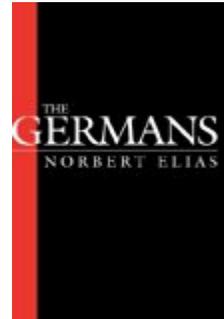


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Norbert Elias. *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996. xvi + 494 pp. \$31.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-10563-7; \$77.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-10562-0.

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The Germans, we read in the preface, “is the most important book by Norbert Elias since *The Civilizing Process*.” This is quite a claim given the fifty years that separate the appearance of the two titles (the former was first published in Germany in 1989, the latter in 1939), raising as it does our expectations that the volume under review contains the ground breaking insights of its illustrious predecessor. It also raises the obvious question of how Elias integrates Germany’s singular breach of civilization between 1933 and 1945 into his overall theory of the civilizing process. Readers looking for an explicit answer will be disappointed. *The Germans* is not a systematically developed argument, but rather an assortment of postwar essays on a variety of related themes—German state formation and personality structure, dueling in the *Kaiserreich*, violence in the Weimar Republic, the rise of Nazism, and terrorism in the Federal Republic. The editor is to be commended for making available these dispersed writings, but it is at the cost of considerable overlap in subject matter and analysis. Still, the constant repetition allows the reader to identify those factors that Elias has invested with special significance, and to reconstruct his answer to the burning question of “Civilization and the Holocaust.”

Since the “discovery” of Elias in the 1970s, his theory has become well-known. Nevertheless, it repays to recall its essentials. *The Civilizing Process* is no celebratory account of human “progress” over the centuries. A witness to the paramilitary violence of the Weimar Republic, during which a friend was murdered by the *Freikorps*, Elias was acutely conscious of the fragility of those norms that make social life possible. The book highlights the historical contingency of such norms, which Europeans naively and arrogantly assumed were theirs by “nature,” by re-

constructing the process of their development. Drawing on Freud, he postulated an anthropology of violent and egoistic drives, represented historically in the Middle Ages, where the “warrior” ethos of the aristocracy prevailed. The epochal development was the absolutist state, whose monopoly on force diminished capricious violence in everyday life. The subjects of early modern Europe internalized the new external constraints with the help of etiquette manuals. Knives and forks came into use.

The Civilizing Process is primarily about the French case, because of its paradigmatic constellation of social forces. The aristocracy accepted its reduced status, swapped the “warrior” for a “court” ethos, and socialized the rising middle class in the art of modern manners and self-control. The court at Versailles became the school of the nation. Like the maturation of children, the civilization of a society is its gradual replacement of external with internal authority. At the summit of this process stands parliamentary democracy, whose functioning requires the anthropologically remarkable ability of individuals and groups to delay or forgo gratification in the name of compromise. Civilization is the habitus of self-control.

If France is the model, how does Germany compare? In *The Germans*, it is actually England and Great Britain that Elias holds up as the paradigmatically civilized country with which he contrasts his native land (p. 324). This comes as no surprise. He lived and worked there for decades after the war, and like other liberal, Jewish refugees from Nazism—Hans Rosenberg, for example—he explained Germany’s descent into barbarism by reference to its divergence from the west. In Elias, in other words, we have an unashamed proponent of the

Sonderweg thesis. He has no truck with the bleakness of a “dialectic of enlightenment” or the cultural pessimism of “modernity and the Holocaust.” The answer to the above question is not to be found within civilization itself. Germans were in thrall to Nazism and they perpetrated the Holocaust because they were never civilized in the first place. Why the civilizing process failed in Germany is the underlying theme of *The Germans* and the subject of the book’s long, central section (pp. 299-402), which was written between 1961 and 1962 in response to the Eichmann trial. Like Hannah Arendt, whose magazine articles on the trial Elias does not appear to have read, Elias was interested in the German conscience under the Nazi regime. Unlike Arendt, however, he thinks this was a specifically German problem. The vulnerability to Nazism was the result of the German tradition, which “bore all its [i.e., Nazism’s] characteristic hallmarks” (p. 331).

The origins of this pernicious tradition can be traced to the chaos of the seventeenth century, when the country was ravaged by the Thirty Years War. Germany has been in decline ever since, a tendency exacerbated by the decentralized structures of the Holy Roman Empire, which inhibited the development of a strong state and dominant court. Germans’ insecurity about their collective identity bred a backward-looking yearning for the restoration of an apprehended former greatness. As a result of this dream and Germany’s exposed borders, the aristocratic elites anachronistically retained their military role far longer than in other western countries, a role cemented by the victory over Austria and France in the wars of unification. In awe of its superiors, who had finally realized the national dream, middle class Germans abandoned their humanistic and universal culture for *Realpolitik* and contented themselves with a subordinate role in the power structure.

This social constellation is the fatal turning point, or rather backward step. Elias singles out Nietzsche as the philosophical incarnation of the retention, consolidation, and spread of the warrior ethos in middle class Germany, although the historian Friedrich Meinecke should have been mentioned when Elias writes that “Seldom before had so much been said and written in praise of power, even of the violent sort” (p. 180). Dueling fraternities and the army became the school of the nation, and bourgeois Germans spared no effort to associate themselves with these institutions, which inculcated “a pitiless human habitus,” or in other words, the anti-civilizational ethos of the feudal aristocracy (p. 107ff.). The strong emphasis on ritual in this milieu was the external authority

that compensated and inhibited the development of internal restraints. And yet only those who were part of this milieu could “give satisfaction” in a duel and qualify as members of the “true Germany.” Socialists, Jews, and other outsiders were without honor and considered a threat to the national ideal.

Elias is frank in his assessment of the personality structure or habitus that this historical experience produced. Middle class Germans possessed a “lust for submission.” They oppressed those beneath them rather than rebel against those that oppressed them. They did not develop the self control or conscience that could restrain their national delusions when the rule of law was removed. They were, in other words, civilizational children. The defeat in 1918 and the rise to power of the despised Social Democrats traumatized the bourgeois German habitus, but the “humiliation of Versailles” affected all Germans. Unlike Britain after the Second World War, they were unable to come to terms with their national decline. Consequently, they opposed the Weimar Republic and its policy of international co-operation, eventually following the man who promised to fulfill their dream of historical greatness. The Nazis merely generalized the anti-civilizational habitus that hitherto had been limited to middle class and aristocratic Germany (pp. 197, 374). When they began to implement their ideologically-driven plans of genocide, there was little within Germans to prevent their participation.

This brief reconstruction does not do justice to the wealth of information and insights that Elias brings to bear on this historical problem. The originality of the analysis lies in the attention to the dynamic relation between the macro-level of state formation and the micro-level of personality structure. The static categories of “the individual” and “society” are historicized and situated within an overarching theory of modernization. Cultural historians will welcome his attention to practices like dueling and the invocation of “habitus” (long before Bourdieu), while social historians will be pleased that class and power remain operational categories.

Still, an important issue is left unclarified. Elias tends to define civilization as a functional matter of self-control (eating with knives and forks), but it is apparent that he thinks that it also contains a normative component (cf., pp. 32f., 109). This tension is evident in the fact that the Nazis ate with knives and forks and that Himmler, in his infamous “Posen Speech,” took pride in the “decency” of his men, because they had not robbed the Jews they had just shot. Had Elias thematized and resolved this para-

dox, his theory might have resembled that of Juergen Habermas. His civilization looks very much like Habermas's post-conventional/post-national telos.

Elias is blissfully unaware of the historical and sociological literature on the subjects about which he writes. The reader will look in vain for references to Barrington Moore or Perry Anderson in his treatment of social relations in early modern Europe, or for the names of David Blackbourn, Richard Evans, and Hans-Ulrich Wehler when he discusses the *Sonderweg* thesis. The age of some essays is also apparent in the references to the Nazis as "half-educated men"—a contention disposed of by Ulrich Herbert's biography of Werner Best—as well as

in the dating of the decision for the Holocaust in 1939, and the gloomy "Thoughts of the Federal Republic" written when terrorism gripped the country during "German Autumn" of 1977. Despite their idiosyncrasies, however, the essays collected in *The Germans* remain compulsive reading and invite application to contemporary cases of social crisis. Elias's theory of barbarism is as relevant today as his theory of civilization was in 1939.

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