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# Civilizing Processes

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The theory of “civilizing processes” was developed by Norbert Elias in the 1930s to describe and explain the generation of higher standards of various forms of conduct in the context of unplanned but structured changes in state formation and lengthening chains of social interdependencies (Elias 2000). The idea of civilized conduct may seem a strange companion to popular understandings of consumer culture, when the latter phrase is often associated with hedonism, individualism and excess. But consumer cultures do refer to the meanings, values, emotions and practices surrounding the use of goods and services, including how people use their bodies through acts of consumption. Elias’s book *The Civilizing Process*, originally published in 1939, examines changing expectations regarding eating especially, but also other bodily practices such as deportment and dressing. Through broader social processes such as urbanization, industrialization and commercialization within the context of the state increasingly pacifying people within the territory (i.e., state agencies such as the police force become solely responsible for keeping the peace), each person comes to depend on more and more interlinked people for the fulfilment of needs and wants on a more consistent basis. For example, in very agrarian societies people tend to rely on themselves or small local groups for the provision of food, but within industrial societies the various processes involved in the production, distribution and consumption of food can involve many individuals connected through specializing in the various parts of these processes (the division of labour). This is an example of lengthening chains of social interdependencies, and as this occurs cultures of consumption also change.

Through these changing norms and ideals of social conduct, including consumption practices, within broader and tighter networks of people (figurations), each person increasingly feels the need to exert greater self-control over behaviour and emotions. Thus, civilizing processes also refer to the changing balance of restraints exercised upon and through the individual, from social constraints towards more self-restraint and self-steered conduct. . Part of this process involves the elevation of ideals of individualism and, as a variant of this, the notion that “the customer is king”. In other words, in principle the consumer has come to be imagined as a sovereign, self-contained individual who knows his or desires and is capable of fulfilling them in the market.

While Elias was not primarily concerned with consumer culture *per se*, he saw civilizing processes partly through developing norms, ideals and practices pertaining to table manners and clothing styles. He noted how successive editions of leading etiquette texts over several centuries demonstrated higher and more precise standards for consuming food. Also, some rules or advice disappeared from later texts. For Elias, this meant they no longer needed to be explicitly stated to adults as it was taken for granted that people do not breach such standards. Early etiquette manuals of the Middle Ages (but written for the courtly circles of feudal lords) directed readers against sharing eating utensils with others, returning partly eaten food back to the common dish or spitting at the dinner table. These are precepts that today we would take for granted; as adults, there is no need for them to be written in manuals (though parents still have to tell young children not to engage in such behaviour at table). Some behaviour at table, and other forms and styles of consumption, became so shameful that they could hardly be alluded to in writing for an adult audience. Most adults had internalised these standards so that following them did not feel like compliance but rather fulfilling one's tastes and desires.

Over the course of the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries in France, former provincial nobles with their own courtly circles and centres of power gradually became defunctionalized as the central monarchy gained in relative power. Their political and military functions declined as the state became more centralized. As they depended on the king for the maintenance of social status and the distribution of favours, social competition between pacified courtiers centred on public displays of opulent and stylized consumption. Through consumption, courtiers tried to maintain or enhance their position in the status hierarchy. With the subsequent decline of both the monarchy and nobility and the related rise of the bourgeoisie, food consumption became more of a privatized practice within smaller family households. Refined consumption skills and displays are less crucial to social success in the occupational sphere in the twentieth century compared to court aristocracies. However, Elias did see the court society as a model-setting class for broader strata in French society, so that the legacy of civilized consumption continues (though informalization processes (see Cas Wouters, this volume) throughout the twentieth century extend and add complexity to this process).

As well as codes and practices changing, new consumption technologies emerged as part of civilizing processes. For example, Elias highlights the invention and physical development of the fork as a materialization of specific social relations demanding greater sensitivity and decorum. The fork was not simply an instrument to facilitate eating, but the objectification of the shifting emotional standards surrounding embarrassment caused by potential breaches of eating etiquette. The use of cutlery allowed for consumption without touching certain types of food. These developments were partly driven by 'pressure from below', the rise of the middle classes who sought to emulate the nobility, who in turn were driven to further attempts at social distinction. But with the growing interdependence between classes and the corresponding partial

decline in inequality, the widespread adoption of prescriptive table manners gradually lessened their ability to serve as means of distinction.

As society becomes less unequal, the previously understood instances of shame or embarrassment, which had referred only to relations with individuals of higher or equal rank, become generalised. The social reference or compass for emotional experience recedes from consciousness. As there is no longer a direct relationship between power relations and emotions, these feeling states, which increasingly have to be hidden from public view, seem to emerge from the inner self.

The intertwined processes of functional specialization (primarily through the division of labour), and the propensity for people to imagine their emotional experiences as emanating from within, advances feelings of individuality. The increasing complexity and interdependency of relations between people mean each individual must observe him or herself and others in order to succeed (though to varying degrees due to uneven social pressures across the overall figuration). As previously expressed impulses are placed under greater control by the self, each person imagines a greater division between themselves and others, further supporting the development of a norm of individuality. Thus, Elias charts the social and historical trajectory of subjectivity or habitus. New self-formations are not the intention of previous social groups, but are the unplanned outcome of many social interactions and interdependencies over generations. With the heightening thresholds of shame and embarrassment, the creation of the inner private self, and the growing centrality of state authority, pleasure becomes a more regulated domain. Society increasingly becomes a spectating society. The eye becomes “a mediator of pleasure” (Elias, 2000: 171). This is related to the increasing constraints on impulsively touching objects or people. Though consumption practices are still embodied (or experienced emotionally through the body), the greater socially expected self-control of emotional display (controls that each person expects of him or herself too once these social controls have been learned) means people tend more often to seek and experience pleasure at a greater distance or remove. Consumption experiences have become more spectacular for more people over time. Novels, theatre, cinema, sports, and television are clear examples of experiencing emotional excitement at a distance.

Selfhood within civilizing processes must be understood as a process within broader processes of denser social interdependencies. The self is not in opposition to social relations, but is only possible through them. The greater functional differentiation within society, the greater interdependence between people, the greater felt separateness of the person within these webs of interdependence, and the growing self-direction of the person, all interrelated, culminate in new forms of anxiety. The growing differentiation and individualisation in society also produces a growing ideal of individuality and difference as a cultural value (Elias, 1991). The imperative to “take care” of oneself is less an appeal to monitor the physical threat posed by others, as in

less pacified times, and more of a reminder to fulfil one's one needs and oneself for fear of neglecting the "inner" person. Many contemporary consumption practices and advertising appeals revolve around these therapeutic discourses of self-care and expression, particularly in the area of clothing, cosmetics, health, wellness and beauty.

Elias connects subjectivity not just with intersubjective or interdiscursive relations, but also with the very development of social relations (for example, between classes, genders, generations and nations), incorporating the formation of the nation-state itself. The greater pacification of society and the related development of more structurally complex social differentiation produces a growing rationalisation and "routinization" of life. In such societies where "the propensities for the serious and threatening type of excitement have diminished, the compensatory function of play-excitement has increased" (Elias and Dunning, 2008: 53). However, this is a "controlled decontrol of emotions" as self-restraints are still required for the enjoyment of consumption and leisure pursuits common in industrialised societies. These leisure satisfactions are, for example, sought in sports spectating and participation, where the play activities mimic more violent forms of social conflict. They are safer institutions for the generation of tension and excitement as the propensity of direct physical violence has reduced for most people (but as this is a non-linear social process, societies can become more violent thereby changing the mimetic functions of sport). Similarly, romantic (and erotic) novels and films represent the excitement of intimate relations that arouse emotions for some consumers (see Elias and Dunning, 2008: 53-4).

In terms of methodology, Elias (2000) uses various texts in his analysis of changes in morals and manners, but these serve explicitly as symptoms (evidence) of social changes. They are not assumed to have any productive capacities, though this remains a possibility. Rather, the emphasis is on what no longer needs to be said – advice that has become redundant due to its inculcation within the self (the conversion of social constraints into self-restraints). A central part of civilizing processes is the explanatory framework provided by figurational shifts.

Elias used the concept of figuration to refer to the dynamic social network comprising mutually dependent people. As the number of people and types of interdependencies expand, the direction of the overall figuration is less subject to the control of any one person or group comprising the network. The conflict and power relations between people provide the dynamic of change, but this trajectory, while not unilinear and, being based on intergenerational social learning, subject to reverses, does have a structured order. Existing social formations allow for many possible future formations, but retrospectively the order or structure of change can be traced. For example, Elias shows how central monarchies sought to pacify their territories in order to maintain their rule. This led to court societies where former warrior nobles had to conform to the new position of courtier and sought favours from the king through distinguishing themselves from their peers. New forms of distinction centred on consumption displays, etiquette

and refinement as physical force became prohibited. The central kings of France did not seek this consumption society in their midst, but it was nevertheless an outcome of pacifying and controlling potential threats.

Since the 1970s Cas Wouters (see Wouters, 2007, and his contribution to this volume) has sought to extend civilizing processes to take account of the apparently less formal social relations between people of different class, gender and age groups. While this has been considered as evidence of a permissive society, and even reason to refute Elias's theories (see Mennell, 1998: 241–6 for a discussion), Wouters contends that this represents an advance in social expectations of more subtle and differentiated self-control – an informalization processes within the broad development of civilizing processes, as more informal social relations also presuppose and demand greater ease of control of the self.

Processes of individualisation are likely to massively expand the scope and extent of needs and wants (Dolan, 2009). Social needs are supplemented by unplanned, socio-historically induced individual desires. As individualisation processes increase choice, and the need to choose, there is a growing awareness of the future, in terms of possible paths to be taken and one's life to be moulded. The future becomes a potential site for personal colonisation and transformation. The market offers opportunities for experimenting with possible future selves by bringing them into the present in material form.

The market of course is a highly differentiated social figuration enabling and enabled by commodity exchange, and needs have to be understood in that context. According to Elias (1950, 291–2): “Human needs become differentiated and specific only in conjunction with specialized human techniques; these on their part emerge and crystallize into occupations only in view of potential or actual human needs.” Functional specialisation and growing social interdependencies therefore produce both an increased sense of individuality and expanding needs. This social and cultural development supports the symbolic transformation of “the consumer” from the relatively restrained consuming public to the potentially “never-satisfied” sovereign of choice. Furthermore, practices and ideals of consumption are not mere effects of social processes of differentiation and functional specialisation; they provide a further spur for these social processes as diversifying needs and desires crystallise into new occupations.

Somewhat contrary to Elias's theories, Dant (2006) posits the potentially decivilizing effects of material consumer culture. He argues that the development of more complex and autonomous material objects may actually lesson direct interdependence between people, thus constituting a decivilizing effect. However, such apparent lessening of direct dependence on other people may reflect the contradiction of a growing reticence on people to express emotional connectivity with others in general, together with a

desire for physical closeness with particular individuals, an outcome which Elias (see especially 1991) clearly detected.

The increasing technical complexity of material objects also of course entails a high degree of social interdependence in their production and distribution, if not necessarily in their use; consumers are also producers and distributors through work, and so any decivilizing effect of material consumption would have to be seen in the context of other civilizing processes. Binkley (2009) also argues that new material environments may affect civilizing processes. The development of more media outlets means consumers are more likely to experience shame and embarrassment in individualized contexts of media and branded consumption compared to the face-to-face contexts of the past. In this respect, Binkley suggests that civilizing and commodifying processes are integrated.

Elias did discuss many of the processes that pertain to commodification, including the commercialization of social relations, the monetization of the economy and the reflexivity involved in consumption practices. For Elias, however, the social constraint towards self-restraint in the context of increasing social interdependencies is the central aspect of civilizing processes, and the more recent processes of commodification associated with consumer culture seem to exemplify rather than supplement these civilizing processes.

The general implication of Elias's theories for the study of consumer culture is that the values, symbols and even material objects of consumption are largely unintended aspects of long-term social processes. Because of this, it makes little sense to assert that the producer or advertiser creates consumer culture or that they possess the power to instil and manipulate consumer desires. There are multiple dependencies, interactions and other relations between producers, advertisers, distributors, retailers, regulators and consumers. Even for each of these categories, a figurational approach demands that we see people in the plural, so that 'the consumer' is actually a person in many social relationships and consumer decisions are never individual as such. The single consumer does not rationally decide on a course of action, based on his or her interests or desires, only to be influenced by other people later; interests and desires are also formed in social contexts and people learn from infancy what and how to consume. This leads us to another implication; consumers and consumption practices are neither rational nor irrational. Consumption involves emotional processes which form and change as part of social relations, competition, cooperation and conflict. Jealously, guilt, shame, pride, joy and other emotions take shape as people meet, exceed and transgress social standards that only make sense through the relations between people. As working life has become more routinized and predictable, consumer culture has become a more important site for the generation and enjoyment of emotional experiences. Academic research needs to take greater account of this emotional dimension.

There are innumerable research opportunities to examine and extend Elias's theories in different geographical and historical contexts. Such research should not be expected to mirror Elias's findings exactly, as all societies undergo distinct processes of social development (see Elias, 1996; 2000, for comparisons between France and Germany). For future research on this topic, a retreat into the present (Elias, 2009) would limit our explanatory horizons.

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