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Author(s): Stephen Mennell and Johan Goudsblom

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Civilizing Processes—Myth or Reality? A Comment on Duerr's Critique of Elias

STEPHEN MENNELL

University College Dublin

JOHAN GOUDSBLOM

University of Amsterdam

Hans-Peter Duerr, *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess*: vol. 1, *Nacktheit und Scham* (1988); vol. 2, *Intimität* (1994); vol. 3, *Obszönität und Gewalt* (1995); and vol. 4, *Der erotische Leib* (1997). Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp.

It is a great tribute to the late Norbert Elias that Hans-Peter Duerr has embarked upon a four-volume critique, *Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozess*, of Elias's original two volumes of *The Civilizing Process* (recently reissued in a single-volume edition).¹ Duerr's volumes may initiate a major intellectual debate and thus lead to the wider recognition of the importance of Elias—whom Duerr himself rates as “perhaps the most influential and stimulating sociologist of the second half of the twentieth century” (Duerr, vol. 3:11).

Space does not permit us to examine here the wealth of empirical detail which Duerr deploys, so we shall concentrate on discussing the main theoretical issues at stake. We cannot help noticing, however, a certain double standard in his handling of evidence. Duerr is a very severe judge of the way that Norbert Elias handles his historical evidence in documenting medieval customs and sensitivities, and his keen eye in this regard is to be applauded. However, whereas every item used by Elias to support his point of view is subjected to extremely rigorous criticism, all the items that can be used to contest Elias's views are accepted at face value. When it comes to criticising Elias, Duerr does not shrink from citing the oddest bits of anthropological lore and interpretation. As authorities, it seems that every nineteenth-century missionary and explorer can be trusted and quoted without reservation. The best

These brief remarks, written at the request of the editors of *Comparative Studies in Society and History* in the hope of stimulating further intellectual debate about the major theoretical issues at stake in Hans Peter Duerr's series, were completed before the publication of the fourth volume of his work, *Der erotische Leib*.

¹ Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1994).

way to expose Duerr's procedure is to quote one typical passage at length. In order to persuade his readers that shame at being seen in the act of defecation is universal, Duerr gives a number of examples, of which we can quote only a few:²

Thus for example the Lele mention as one of the distinctions between humans and animals that the latter urinate in public because they possess no shame (*buhonyi*),³ and among quite a few peoples someone who is seen by others while defecating commits suicide out of shame.

When among the Micmac a pair of siblings were out in the forest, the young girl noticed traces of faeces on her brother's clothing, revealing that he had just relieved himself away in the bush. This shamed him so much that he hanged himself from the branch of a tree.⁴

For the Lakalai on the northern coast of New Britain, defecation is so shameful that a woman who says about her little child, "Oh little Hans has shit himself," can drive a man who happens to have the same name and who overhears this into suicide, after which the woman will be charged with manslaughter.⁵ . . .

When among the Hagenberg tribes in New Guinea someone happens to be caught urinating or defecating, he hides his face in his hands and thinks about whether he should hang himself. . . . When a man sees a woman relieving herself, it is customary that he goes to her and asks her to sleep with him. Usually she complies, for after coitus shame is past because they have been intimate with each other.⁶

Passages such as these would, in our opinion, have deserved at least as close a scrutiny as Duerr has given to Elias's sources.

The uncritical juxtaposition by anthropologists of reported customs from many times and places, as exemplified here by Duerr, was once famously denounced by Sir Edmund Leach as "butterfly collecting."⁷ Duerr can freely engage in this kind of lepidoptery because he is not committed to any theory of long-term social and cultural change, and he explicitly rejects the notion of a civilizing process, which to him is nothing but a myth.

But is it a myth? Can it be denied that in every known human society, each member undergoes an individual, lifetime, civilizing process? In the social scientific literature this is more usually referred to as "socialization," "enculturation," or "personality formation"; at least since Freud, Piaget and Kohlberg it has not been seriously disputed that this process does indeed occur nor that it has a sequential structure. Elias's particular contribution in this respect was to put these psychological insights into an historical and sociological context, to point to the balance between self-constraints and constraints exerted by others and to suggest how that balance changes in the course of an individual's lifetime.

² This passage, which we translated is quoted from Duerr, vol. 1:227–8.

³ Attributed to Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meanings* (London 1975), 10, 12.

⁴ Attributed to E. Vetromile, *The Abnakis and their History* (New York, 1866), 89ff.

⁵ Attributed to Ward Goodenough, "Personal Names and Modes of Address in Two Oceanic Societies", in M. E. Spiro, ed., *Context and Meaning in Cultural Anthropology* (New York, 1965).

⁶ Attributions are given to A. Strathern, "Why is Shame on the Skin?" *Ethnology*, New York, (1975), and to G. F. Vicedom and H. Tischner, *Die Mbowamb*, vol. 1 (Hamburg, 1948).

⁷ Edmund Leach, *Rethinking Anthropology* (London, Athlone Press, 1961).

The social standards which an individual learns in the course of a lifetime differ from society to society. But must we not also acknowledge that the standards which prevail at a particular time in a given society have not always been the same, nor have they come out of the blue? When such standards do in fact change, are the changes purely at random, purely matters of capricious fashion; or can we try to discover at this level, too, processes with a sequential structure? These are the precisely the questions Elias addressed in *The Civilizing Process*, in which he both documented such changes and developed a model for explaining them.

Duerr is prepared to find structured long-term processes in certain aspects of social change, but he excludes just those matters with which Elias was especially concerned:

Of course, I do not dispute that there has been a civilizing process in terms of a change of the societal “macro-structure,” nor that there has been a development of civilization in the technical and material sense, with profound transformations and innovations in administration, in the police and the military, in the organization of labour, in traffic and transport, in the supply of goods, in waste disposal, etc. But what I do dispute is that on the one hand this development has involved an intensification of social control, and that on the other hand it has fostered in man a fully different “drive economy”—a new “psychic habitus” . . . ⁸

It is not difficult to recognise, in Duerr’s distinction between the technical and the psychological, the time-honoured dichotomy between “Civilization” and “Culture” as expounded by Alfred Weber and introduced into American sociology by Robert MacIver. But is it possible to maintain this distinction, and to contend that whereas there is a structure in the technical changes, the psychological changes are random?

Surprisingly enough, Duerr is not quite as sceptical on this account as he may seem. He does have a theory of psychological change over the recent past. Even more surprisingly, this theory could easily be made to fit Elias’s more comprehensive theory. Duerr’s thesis is that in small communities or tribal groups social control was strict, tight, and inescapable. Contemporary society, by contrast, has become much more differentiated, allowing for a greater variety of behaviour, and social control has therefore become looser. Duerr⁹ objects most emphatically to a passage in which Elias asserts that:

social drive-controls and restrictions are nowhere absent among people, nor is a certain foresight; but these qualities have a different form and degree among simple herdsmen or in a warrior class than among courtiers, state officials or members of a mechanized army. They grow more powerful and more complete the greater the division of functions and, thus, the greater the number of people to whom the individual has to attune his actions.¹⁰

Duerr concedes that the person today is indeed connected to more people than ever—but the connections are not between whole personalities but only between, as he puts it, fragments of the personality. Therefore, according to

⁸ Duerr, vol. 3:26. ⁹ Duerr, vol. 3:27. ¹⁰ Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 481.

Duerr, norm violations have fewer consequences: if the individual is put to shame, he does not lose his face, but only one of his faces.¹¹

Here it is easy to see Duerr's adherence to an older, less sophisticated tradition of thinking in terms of a polar opposition between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*. What Duerr fails to see is not only that his observation is not at odds with Elias's theory but that Elias's notion of a changing balance between internal and external constraints provides a far more subtle basis for conceptualizing the changes to which Duerr is referring. Individuals in more differentiated societies may have access to "increasing varieties"¹² of behaviour, but this may lead them into greater uncertainty and confront them with more occasions for embarrassment and shame. Apart from his digression on modern trends in shame and embarrassment, Duerr shows no interest in a systematic investigation of varieties of shame in various social settings—for instance, in the relationship between the various guises of shame and forms of social hierarchy. It is in that area, of "bridging the macro-micro gap" and thus overcoming the individual-society dichotomy, that Elias's most original contribution lies.

As Duerr rightly notes, in *The Civilizing Process* Elias was primarily concerned with developments in Europe. But is it conceivable that a civilising process in Europe could have evolved completely independently of any previous developments or, for that matter, contemporary developments elsewhere? Elias himself was aware of the wider connections, and there are occasional allusions to them in *The Civilizing Process*. In his later writings, he expanded the range of his investigations to aspects of the human civilizing process at large, such as the development of the human capacity for timing and, more generally, for the use of symbols.¹³

Other researchers have begun to use the theory of civilizing processes in non-European settings. Recent examples include Eiko Ikegami's *The Taming of the Samurai*,¹⁴ Elçin Kürsat-Ahlers's account of state-formation among the early Eurasian nomads,¹⁵ and Wim Rasing's study of order and nonconformity among the Inuit.¹⁶ Another strand of studies taking up Elias's theory is represented by those who are studying decivilizing processes, which were a preoccupation of Elias himself in one of his last books, *The Germans*.¹⁷

¹¹ Duerr, vol. 3:28.

¹² Our allusion here is to Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, 460–5, "Diminishing Contrasts, Increasing Varieties."

¹³ Norbert Elias, *Time: An Essay* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1992); *The Symbol Theory* (London, Sage, 1991).

¹⁴ E. Ikegami, *The Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Elçin Kürsat-Ahlers, *Zur frühen Staatenbildung von Steppenvölkern: Über die Sozio- und Psychogenese der eurasischen Nomadenreiche am Beispiel der Hsiung-Nu und Göktürken mit einem Exkurs über die Skythen* (Berlin, Dunker und Humblot, 1994).

¹⁶ Wim Rasing, "Too Many People": *Order and Nonconformity in Iglulingmiut Social Process* (Nijmegen, Catholic University of Nijmegen, 1994).

¹⁷ Elias, *The Germans: Studies of Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Oxford, Polity Press, 1995).

All these studies go to show that, on the one hand, one can fruitfully apply the model of civilizing processes to a variety of settings without, on the other hand, subscribing to assumptions of unilinear development and progress.¹⁸ Especially when we consider civilising processes at the most comprehensive level of humanity as a whole it is clear that human beings have again and again had to confront new problems in living together and to find new solutions to them. The balance of inner constraints and external constraints has always tended to be labile and precarious. Today, with the vast increase in human numbers and in the extent of their interdependencies across the globe, the problem of civilization may well have become more urgent than ever before. In order to appraise it, we have to acknowledge civilizing processes as a reality and not dismiss them as a myth.

¹⁸ Elias himself defined the task of the sociologist as to be “a destroyer of myths” (*What is Sociology?* [New York, Columbia University Press, 1978]). Although he took great pains to distance himself from nineteenth-century models of social evolution and progress, Duerr is not the first critic to level at Elias the charge of following such outdated models.