was not exactly physical violence (Elias 2006, pp. 86–126).⁸ It proves that the persistence of violence in other forms is indeed highly characteristic of the process of civilization.

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

2.3 *A Positive Ontology of the State?*

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

the state further enables the development of a civic community that would be unthinkable otherwise.

To be provocative, we can also put the substantive transformation of violence pointed out by Elias in parallel with Carl Schmitt's ontology of the state, where the emergence of the state would mark a transformation from unbridled, unbounded and destructive interpersonal violence to limited, codified and legally sanctioned violence (both within and between states). For instance, in his 1963 preface to *The Concept of the Political*, Schmitt states, "... the classical state achieved something totally implausible: establishing inner peace and excluding enmity as a concept of law. It succeeded in eliminating the feud, an institution of medieval law; ending the religious civil wars of the 16th and 17th centuries, in which each camp believed itself to be particularly justified to wage war; and enforcing tranquility, security, and order within its borders" (Schmitt 2009 (1963), p. 11).⁹ For both authors, the transformation from private violence to sanctioned, legitimate and public forms of violence is a criterion of progress towards civilization—a transformation only the state appears able to perform. As Schmitt puts it in what could have been an Eliasian expression, "the domestication and clear delimitation of war make enmity relative. Each instance of such relativizing is a great advance towards more humanity."¹⁰

For Schmitt, however, this containment supposes a community of states (as opposed to a stateless universal union of people) that allows a demarcation between the friend and the enemy (Schmitt 2009 (1963), p. 52). Therefore, universalistic values and a normative set of principles, such as human rights, can only threaten this demarcation and, if enforced, unleash unlimited violence (Schmitt 2009 (1963), p. 51). Here Elias's and Schmitt's respective visions of post-national integration reveal a clear divergence that is not reducible to an opposition between (Eliasian) optimism and (Schmittian) pessimism. As we shall show later, in the "Changes in the We-I Balance" (1987), Elias insists that the discourse of human rights, its progressive institutionalization towards the end of the twentieth century and its increasingly efficient use at the international level signal that the locus of identification is necessarily displaced beyond (and above) the state, announcing a new stage in the process of civilization. Hence, the divergence lies in Elias's refusal to follow the logical consequences of Schmitt's conceptualization: that the entanglement of violence in a set of norms is made possible only by the state in its "classical" form.

3 STATE VIOLENCE AGAINST *CIVILITÉ*

So far, we have focused mainly on Elias's central work *On the Process of Civilisation*. This focus leads us to make two general points or provisional conclusions. First, Elias's original insistence on the reduction of violence might have led him to omit some more problematic forms of violence that would come to the fore in the twentieth century, that is to say, forms of violence that are at the same time on a larger scale, more extreme and fostered by the states themselves. As we shall show in the first point below, Elias's reflections on the Holocaust that were published later in his life would constitute, to a certain extent, an amendment of his theses of the thirties (Agard 2009), but mostly, in our view, an innovative extension of these, (at least partly) refuting the basic interpretation we have just presented about the role of the state in matters of violence. Second, a tension runs through Elias's *On the Process of Civilisation* between a carefully thought-out, historical and sociological model and a model that remains partly indebted to a tradition of ontologizing the state as a unique and original phenomenon. Discussing it is not within the scope of this chapter, but we can say that this latter model is counterbalanced by the former. Considering the strongly historical dimension of Eliasian thought, the civilizing process does not culminate in the state. It even less begins with the state. This is a second reason why the concept and history of *civilité*, on the one hand, and the concept and history of the state, on the other hand, cannot be confused. In the second point of this section, an "ethical" definition of the concept of *civilité* will therefore be presented. This normative concept of *civilité* is more open, less dependent on the state, partly built on the critique of the uncivilized character or the decivilizing features of the modern state. Far from being state-centred, this ethical definition, based on a growing empathy and ability of an enlarged self-detachment, is marked by a certain "cosmopolitanism". At the same time, *civilité* in this strong meaning is highly compatible with the "real" historical trajectory and with the relational reality of both state and *civilité* concepts and social experiences that have been investigated within the frame of Elias's historical sociology of the civilizing process(es).

3.1 *About Nazism and Uncivil State Violence*

In his essay written around the time of the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem and critically titled "The Breakdown of Civilization" (Elias 1996, pp. 299–402), Elias directly confronts the extermination of the Jews

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

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

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

These sentences are extremely important for the civilizing processes theory as a whole. Elias points out that Nazism and genocide reveal negatively, with particular acuity due to their relatively exceptional character, the *ethical* core of the civilizing process, which Elias did not really mention in the 1939 text¹¹ and to which we shall return later, namely, the “growth of mutual identification” of most modern people with their fellow human beings, “simply *as* fellow human beings” (Mennell 1992, p. 248). Here we are forced to admit that the civilizing process cannot be reduced to pacification within the state (although inner peace largely remains—or became, to be more exact, as we said that the civilizing process did not begin with the state—a kind of condition for its continuation). It can even less be reduced to civilization of manners strictly speaking. As ironically pointed out by Konrad Jarausch (2004), the Nazis had not necessarily lost their manners at table (nor necessarily beat their children, etc.).

Indeed, something else, something “more”, civilization in a different, more “progress-oriented” meaning, crumbled or collapsed in the Nazi period: something like generalized human “mutual identification”, which is certainly neither innate, once again, nor achieved, but mostly owes its characteristics to centuries of civilizing processes.¹²

Now, our core question is: to what extent is the civilizing role of the modern state brought into question by the Nazi “barbarity”, or to what extent could the state be partly responsible for the “breakdown” of the human being’s self-esteem? We can address the question by evoking Elias’s and Zigmunt Bauman’s respective positions (De Swaan 2001). Elias wrote about “breakdown”. If we caricature his position, the Holocaust is, in his opinion, a paradox, a paradoxical development in the civilizing process, whereas Bauman considered it to be just the reverse, a paroxysm, for “the modern era has been founded on genocide, and was proceeded through more genocide” (Bauman 1993, p. 227). But Elias is not an anti-Bauman before the fact. He (more) explicitly recognized that civilizing and decivilizing processes were partly due to the same causes. The differentiation of social functions and lengthening of the chains of interdependence, for instance, called for social pacification. But they were also required to make possible the extermination of the Jews by the Nazis and its rational, bureaucratic organization, including the emotional detachment of an Eichmann establishing timetables for trains to Auschwitz (Arendt 2006) and the organization of the mass killing in the gas chambers (Elias 1996, p. 307). If modernity does not create or aggravate barbarism and violence, it might rationalize, bureaucratize and organize it.

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

to prevail, and at the same time “the full violence of the state is unleashed against specific categories in well demarcated local, temporal, social and mental compartments” (De Swaan 2001, p. 276).¹³

We should like to make two additional remarks regarding the role of the state in the “breakdown of civilization” that Elias analyzed in *The Germans*. The breakdown must of course be explained in the light of certain “social conditions” that could be found in numerous other contexts (humiliating military defeats, economic and political crisis, anti-Semitism and xenophobia, etc.). It must be considered more broadly in relation to many non-(typically) German aspects: France, Great Britain and the United States experienced racism and imperialism, and a complex set of practices, including science, technological innovations and “massification”, gave birth in these contexts to a culture based on the general idea that “we” are superior and dominant. Nevertheless, Nazism, war, concentration camps and, above all, genocide seem to have had something to do with a specific German national habitus and, according to Elias, with the specificity of the German nation state’s historical trajectory. This trajectory and habitus would, notably, have been characterized not by strength but, on the contrary, by *weaknesses* of a state monopoly of violence that had been consolidated very late and shakily, compared to the other great European powers (see the enduring institution of duelling in the Wilhelmine Empire, which tolerated and encouraged interpersonal private violence in some contexts, in Elias 1996, pp. 44–64). In Germany, the lack of a state monopoly, or a state monopoly which was too feeble for too long or too young and immature, yielded a state that was not able to democratize in time and thus unable to really “civilize” society, fostering the need for authoritarian rule and highly fanciful political discourses such as Hitler’s (Mennell 1996, p. 112). After such a historically hesitant monopoly crumbled under the Weimar Republic, which is described as the most decivilizing period regarding the growth of “private” violence (Fletcher 1997), Hitler restored a kind of highly effective monopoly of the means of violence.¹⁴ This very monopoly finally permitted the genocide to be organized so efficiently in a context of war, and in the frame of a rather innovative regime or system, hardly comparable to other and former, even the most authoritarian ones, according to Arendt in her famous opus, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1958), centred on Nazism and Stalinism.

For his part, in *The Germans* Elias partly recycles the *Sonderweg* theme by considering the peculiarity of the German state and habitus formation to be of major importance. That argumentative strategy contributes

to exonerating the “normal” state-building path *partially*.¹⁵ At the same time, Elias firmly insists on the guilty incredulity and passivity of the other European powers witnessing the rise and crimes of Nazism that they were neither able nor keen to prevent. After the tragedy of the First World War, Western leaders’ errors about what should “really” be realist politics in the thirties were obviously at fault, but according to Elias their failure to prevent the tragedy is also to be seen in relation to their more global misunderstanding of the civilizing process itself:

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

A second point about what happened under the Nazi regime should also be considered in relation to the state and violence issue. It concerns the efforts made by the Nazis to transform Jews into “enemies” of the German people and justify “war” against them—a very costly and “irrational” war that, along with the simultaneous opening of several fronts, caused, according to Elias, the Nazis to lose the more conventional, inter-state, war (Elias 1996). The project of extermination that unfolded starting from *Mein Kampf* firstly required a diminution of the feelings of identification with the Jews that many non-Jewish Germans had developed. The Nuremberg Laws adopted for that purpose prove that the Nazis had assimilated the need to legalize their apparently unbridled violence towards the Jews. The decisions taken early to remove Jews first to ghettos and then to camps, most of which were situated *outside* Germany, prove the necessity of (hiding and) turning genocide into a war with an enemy that culminated in the creation of extermination camps *outside* the state’s territory. Last but not least, the Nazis remained curiously apprehensive of German public opinion regarding the treatment of the Jews. Of course that does not minimize the violence of the Nazi state at all. Rather, it shows that more or less “civilized” standards, standards more or less related to state building, such as shunting violence to the side of war and external conflict, are not so easy to ignore and dismantle, for even the Nazi regime had to come to terms with these standards within German society. At the same time, such standards do not by themselves guarantee civilization at all. By singling it out, an Eliasian reading helps *situate* Nazi state violence instead of confusing

it with the very “nature” of the modern state, or on the contrary, with its very negation. Rather, Nazi violence appears to be an example of state violence resulting from specific historical (de)civilizing processes that could have been developing elsewhere in other ways and should be explained (Elias 1996, p. 304).

3.2 *Civilité against and beyond State (Violence)*

A core hypothesis of this chapter is that the most adamant denials of civility envisioned by Elias himself—first among them being Nazi violence against Jews—deeply question the civilizing role supposedly attributed to the state by the civilizing process theory. These denials also consequently complicate and enrich the significations of the terms “civilization” and “*civilité*”. As we have recalled above, *civilité* is usually understood from the 1939 text as a behaviour-regulating principle that was crucial to the development of court society in Europe and thus intimately associated with state building and the specific elites it required and fostered (Elias 2012, p. 61). In this last section, we should like to stress that *civilité* can be understood by Elias as something more demanding, ethically speaking, and slightly different from this first historical meaning.

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

As we have pointed out, what crumbled under Nazism and in World War II was, in a nutshell, the growing ability to put oneself in someone else’s place, referring to a civilized self-esteem that Elias does not mention in *On the Process of Civilisation*. This mutual identification very clearly has

something to do with compassion and empathy, which have no reason to be limited by the borders of a political unit, survival unit or community. On the contrary, such feelings are revealed precisely when they concern strangers, prisoners of war or supposed enemies—in a word “the other”, someone from outside one’s political community or survival unit. The widening of the scope of identification circles mentioned by Elias and his followers thus directly participates in an enlarging consciousness of the self that defines a kind of cosmopolitanism in Elias’s late texts. Elias himself did not contribute so much in elucidating precisely the factors that favoured or on the contrary prevented the development of empathy feelings according to the development of different forms of *civilité* and the decrease of violence in long-term world history. The roles of cities and urban models, for instance, and even more of religion(s) (Muchembled 2008) were certainly under-investigated by Elias, who obviously focused on the state. But what is sure in our view is that Elias’s cosmopolitanism (although still quite statist) is at the end of the day incompatible with the Schmittian model of the political and the state we evoked at the beginning. It is indeed doubtful that Elias could have agreed with a conception founded on the organic unity of a people, given that he firmly and consistently rejected any kind of nationalism (see for example Elias 1996, p. 315). But Elias’s cosmopolitanism also seems incompatible with Schmitt’s view that the “classical state”, able to distinguish between external friends and enemies, is the ultimate guarantor of a “civilized” treatment of the other (see Schmitt 2009 (1963), p. 11).

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

4 CONCLUSIONS

In Elias's more political texts, especially those related to violence in international relations, the term *civilité* seldom occurs and the need for a world state is for its part a recurrent issue. In some passages, from the conclusion of *On the Process of Civilisation* until "The Fishermen in the Maelström" (1981), the very survival of mankind in the nuclear era seems to be contingent on such a state's existence. Establishing a global monopoly of violence would be the only way to prevent ultimate destructive violence and put an end to the global war that partially results from state building, as already advocated by Rousseau.¹⁶ According to Elias, without a compelling force—a military monopoly—international law would be unable to pacify international relations (Elias 2007b, pp. 138–150), which, for that reason, are not civilized or civilizing, but, on the contrary, constantly threatening. In those passages, Elias seems rather close to the eighteenth-century cosmopolitanism that was built against and at the same time upon Thomas Hobbes's model of sovereignty.¹⁷

Challenging the global state solution to fight against global violence, another interpretation of Elias's "reality-congruent" cosmopolitanism can be found at the end of "Changes in the We-I Balance" (1987), where Elias carefully evokes human rights, instead of the quite illusory solution of a global world state.¹⁸ He put particular emphasis on the rise of individual rights against state prerogative related to violence:

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

He finally insists:

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

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

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

NOTES

1. For more about juxtaposing Elias’s and Foucault’s theories, see Spierenburg (1984), Van Krieken (1990) and Mennell (1992, p. 58).
2. According to Jonathan Fletcher, “what Elias actually means when he uses the term violence is still unclear” and “violence can only be defined in context”. At the same time, we agree with Fletcher that Elias first and foremost “refers to physical force when employing the term violence”, especially regarding the role of state controls and monopolies (Fletcher

- 1997, p. 47). Keane, for his part, defines violence “crudely” as “any uninvited but intentional act of physically violating the body of a person who previously had lived ‘in peace’” (Keane 1996, p. 6).
3. We have already been trying to foster such a dialogue between Elias’s historical sociology and political philosophy on the topic of European integration and post-national citizenship (Delmotte 2002, 2007, 2012).
 4. In other words, we are maybe here a little bit more hesitant or reserved than Dépelteau, Passiani and Mariano, although we share their “impression” and agree with them when they write: “It is true that Elias made distinctions between the developments of France, Great Britain, and Germany. However [...], he proposed a general theory of ‘civilizing processes’. In this respect, it is also true that Elias gave the impression that there is one ‘civilizing process’, and that in order to be ‘civilized’ a society would have to go through something similar to what happened in France and Great Britain” (Dépelteau et al. 2013, p. 52).
 5. We can note that, for Elias, this intricacy of war making and pacification is paradoxical only if a moral judgement is cast from the standpoint of “civilized” individuals. Indeed, trying to cast such a judgment is misleading, the product of a “subjectivist or partisan view of the past” through which “we usually block our access to the elementary formative regularities and mechanisms, to the real structural history and sociogenesis of historical formations” (Elias 2012, p. 346).
 6. In this respect, Elias remains well within the line of classical sociologists such as Durkheim (2002), and shares with the latter a concern for the potential inner conflicts that may arise from the discrepancy or non-coincidence between internal and external structures.
 7. As early as 1939, Elias had clarified his point about the importance of qualitative evolution in manners and controls, an evolution he sees as more complex than de-multiplication and reinforcement of the (self-)controls. See his letter to Raymond Aron (in Joly and Deluermoz 2010). In this respect his thought has been remarkably pursued by the work of Cas Wouters about “informalization” (2008).
 8. Here, Elias appears to fail to think out fully the relationship between physical violence and symbolic violence as understood by Pierre Bourdieu, that is to say, a form of constraint that “rests on an unconscious accordance between mental and objective structures” (Bourdieu 2012, p. 239). Bourdieu’s central suggestion is precisely that, in order to produce a sociological theory of the state, the Weberian (and Eliasian) priority of physical violence must be reversed. In a nutshell, it is the monopolization of symbolical violence that constitutes, in Bourdieu’s view, the central process that makes pacification possible (and, crucially, usually enables the state to avoid using physical violence): “*L’État est doté d’un instrument de constitu-*

tion de la paix intérieure, une forme de cela-va-de-soi, d'un taken for granted collectif à l'échelle d'un pays" (Bourdieu 2012, p. 268).

9. Authors' translation of "*dem klassischen Staat war etwas ganz Unwahrscheinliches gelungen: in seinem Innern Frieden zu schaffen und die Feindschaft als Rechtsbegriff auszuschließen. Es war ihm gelungen, die Fehde, ein Institut des mittelalterlichen Recht, zu beseitigen, den konfessionellen Bürgerkriegen des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts, die auf beiden Seiten als besonders gerechte Kriege geführt wurden, ein Ende zu machen und innerhalb seines Gebietes Ruhe, Sicherheit und Ordnung herzustellen.*"
10. Authors' translation of "*Die Hegung und klare Begrenzung des Krieges enthält eine Relativierung der Feindschaft. Jede solche Relativierung ist ein großer Fortschritt im Sinne der Humanität.*"
11. Talking about "ethics" is not very Eliasian. For the French political theorist Philippe Raynaud (2013), Elias was, however, consciously moved by the same questions about the ethical and legal significance of the development of civility concurrently with Western state building as Hume, Rousseau and Kant (Raynaud 2013, p. 246).
12. For once, it is hardly possible *not* to validate morally, in terms of progress, such a "progressive", although relative and reversible, trend. Better stated, the growth of mutual identification and empathy is something that *can* be morally validated and this possibility is obviously validated by Elias himself. To be clear, the point is not about an innate character of empathy or compassion, qualities that are learned in any event and evolve in line with the standards of behaviour and feelings. The point is that the civilizing process would have been marked little by little by a widening scope of identification due to the growing repulsion to death and suffering of people increasingly remote and different from "us". "We watch football, not gladiatorial contests," Elias wrote to sum up such an evolution in "The Loneliness of the Dying" (2010b, p. 4) (the title of which does not precisely suggest a blind optimism about social change, by the way).
13. In the text "The expulsion of the Huguenots from France", first published in 1935, Elias shows the enduring risk of personal use of legitimate violence, namely by a Catholic king against the Protestant (Agard 2009). However, the episode relates to a very ancient period, that of the state's inception.
14. Of course, we can wonder, for example with Martin Broszat (1981), if the Nazi regime was really a "state" dictatorship or rather a party dictatorship.
15. Wacquant's analysis of the decivilizing processes at work in the black ghettos in some American cities gives another example of valuing, through the negative example, the "normal" trajectory of the state (Wacquant 2004). Decivilizing is largely envisioned by the French sociologist as a de-pacification, a resurgence of private violence and rise in killings due directly to the

withdrawal of the state, first from education and law enforcement (schools and police). State violence against citizens in these areas is of course noted but the emphasis on the decivilizing penal or “American” model of the state helps to validate, by the contrast that it creates, the civilizing social or “European” model of the state (Castel 2003) that would be currently weakening or disappearing. Moreover, Wacquant suggests that the decivilizing processes at work in the ghettos go as far as to cause the disintegration or shortening of interdependence chains, the growth of which is a kind of driver or *causes* of the civilizing process. For instance, in black American ghettos, decivilizing processes caused by the withdrawal of the state favour the return of an informal economy, people not daring to move out of their immediate neighbourhood, and so on.

16. “Since each of us is in the civil state with his fellow citizens and in the state of nature with all the rest of the world, we have forestalled private wars only to ignite general ones, which are a thousand times more terrible; and [by] uniting ourselves to several men, we really become the enemies of the human race,” Rousseau writes in his *Abstract of the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s Plan for Perpetual Peace* (1761, 1995), the direct opposite of what Schmitt will write. As we have been trying to demonstrate, Elias’s position is more ambiguous.
17. See, for example, the Abbé de Saint-Pierre’s *Plan for Perpetual Peace* ([1713] 1987). More broadly, this cosmopolitanism conceives of a political entity enlarged to the borders of the human community, a citizenship that, although universal, is still based on belonging to a political community with which one should be identified.
18. Elias also could have written: “Deadly danger to any civilization is no longer likely to come from without (Arendt 1958, p. 302). However, Arendt’s warning is indeed much more explicit about the dangers of a world government: “For it is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organized and mechanized humanity will conclude democratically—namely by majority decision—that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof” (Arendt 1958, pp. 298–299).

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