Norbert Elias and Emotions in History
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The work of Norbert Elias has played an important role in the scholarship on the history of emotions, sensibilities and mentalities, either as an inspiration or as a point of departure, inspiring some and irritating others. Along with Johan Huizinga (1924/1996) and Lucien Febvre (1938/73), he argued vigorously for the importance in social science of taking sufficient account of human psychology and subjective experience, and one way or another it is difficult to engage in the history of emotions without at least referring to his ideas and arguments. For many cultural historians his work on court society and the civilizing process is a useful stimulus to their own particular concerns (e.g., Burke, Harrison and Slack 2000; Spierenberg 1991)

Lately, however, the references to Norbert Elias’s work in the writing on the history of emotions frequently assume, more or less, the following form: “Hitherto the history of emotions has been held under the conceptual sway of Elias’s theory of the ‘civilizing process’. Elias saw emotions as primitive and irrational, and regarded the process of ‘civilization’ (read: ‘modernisation’) in teleological terms as a one-directional mechanism revolving around the triumph of increased rational control over supposedly ‘primitive’ human emotions. For Elias the Middle Ages were populated by emotion-driven savages, to be gradually replaced, as ‘progress’ unfolds, by the modern, civilized, rational subject. What a fool! We all know that medieval people controlled their emotions and had their own particular forms of rationality, and how highly emotionally-driven us moderns can and have been. What about the Holocaust! Let us dispense with Elias’s old-fashioned way of thinking about the history of emotions, and discuss the much more sophisticated understanding that I would like to put before you, to take the history of emotions to a new level of conceptual sophistication”.

1 The work with which historians of emotions are most familiar, as The Civilizing Process, has had a convoluted history. It was first published in German in 1939, in 2 volumes, as Über den Prozess der Civilisation: soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen (Haus zum Falken). It was reprinted in 1969 (Francke Verlag), in 1976 (Suhrkamp) and a revised German edition was published in 1997 (Suhrkamp, as volume 3/l + II of the Norbert Elias Gesammelte Schriften). In English translation, it first appeared in separate volumes, volume 1 The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners (Urizen, Basil Blackwell) in 1978. Volume II was published in 1982 as The Civilizing Process: State Formation and Civilization (Basil Blackwell) and as The Civilizing Process: Power and Civility (Pantheon). The one volume edition was published I 1994 (Blackwell) and a revised edition in 2000 (Blackwell). The final revised edition constituting volume 3 of The Collected Works of Norbert Elias (CW) was published in 2012 by University College Dublin Press, titled On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations, which is a more precise translation of the original German, and the edition that is referred to here. Equally important are The Court Society, written in 1933 but first published in German in 1969 and in English in 1983, CW edition in 2006, Studies on the Germans, published in German in 1989 and English in 1996, CW edition in 2013, and The Society of Individuals, published in German in 1987 and English in 1991, CW edition in 2010.
Elias often functions, then, as a convenient straw man, the essentially misguided establishment figure from which we all, naturally, want to distinguish ourselves. Not everyone refers to Elias in this way, but it is a strong enough tendency to constitute an obstacle to understanding the possible contribution that Elias can make to research on the history of emotions.\(^2\) The aim of this chapter is to move beyond the concern with patricide to sketch a more precise picture not just of what Elias wrote and thought, but also of the difference between a more or less productive critical orientation towards his work.

This is not an argument to side-step the critiques of Elias’s ideas. There are good reasons to retain a critical sensibility in relation to Elias’s arguments and how they are formulated. His core books, *The Court Society* and *The Civilizing Process* were written in the 1930s and a great deal of scholarship has taken place since. Sometimes he drew a long bow in his reading of the sources, he could have paid more attention to how historical sources should be read, and many commentators have developed alternative explanations that are at least as persuasive, and often more so. However, if Elias is to be chastised at times for not being thorough enough in his reading of the available sources, the same point applies to our reading of Elias – he wrote quite a lot, and what is a legitimate object of criticism in one part of his writing will be often be approached quite differently, sometimes in a contradictory way, in another. The same rigour one applies to the reading of historical sources needs to be applied to the reading of Elias’s writings, and basing one’s understanding of Elias’s work on a two-line, perhaps two paragraph, summary of his 1939, two volume book *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* is simply not good enough. The points of criticism will often align perfectly with theoretical arguments that Elias made himself in other places, so that one is frequently, in fact, arguing with Elias against Elias\(^3\). There is also now a very considerable secondary literature which engages with many of the problems and lacunae in his work in ways that constitute a significant development of the manner in which his ideas and arguments can be read and understood, finding ways to address the problems in his arguments by reworking rather than simply rejecting them, and finding new salience in his ideas when applied to different sets of problems. This ever-expanding body of writing also needs to be taken into consideration in thinking about the role that Elias can play in the history of emotions.

A lot also depends on how one understands the field of ‘the history of emotions’. Elias himself would never have seen himself as a ‘historian of emotions’, he was a sociologist who thought that sociology could only be undertaken properly by looking at long-term processes (hence the occasional use of the term ‘process sociology’ to refer to his style of sociological thought (van Krieken 2001), and that a central aspect of that historical sociology had to be a grasp of how human psychology – he used the term *habitus* – had changed in relation to changes in social structures. I suspect he would have regarded the strong version of history of emotions, such as the Stearns’ ‘emotionology’ (Stearns and Stearns 1985), where one looks at the history of particular emotions – anger, fear, and so on. – as a rather odd exercise, or at least a very constrained one. Elias was more concerned to frame his research

\(^2\) J. Carter Wood (2007) outlines nicely the problems with this sort of approach to Elias,

\(^3\) Johan Arnason first drew attention to ‘the scope for “arguing with Elias against Elias”’(1989, 50).
questions in broader terms. But if by ‘history of emotions’ one means ‘history that takes emotions seriously’, his work is highly relevant and very productive in working through the ways in which particular emotional communities are the product of changing social structures, as I will try to explain.

What does Elias mean by ‘the process of civilization’?
Elias’s starting point is to assert that human psychology and emotional disposition has a history, changing as social conditions change rather than remaining the same over time, and it is probably in this sense that he can be regarded as one of the founders of the history of emotions. When he started looking at etiquette books in the 1930s, he felt that they revealed something about human psychology – its changeability – that was alien to most contemporary psychology. He said that he pursued his research ‘with a clear awareness that it would be an implicit attack on the wave of studies of attitudes and behaviour by contemporary psychologists’. (Elias 1994, 54). With the exception of Freud and his followers, academic psychologists at the time ‘believed that one had to have someone in front of one here and now’ (Elias 1994, 54), in order to measure their behaviour and psychological processes, without any conception of how human behaviour might have changed over time. ‘The whole process of the transformation of people is hidden from view’ (1994, 54), and that was what he set out to correct. In this respect his concerns paralleled precisely those of Lucien Febvre, who also felt that the discipline of psychology as it stood in the 1930s was of little use in understanding the emotional disposition and cognitive categories of people in the past (1938/73, 5).

When Elias began writing, he thought that Europeans saw themselves as being at the pinnacle of the world, as exemplars of civilization. As Elias put it civilization had become a crucial part of Europeans’ sense of superiority over all other peoples in the world:

‘the consciousness of their own superiority, the consciousness of this ‘civilisation,’ from now on served at least those nations which became colonial conquerors, and therefore a kind of upper class to large sections of the non-European world, as a justification of their rule, to the same degree that earlier the ancestors of the concept of civilisation, *politesse* and *civilité*, had served the courtly-aristocratic upper class as a justification of theirs’ (2012, 57)

He titled his book ‘the process of civilization’ precisely in order to say that whatever could be said to be the character or *habitus* of people today had to be seen as the outcome of a long-term historical process, rather than the natural constitution of a nation or cultural group. A large part of his motivation in writing *On the Process of Civilization* was precisely to come to a better understanding of the brutality of the Nazi regime, since ‘one cannot understand the breakdown of civilised behaviour and feeling as long as one cannot understand and explain how civilised behaviour and feeling came to be constructed and developed in European societies in the first place’ (2013, 445-6).
To use the Foucauldian term, he was interested in the *genealogy* of what we now understand, experience and feel, either consciously or unconsciously, as being ‘civilized’, as not being barbarians, proper human beings deserving of recognition and respect, not just for its own sake, but also in order to understand... how and under what conditions human beings satisfy their individual or group needs ‘without reciprocally destroying, frustrating, demeaning or in other ways harming each other time and time again in their search for this satisfaction’ (2012, 31). He wanted to treat the modes and norms of conduct and emotional disposition that we are familiar with today as social rather than natural or biological, to reveal their history and their intimate connections with broader social, political and economic lines of development, and it was this assemblage of developments linking the macro level of social, political and economic structures with the micro level of psychological and emotional orientation that he called ‘the process of civilization’.

For Elias this self-perception of ‘being civilized’ could only be explained in terms of the linked development of social structures and our psychological and emotional make-up, or *habitus*. He rejected the idea that one could distinguish between ‘society’ and ‘the individual’ and then talk about the relationship between them; this was the understanding in Talcott Parson’s (1937)*The Structure of Social Action* and its distinction between ‘personality’ and ‘the social system’. For Elias, society could only be a ‘society of individuals’ (Elias 2010), and individuals only existed in their relationships with each other in more or less complex social figurations characterized by shorter or longer, more or less dense ‘chains of interdependency’.

It is worth pausing briefly beside the concept of *habitus*, these days often incorrectly attributed to Pierre Bourdieu (1990). It was a central concept in Elias’s writings, but also more generally in early sociological thinkers like Durkheim and Weber, who had an appreciation of the importance of the psychological formation of individuals in explaining social life. 4 Durkheim, for example, argued that, ‘it is not enough to direct our attention to the superficial portion of our consciousness; for the sentiments, the ideas which come to the surface are not, by far, those which have the most influence on our conduct. What must be reached are the habits...these are the real forces which govern us.’ (Durkheim 1956, 152 cited in Camic 1986, 1052). One can just as usefully use the term ‘habit’, of which habitus is simple the Latin form, and Charles Camic (1986) points out that a major defect in post-classical sociological thought is to reduce all individual conduct to reflective action, discounting the possibility of *unreflective*, that is, habitual action, which the early sociologists saw a central aspect of how human beings actually conduct themselves in social life. The simplest version of habit would be the movements of a trained dancer or an experienced footballer – the success of their engagement with their physical tasks depends precisely on the ‘automation’ of most of their elements, the embedding of movements and responses in their physical and psychic memory banks. A dancer who reflects on the mechanics of how to do a pirouette will do a very poor one – that’s what beginners do. More generally, as Camic remarks, habit refers to ‘the durable and generalized disposition

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4 See also Marcel Mauss (1973) on ‘techniques of the body’.
that suffuses a person's action throughout an entire domain of life or, in the extreme instance, throughout all of life-in which case the term comes to mean the whole manner, turn, cast, or mold of the personality' (1986, 1046). This is what Elias meant by the term habitus, which he also referred to with the term 'second nature' (i.e. socially developed orientations, inclinations and dispositions which are so deeply embedded that they experienced ‘as if’ they were rooted in nature), which was ‘an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control’ (2012, 406)

**Court society**

A central element of Elias’s understanding of the civilizing process is his account of court society and the particular model of emotional regulation which it elicited from its participants, and which he argues eventually spread throughout the rest of society, albeit alongside other models. For the purposes of identifying how Elias’s ideas can be drawn upon in the history of emotions, *The Court Society* (Elias 1969/2006) – his Habilitationsschrift, written in 1933 - might in fact be a better place to start than *On the Civilizing Process*. The Western European aristocratic elite were being buffeted by a variety of political, social and economic forces from the 16th century onward, the opportunities to exercise violence as a competitive strategy were disappearing, requiring new techniques to establish distinction and one’s place in the social hierarchy. Clothing, gesture, manners, taste, verbal expression, wit, dancing skill were all utilised to express distinction and status. As Stefan Breuer put it, ‘Observation of self and others attained a previously unknown intensity, psychological warfare became indispensable weapons in the competition for prestige’. It was not a matter of emotion giving way to rationality, but of regulating them, carefully considering when, where and how the passions would be satisfied (Vowinckel 1983, 95). This was for Elias a corrective to Max Weber’s account of the Protestant ethic, which was essentially concerned with the moral orientation and affective disposition of the bourgeoisie, which Elias felt could not be properly understood without taking into consideration the emotional sensibility that was being opposed, that of the aristocracy. In addition, Elias felt it was a mistake to see the psychological orientation developed in court society as having been left behind in the process of modernisation, and that it continued to place a role in contemporary society. As he put it, ‘aristocratic court society developed a civilising and cultural physiognomy which was taken over by professional-bourgeois society partly as a heritage and partly as an antithesis and, preserved in this way, was further developed’ (2006, 44).

For Elias, as for Weber, ‘rationality’ refers to the calculation of the balance between short-term desires and emotional inclinations and the longer-term consequences of human action. The more the balance is weighted towards the latter, the more ‘rational’ the behaviour, but there remain a wide variety of ways in which that relationship can be calculated (Weber 1930, 77-8), and for Elias there was a significant difference between the rationality of court society and that the world occupied by the bourgeoisie. The first difference revolved around the question of ‘authenticity’ – the extent to which the outward display of one’s feelings and thoughts was meant to correspond to one’s inner emotional and cognitive state. In court society, it was acceptable, indeed a requirement that they did not correspond to each other, emotional expression was to be harnessed to the pursuit of
strategic aims, the rules of politeness and civility. In bourgeois society, in contrast, such a disposition was denounced as hypocrisy, and a high moral value was placed on the genuineness of one’s emotional communications.

The second difference concerned what was regarded as the kind of long-term interest to which one ought to be orientated. For the bourgeoisie, it was the acquisition of economic capital, so that emotional expression was regulated in terms of longer term financial gains and losses. Time is money, and thus so is time expended (‘wasted’) on emotional expression which gets in the way of accumulating economic capital. In court society, however, the concern is with the acquisition, accumulation and retention of symbolic capital, making identity and existence deeply representational, depending on constant display, exhibition and on-going performance of one’s status.

In Elias’s words:

Bourgeois-industrial rationality is generated by the constraint of the economic mesh; by it power-opportunities founded on private or public capital are made calculable. Court rationality is generated by the constraint of the elite social mesh; by it people and prestige are made calculable as instruments of power. (2006a, 121)

In court society social relationships and emotional dispositions were thus organised around competitive struggles for distinction and the symbolic representation of one’s status and prestige. Elias observed that the deliberate management of one’s emotions was crucial to success in such struggles. The ability to conceal one’s ‘real’ feelings was a key element of power relations in court society, because:

....affective outbursts are difficult to control and calculate. They reveal the true feelings of the person concerned to a degree that, because not calculated, can be damaging; they hand over trump cards to rivals for favour and prestige. Above all, they are a sign of weakness; and that is the position the court person fears most of all. In this way the competition of court life enforces a curbing of the affects in favour of calculating and finely shaded behaviour in dealing with people. (2006, 121)

One could say that court society was marked by an absence of a distinction between the public and the private, making all one’s ‘private’ feelings grist for the mill of one’s public life, whereas the middle-class professional was able to keep the two spheres separated,

Elias’s analysis of court society also has a contribution to make to a ‘history of the present’, in the sense of an understanding of the historical roots of the emotional dimension of contemporary social life. Although the self-image of modern individuals may be that they are rational and good at controlling their emotions, perhaps to excess, the organisation of
power relations around the representation of social prestige still plays an important role in contemporary societies. As Elias put it:

Despite their formal organisational framework based on written contracts and documents, which was developed only in rudimentary form in the state of Louis XIV, in many organizations of our time, even industrial and commercial ones, there are rivalries for status, fluctuations in the balance between groups, exploitation of internal rivalries by superiors, and other phenomena that have emerged in the study of court society. But as the main regulation of human relationships in large organisations is formalised in a highly impersonal manner, such phenomena usually have a more or less unofficial and informal character today. In court society we therefore find quite openly and on a large scale many phenomena that exist below the surface of highly bureaucratised organisations. (2006, 152)

Elias’s analysis of court society can thus be approached as revealing the historical foundations of the emotional underbelly of overtly instrumentally-rational organisational life.

He saw the structure of social life among the European elite, in court society, as the institutional core of the process of civilisation, with the dynamics of court society producing a particular kind of psychological and emotional disposition and code of conduct. The basic psychological principle of court society was that one’s conduct and emotional expression need to be regulated in the service of maximising one’s competitive position in an increasingly complex and volatile network of social relations. For Elias court society displayed the emergence of a form of mutual and self-observation which he referred to as a specifically ‘psychological’ form of perception, and which we would today refer to as reflexive self-awareness. As he put it:

The new stage of courtesy and its representation, summed up in the concept of civilité, was very closely bound up with this manner of seeing, and gradually became more so. In order to be really ‘courteous’ by the standards of civilité, one was to some extent obliged to observe, to look about oneself and pay attention to people and their motives.....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 Ages. (2012, 85- 86)

Other observers of early modernity have come to like-minded interpretations. Stephen Greenblatt (1980), for example, drawing on different sources, makes a similar comment about the Renaissance using the concept of ‘self-fashioning’, referring to ‘an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process’ (1980, 2) in the 16th century. He emphasises that this kind of attitude toward the self had been present among the elite in the Ancient world, but that Christianity leaned more
towards imitation of Christ and regarded an engagement with the shaping of identity with suspicion. The behavioural change accompanying the Renaissance had self-fashioning at its heart, and ‘it describes the practice of parents and teachers; it is linked to manners or demeanour, particularly that of the elite; it may suggest hypocrisy or deception, an adherence to mere outward ceremony; it suggests representation of one’s nature or intention in speech or actions. (1980, 3)

The Process of Civilization
Elias’s underlying argument in On the Process of Civilization is that the web of relationships and interdependencies within which people are located has, to begin with in Western European societies like Germany, France and England, gradually become increasing complex and dense, and that one can observe the effect this has had on people’s relationship to their emotions, on what it means to be a ‘person’. The broad formula that he articulates is that the balance between external and internal constraint can be seen to move, gradually but not necessarily evenly, towards the latter, that the unconscious internal mechanisms of self-regulation come to take on greater and greater salience in comparison to the external mechanisms of social control. Elias referred to this increasing self-regulation as a process of ‘psychologization’ and ‘rationalization’, because it revolved around the growing reflexive understanding of our own actions, those of others, their interrelationships and their consequences. ‘The web of actions grows so complex and extensive,’ wrote Elias, and ‘the effort required to behave ‘correctly’ within it becomes so great, that beside the individual’s conscious self-control an automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control is firmly established’ (2012, 406) Although one can say that individuals in all societies and cultures internalise a certain set of habitual behaviour patterns, or an ethical disposition towards drives and emotions that remains in place in the absence of external controls, Elias’s argument is that as social structures become more complex and differentiated, this will be reflected in the complexity of individuals’ apparatus of self-management.

When Elias looked at successive French etiquette manuals, he observed a gradual shift in their content over time. The concerns characterizing early etiquette manuals either disappeared from view, suggested they had become culturally and psychologically self-evident, and new concerns appeared in later editions. Gradually more and more aspects of human behaviour become regarded as ‘distasteful’ and ‘removed behind the scenes of social life’, and the standard applied to emotional expression, bodily functions, table manners, forms of speech and, above all, violence and aggression, became slowly more sophisticated, and Elias speaks of increasing thresholds of shame, embarrassment and repugnance. Erasmus’s De civilitate morum puerilium (On Civility in Boys, 1530), was especially important for Elias’s account, a book which enjoyed very wide readership, with more than 130 editions, 30 in the first 6 years after publication (Elias 1939/2012, 62). For Elias the telling characteristic of the portrayal of everyday life and behaviour was how alien it was to a modern reader. It portrayed concerns – how to manage snot, how to eat from a common bowl, whether to put one’s whole hands into the dish of water presented to wash one’s hands before a meal, whether one licks one’s fingers, whether to offer a half-eaten
piece of meat to someone else - which today are either self-evidently something all children learn how to address, or simply disgusting. The emotional reaction of a modern person to Erasmus’s book was exactly what Elias wanted to explain – what transformations in our ‘emotional economy’ (Affektenhaushalt) had taken place in the intervening period, how should they be explained, and what relationship did they have with broader social, political and economic changes?

Two forces are of specific concern for Elias: state-formation, in particular the rise of monarchical absolutism (Elias 2012), and gradually increasing differentiation, complexity and size characterized by lengthening chains of interdependence. The monopolisation of the means of violence characterizing European state formation generated a requirement to exercise power in a variety of non-violent ways. Social success, he became increasingly dependent on ‘continuous reflection, foresight, and calculation, self-control, precise and articulate regulation of one’s own affects, knowledge of the whole terrain, human and non-human, in which one acted’ (Elias, 2012, 439). An important aspect of the state-formation process, the organisation of disparate village, towns, principalities and so on into the larger units that became nation-states, and the lengthening of the chains of interdependence has been what the Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan (1995), in his development of Elias’s account, has called ‘widening circles of identification’. The capacity for mutual identification is a crucial aspect of the emotional make-up of any group of human beings and their emotional relationships with each other, because the boundary between ‘us’ and ‘them’ tends to constitute the boundary for the exercise of violence and aggression, with humans feeling freer to exercise violence on those they regard as ‘other’. Identification also determines whether one is concerned about and thus emotionally affected by what happens to other people, or whether one remains indifferent. As de Swaan put it, citing Nico Frijda (1986), ‘No concern, no emotion’ (de Swaan 1995, 25).

Second, as European societies increased in social density, produced by a combination of population growth and urbanization, the networks of people that individuals would be interdependent with, no matter how fleetingly, become correspondingly wider and denser. He spoke of the ‘conveyor belts’ running through individuals’ lives growing ‘longer and more complex’, requiring people to ‘attune’ their conduct to the actions of others, and becoming the dominant influence on their existence, so that they are less ‘prisoners of their passions’ (2012, 413) and instead more captive to the requirements of an increasingly complex ‘web of actions’, particularly a demand for ‘constant hindsight and foresight in interpreting the actions and intentions of others’. This is how he formulated it:

The denser becomes the web of interdependence in which the individual is enmeshed with the advancing division of functions, the larges the social spaces over which this network extends, and the more they become integrated into functional or institutional units – so correspondingly the more threatened is the social existence of the individual who gives way to spontaneous impulses and emotions, the greater is the social advantage of those who able to moderate their affects, and the more strongly is each individual constrained from an early age to take account of the
effects of his or her own or other people’s actions on a whole series of links in the social chain. (2012, 408).

The ‘civilizing’ (Elias’s inverted commas) of behaviour means ‘the moderation of spontaneous emotions’, the extension of one’s temporal consciousness beyond the immediate present, paying greater attention to the chain of effects set in motion by one’s actions requiring greater self-reflection, and is part and parcel of the concentration of power and the means of violence in the state on the one hand, and the ‘lengthening chains of social action and interdependence’ (2012, 409) on the other. These two developmental processes produce particular kinds of pressures on individuals, which ‘tend to produce a transformation of the whole drive and affect-economy in the direction of a more continuous, stable and even regulation of drives and affects in all areas of conduct, in all sectors of life’ (2012, 412).

Elias’s own arguments concerning the reduction of violence have been the object of considerable criticism, about which more below, but it is worth pausing beside the observation that most empirical studies of the history of violence do agree that one can observe a gradual trend towards the overall reduction in physical violence between human individuals and groups. T.R. Gurr’s 1981 article was one the earliest examinations of the historical data on homicide and interpersonal violence, and although he has a number of concerns about the fragmentary character of the available evidence, his overall conclusion remains that, despite periodic upswings in violence for a decade or two, there has indeed been a long-term decline in interpersonal violence consistent with Elias’s arguments about the gradual transformation of emotional economies in the course of European history (1981, 342). Pieter Spierenberg (1984) demonstrated how public executions and cruel penal became decreasingly acceptable, in the context of a gradual decrease in tolerance of cruelty and the infliction of pain. Later Manuel Eisner (2001) filled out the picture with additional evidence, and similarly argues that it is clear that the increase in violence in the period after the 1960s was a lot like the post-war baby boom, a temporary reversal of a long-term downwards trend.

Robert Muchembled (2011) captures the prevailing view among historians of violence, arguing that although Elias’s explanations were often too generalized and simplified, requiring reworking and supplementation, but nonetheless agreeing that individual behaviour shifted from around 1650 from an habitual orientation towards violence towards ‘a system of norms and rules of politeness which devalued armed confrontation, codes of personal vengeance, excessively harsh hierarchical relationships and relations between the sexes and age groups’, resulting in ‘a veritable transformation of the collective sensibility with regard to homicide’ (Muchembled 2011, 2-3).

Processes of Decivilization

On the Process of Civilization was published in 1939, and it has often been remarked that this was not a particularly good time to be talking about civilization, when Western Europe was on the brink of descending into one of its more barbaric periods. Alvin Gouldner (1981)
once remarked, for example, drawing on the work of Randall Collins (1974), that while it may be true that European societies became more internally pacified with the emergence of centralised nation-states, with a reduction in what he calls ‘privately undertaken ferocity’ (p. 418), that type of violence ‘comes to be succeeded by other forms of violence, new forms of bureaucratic domination and of asceticism. Passionless, impersonal callousness, in which more persons than ever before in history are now killed or mutilated with the flick of a switch’. For Gouldner, this is what the civilizing process amounts to, ‘where there is guilt about personal ferocity yet an intensification of callousness; where killing occurs without personal rancour and the massacre of nations may be ordered without a frown’ (1974, 418; see also Bauman 1989, 28). Ian Burkitt has similarly argued that civilization should be seen as ‘an inherently ambivalent process, containing within itself the potential to unleash the forces it would label ‘barbaric’ on an unprecedented scale’ (1996, 142).

However Elias was not unaware of this problem: his own mother perished in, he thought, in Auschwitz, and in the preface to On the Process of Civilization he notes that the issues he was dealing were rooted not in scholarly concerns, but in ‘the experiences in whose shadow we all live, experiences of the crisis and transformation of Western civilization as it had existed hitherto, and the simple need to understand what this ‘civilisation’ really amounts to.’ (2012, 8). He noted that there had been a shift in the emotional response to mass killings over the course of human history, from regarding it as normal and more or less acceptable to experiencing it as abhorrent. As he put it:

The problem I set myself to examine was, then, to explain and to make comprehensible the development of personality structures and especially of structures of conscience or self-control which represent a standard of humaneness going far beyond that of antiquity, and which accordingly make people react to behaviour like that of the National Socialists...with spontaneous repugnance. (2013, 446)

This is where it is important to read beyond On the Process of Civilization and include his later thinking, especially in his book Studies on the Germans, where he deals directly with the Nazi regime. Elias had always allowed for the possibility that civilization might break down or temporarily reverse its long-term direction, and in Studies on the Germans he goes on to discuss the possibility that specific processes of state-formation produce either a ‘deficient’ process of civilization, or result in a clear process of decivilization encouraging the more widespread manifestation of brutal and violent conduct (Mennell 1990; Fletcher 1997; Dunning and Mennell 1998).

He also raised the possibility that civilization and decivilization can occur simultaneously, making precisely Gouldner’s point that the monopolization of physical force by the state, through the military and the police, cuts in two directions and has a Janus-faced character (2013, 188). He argued for the reversibility of social processes, and suggested that ‘shifts in one direction can give way to shifts in the opposite direction,’ so that ‘a dominant process directed towards greater integration may go hand in hand with partial disintegration’ (2009,
4). The Hitler regime showed ‘processes of growth and decay go hand in hand and that the latter may outweigh the former’ (2013, 230).

Jonathan Fletcher (1995) has usefully highlighted the three most important criteria characterizing Elias’s conception of the process of civilization and the direction it might be taking or, if you like, a set of sub-processes: (a) ‘a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of the latter’, (b) ‘the development of a social standard of behaviour and feeling which generates the emergence of a more even, all round, stable and differentiated pattern of self-restraint’ and (c) ‘an expansion in the scope of mutual identification within and between groups’ (1995, 286). Any of these processes can go in the opposite direction, depending on particular circumstances, and for Fletcher such a reversal is likely to trigger similar reversals in the others and determine the overall direction of ‘the civilizing process’. My own view is that it is entirely possible for any of the three to take a different direction from the others, and this often explains the co-existence of civilized and decivilizing processes, or the ‘barbarism of civilization’ (van Krieken 1999), and the complexity of the emotional framing of particular groups within society – including, for example, women, the elderly, children, Indigenous people, migrants, refugees, particular religious groups, and particular ethnic groups.5

Elias himself pointed to the problem of how social structural conditions generating the emotions anxiety and insecurity would underpin decivilizing processes:

The armour of civilized conduct would crumble very rapidly if, through a change in society, the degree of insecurity that existed earlier were to break in upon us again, and if danger became as incalculable as it once was. Corresponding fears would soon burst the limits set to them today (2012, 576).

This question is an important aspect of the way in which the structuring of emotional dispositions operates in particular contexts, in relationships between specific groups in any given society. For example, in my own discussion of the treatment of Australian Aboriginal families and children by European Australians, I drew attention to the way in which the anxiety surround cultural and racial hybridity constituted, and still constitutes, a barrier to mutual identification, making possible the coexistence of civilized and barbaric behaviour. This is the dynamic underpinning many of the current reassessments of past practices such as the removal for adoption of the children of unmarried mothers, the treatment of children in institutional care, the displacement of British children to outposts of Empire like Australia and Canada. All of these practices and policies relied on a lack of mutual identification with the categories of persons being regulated and managed, and they appear questionable and ‘uncivilized’ today precisely because the capacity for identification has changed in the broader population, and we now ‘feel the pain’ experienced by those individuals, whether it be through reading about their experience, seeing a visual portrayal of it on film or in television, or hearing the testimony of those individuals themselves.

5 See de Swaan (1997) on processes of ‘disidentification’.
Problems and issues

The first concern with Elias’s analysis of the history of emotions relates to his account of how expressions of aggression and violence changed over time. I have written about this before (van Krieken 1989), so here I will just outline a selection of the arguments. There is little disagreement that the Middle Ages was a violent period, and that interpersonal violence decreased subsequently, but there are a number of problems with how Elias portrayed this change. The basic problem seems to be that he leaned towards a portrayal of medieval violence as somehow ‘natural’, despite his own theoretical principle that human behaviour, including emotions and psychological drives, should be understood primarily as socially produced. He spoke of the ‘aggressive impulse’ being ‘confined and tamed by innumerable rules and prohibitions that have become self-constraints’ (2012, 187), the ‘cruelty and joy in the destruction and torment of others’ only ‘breaking out’ during ‘times of social upheaval or where social control is looser’ (2012, 187).

The objection that almost all commentators have to this presentation of the question is that it overlooks the ways in which violence and aggression are socially produced by historically specific social, political and economic conditions. Johan Arnason suggests that the violence which dominated life in the early Middle Ages should be seen as the outcome of a specific interaction between the declining Roman Empire and the surrounding regions, ‘not simply the normal condition of a society which lacks both a complex division of labour and a centralized monopoly of violence’ (Arnason 1989, 54-5). The social framework for medieval ferocity was to a large extent that of a particular structuring of vengeance, feud, and the settlement of disputes. The violence which was progressively monopolised by the state was not simply, perhaps not even largely, that of knights, but more of the ordinary populace (Spierenburg 1984, 1-10). Indeed it might have been knights who were the most self-disciplined in the expression of their aggression, in comparison with the rest of the population.

In relation to knightly violence, the Dutch historian Benjo Maso (1982) has argued that aggressiveness among knights increased precisely with state-formation and the initial stages of the monopolisation of violence (Maso, 1982, 306). Before the 12th century the primary sources appear to indicate more respect for those who temper their courage with foresight and planning (Maso 1982, 307), but with the spread of a money economy, mercenaries were increasingly being used in the conduct of war, and this seriously threatened the position of knights. In the ensuing conflicts the knights were aided by the Church, which threatened mercenaries and those who employed them with excommunication, and this in turn gave knights even more excuse to kill any they came into conflict with. As Maso puts it:

The impulsiveness which medieval knights appear to display to our eyes did not derive in general from a lack of self-discipline, but was a carefully cultivated characteristic with which aristocratic warriors tried to distinguish themselves from the lower classes they saw as threatening them. What Elias calls a desire for
aggression could with equal justification be called a pressure towards aggression (Maso 1982, 322).

Knightly violence was thus itself a product of a specific set of social conditions. We should note that Elias does say as much himself when he remarks that ‘violence was inscribed in the structure of society itself’ (Fontaine 1978, 248), and that ‘to a certain extent, the social structure even pushed its members in this direction, making it seem necessary and practically advantageous to behave in this way’ (Elias, 2012, 189). However runs contrary to the terms he otherwise used to portray medieval violence as being characterised by a positive desire for violent cruelty awaiting domestication through state formation and the monopolisation of physical force. Human violence is a product of specific social conditions, and state formation itself can and does encourage the controlled expression of sadism, cruelty and aggression.6

Most of the problems with Elias’s portrayal of the Middle Ages, and the source of most of the irritation among medieval historians, can be traced back to the step he took of treating the Middle Ages as his empirical and conceptual starting point, saying, for example, that ‘it is necessary first to obtain a clearer picture of how the behaviour and emotional life of Western peoples slowly changed after the Middle Ages’ (2012, 4). This almost inevitably locked him into framing medieval emotional expression as somehow ‘natural’ and ‘pre-social’, making it harder to conceive of human behaviour at that time as itself the product of particular social conditions.

**How different are we?**

A second question concerning how Elias can be read concerns a fundamental opposition running through much of Western social, cultural and political thought, between those who lean towards seeing all human beings as more or less similar to each other, and those who emphasise the differences between distinct groups. The latter orientation can relate either to differences at a particular point in time, say between cultural groups, or differences across history.

In his five-volume critique of the ‘myth of the civilizing process’, one of Elias’s strongest critics, the German anthropologist Hans-Peter Duerr (1988; 1990; 1993; 1997; 2002), suggests that although Elias set out to critically analyse the European self-perception of what it means and feels like to be civilized, in fact he ends up sharing the same presumption of superiority and progress, and that the concept of the process of civilization is a *myth*, in the strongest sense of that term. Duerr argues that if we agree that human sexual relations are always socially regulated and subjected to some patterned set of rules and norms, then this will universally produce some sort of division between public and private bodily domains, with the private domain constituting the focus of social regulation. For Duerr the kind of lack of restraint of sexual impulses which Elias seems to observe in the Middle Ages

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6 Eisner (2011, 632) also argues that violence is the product precisely of strong communal bonds, declining with the rise of individualism.
is simply impossible, because the patterned family relations which existed at the time required at least some set of rules governing what one could or could not do in the sexual realm.

Duerr’s arguments draw our attention to the fact that Elias was actually pursuing two distinct kinds of argument that get conflated. On the one hand, Elias pointed to the change in the form of the restraint exercised over our psychological and emotional dispositions, in shifting from external to internal constraint. But he also suggested that the restraint became more effective, in that individual impulses and desires became more effectively subordinated to the requirements of ever more complex and differentiated social relations characterized by lengthened chains of social interdependency. Duerr has no problem with the first, but he disputes vehemently the second. On the contrary, he argues that since ‘the people in small, easy to survey ‘traditional’ societies were far more closely interwoven with the members of their own group than is the case with us today,’ this means that ‘the direct social control to which people were subjected was more unavoidable and air-tight’ (1988, 10; also 1993, 26-7).

Duerr’s critique chimes with the Reinhard Bendix’s (1952) of ‘the fallacy of attributing to character structure what may be part of the social environment’, as well as ‘the temptation of attributing to the people of another culture a psychological uniformity which we are unable to discover in our own’ (1952, 301). For Bendix there was no necessary or essential congruity between prevailing social institutions and cultural forms on the one hand, and ‘the psychological habitus of a people’ on the other, and that people may behave in particular ways ‘in spite of as well as because of, their psychological disposition’, for a range of reasons including fear and apathy (1952, 297). In Bendix’s view (1952, 302), discussing Elias in particular, specific historical conditions may favour one type of emotional disposition over another, but without reaching very deeply into those emotional dispositions, so that all that really matters is the history of the social conditions eliciting particular kinds of emotional dispositions, rather than the history of those dispositions themselves. Similarly writers like Nikolas Rose argue that the important topic is not the history of human psychology itself, but of ‘the intellectual and practical instruments and devices enjoined upon human beings to shape and guide their ways of ‘being human’(1996, 300).

The issue has been summarised usefully in Craig Pritchard’s (1999) sketch of the differences between theorists of ‘governmentality’ influenced by Foucault, like Rose, and post-marxists more influenced by psychoanalysis. He points out that writers like Stuart Hall (1996) are critical of Foucault’s ‘flat’ or ‘thin’ ontology in which people are inserted relatively smoothly into whatever regime of governance happens to have emerged, whereas Hall would rather treat human psychology as relatively ‘thick’, constituting less malleable ‘material’ that is more stable over time and resistance to changes in social context. In general terms Elias saw human emotional orientations in relatively ‘thick’ terms – how they have changed over time is precisely what he wanted to examine. However, we are also left dangling by his observations about decivilizing processes and the ease with which ‘the armour of civilized
conduct’ would ‘crumble’ under particular social conditions, leaving the actual stability and depth of psychological and emotional orientations a still unresolved open question.

**Decivilisation: does the analysis work?**

A third central criticism of Elias has always been his neglect of the possibility of simultaneous but contradictory social processes. Until he started analysing processes of decivilization, it was fair to say that he neglected the ‘dark’ side of civilisation, and his inclination towards elegant simplicity made it difficult to see the dialectical nature of civilisation and the possibility of different, perhaps opposing, processes developing at different levels of any given social figuration. Stefan Breuer (1991), for example, draws attention to the ‘negative side of functional differentiation’, the effects of the organisation of capitalist societies around the logic of the market. Although longer chains of interdependence may demand greater foresight and calculation as Elias suggests, markets also display ‘a dimension of coincidence and anarchy, which undermines the calculability of individual action’ (Breuer 1991, 405). Market competition does not simply produce ever-larger and better integrated ‘survival units’, argues Breuer, it also generates ‘the atomization of the social, the increasing density and negation of all ties - asocial sociability’ (Breuer 1991, 407). Ian Burkitt remarks along similar lines that lengthening networks of interdependence can in fact reduce mutual identification and that ‘sections of the population can then be persecuted, discriminated against, or even killed, while the central features of ‘civilization’ remain intact’ (1996, 147).

The concept of decivilization does respond in some ways to this criticism, but Breuer finds that it does not go far enough, because he believes that Elias still sees processes of decivilization as distinct from civilizing processes. Following Adorno and Horkheimer’s (1979) concept of the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ Breuer suggests a more dialectical conception of civilization as itself producing its own dark side, of civilization and decivilization as different sides of the same coin, always developing hand in hand (1991, 414). There still seems to be a need for a more dialectical understanding of social relations and historical development, one which grasps the often contradictory character of social and psychic life. This applies both in relation to social relations and the conflicting consequences of state societies organized around the logic of the market, as well as in relation to psychic processes and the contradictory dynamics between our affects, desires and impulses and the requirements of social life.

**State-formation and beyond**

Fourth, Elias’s concentration on the connections between state-formation and civilizing processes suggests two alternative modes of analysis, the first of which reflects on different aspects of social organization - other than state formation - which might also support processes of civilization. These can include the form taken by family life and religious belief systems, and broaden our view of the ‘changes in social structure’ to include features of

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7 An excellent example of this kind of more dialectical re-working of the concept of the process of civilization is Christopher Powell’s (2011) analysis of genocide and civilization.
social life beyond the formation of particular types of political regimes. Studies of state-less societies such the Dutch anthropologist H.U.E. van Velzen’s (1982) of the Djuka in Surinam, for example, tend to find similarly ‘self-constrained’ forms of emotional management. The Aucaners themselves are convinced of the sophistication of their own civilization, regarding Bakaa (Whites, but really all outsiders) as generally barbaric: ‘rude, childish, subject to bouts of passion’. They refer to ‘the Bakaa’s indiscretion, but also their inability to suppress emotions and the inept way in which they conduct human relationships’ (1982, 247). In Djuka society one regulates and manages feelings and emotions in a quite stable and precise manner, and for van Velzen the absence of a central state means that Elias’s explanatory relationship between state formation and civility cannot be sustained. My own argument (van Krieken 1989) is that this can be approached as a rejection of the strong version of Elias’s argument – stable self-control is closely tied to state-formation – while still supporting a weaker version of it – stable self-control is closely tied to particular social conditions – when one expands the field of vision to include the structure and dynamics of family life and the institutions put in place for the education of children. Self-restraint develops in the course of every individual’s lifetime, particularly their early childhood, making family life and child-rearing precisely the arena in which the linkage between social conditions and personality structure takes place.\(^8\)

Dilwyn Knox (1991) has also pointed out the problems attached to overlooking the sources of changed forms of emotion management in religious institutions and practices, arguing that one of the key texts upon which Elias relies for his understanding of how behavioural norms shifted, Erasmus’s De civesitate, was anchored not in court society, but in the codes of comportment written by clerics and religious since the 13\(^{th}\) century, which Erasmus was essentially adapting for a secular reading by the laity. The important development in Erasmus’s thinking was that he based his arguments on reason and the importance of rationality in distinguishing humans, and their piety, from animals, and urban citizens from peasants, rather than on the authority of scripture. In relation to manners, writes Knox,

...the important distinction for Protestants, as for Erasmus, was not between court and inferiors anxious to scale a social ladder. It was instead the distinction between humans and those lower down the chain of being, the irrational animals - very much more familiar companions of all Europeans in the sixteenth century than today - or those, like peasants, whose comportment differed little from that of the beasts with whom they lived (1991, 124).

From this perspective the foundations of the increasing internalisation of self-constraint were much broader than Elias’s emphasis on the interpersonal dynamics of court society would suggest. This is not necessarily fatal to Elias’s account, court society did have its role to play, but Knox’s analysis highlights how it was only one source of change among many, and she is right to say that ‘whereas Elias portrayed religious and clerics as passive

disseminators of courtly norms,’ it is more accurate to say that ‘clerics and religious promoted rules rooted in their own traditions’ (1991, 129).

Civilizing offensives versus civilizing processes
Finally, Elias places a strong emphasis on the unplanned nature of social change, the independence of processes of social development from organized and deliberate human action. Even though he said ‘what is interesting is the interweaving of an unplanned process and human planning’, the weight of his analysis lies on the former. When Roger Chartier speaks of self-discipline and emotional management as having been ‘instituted’ by the state (1989, 16), he is actually using a logic which is very different from Elias’s, where the emphasis is placed on the requirements of particular types of social figuration. This has the effect of placing in the background the organized interventions of powerful social groups into the form and direction of civilizing processes. Most social historians, for example, paint a picture of European history in which diverse groups of lawyers, inquisitors, clergy, judges, entrepreneurs, military leaders, and so on, played an active and constitutive role on shaping history, in addition to being driven in particular directions by abstract social forces (Mitzman 1987; Delumeau 1977; Muchembled 1985; Oestreich 1982). A central concern for those drawing on Elias’s social theory is thus an understanding of how to engage with the distinction between civilizing processes and civilizing offensives (van Krieken 1990a). When Arthur Mitzman says, then, that the concept of ‘the civilizing offensive’ is ‘of course, derived from Norbert Elias’ (1987, 682), this is a misapprehension – in Elias’s conception of the process of civilization, it is a much heavier emphasis is placed on requirements emanating from increased competition and social interdependency. Kitty Verrips (1987) has also pointed out that Elias’s argument is more inclined towards seeing elite groups precisely as not wanting lower social groups to imitate their behaviour, since it would undermine their status and distinction, and that the force leading towards the spread of emotional and behavioural codes were more ‘bottom-up’ with aspiring social groups wanting to improve their social status. ‘After all.’ Wrote Verrips, ‘why should people in power go to any trouble to bridge the gap with people with less power by imposing their own behavioural standards on them?’ (Verrips 1987, 4)

A useful way to frame this issue is to reflect on the body of work that in the first place confirms Elias’s portrayal of the overall transformation of habitus and emotional orientation, the writings on the history of discipline. Foucault and Weber, for example, agree that one can trace a developmental trend towards increasing self-discipline, a regularisation and routinisation of the psyche, so that one’s inner ‘economy of the soul’ coordinates with the outer economy of an increasingly bureaucratised, rationalised and individualised social world. Their work converges on the notion that there has been ‘societalization of the self’, a transition in European history from a social order based on external constraint to one increasingly dependent on the internalisation of constraint (van Krieken, 1990a; 1990b). E.P. Thompson, for example, shows how self-restraint came to be internalised in the development of time-discipline among English workers, so that ‘the transition to mature industrial society entailed a severe restructuring of working habits -
new disciplines, new incentives, and a new human nature upon which these incentives could bite effectively’ (1967, 57)

For the German historian Gerhard Oestreich, too, the 'disciplining of society' stood at the centre of the historical stage, arguing that the expansion of state power depended not so much on rationalization, centralization and institutionalization, as on the 'spiritual, moral and psychological changes which social discipline produced in the individual, whether he was engaged in politics, army life, or trade', changes which were 'far more fundamental, far more enduring than the institutional changes in politics and administration (Oestreich 1982, 156). He traces the origins of social discipline to the police ordinances of the early modern West European town councils, which were a response to the problem of social order generated by the population drift from the countryside to the city generated a problem of social order, and the failure of existing forms of social organization, particularly the Church, in maintaining social order in the face of these changes. The newcomers had to adapt to urban lifestyles 'for which rural customs and traditions were an inadequate preparation' (Oestreich 1982: 156), and Oestreich argued that the increasing density of urban population itself 'led to stresses which had not been felt hitherto and which lowered the threshold of tolerance towards the unrestricted development of personal lifestyles and towards diversity and deviation from a certain norm' (Oestreich 1982, 156).

For all these writers there is a 'translation' of Elias's 'requirements' of lengthening chains of interdependency into specific institutional forms and practices: Protestant asceticism, rational bureaucracy, regulatory mechanisms, and disciplinary techniques. It is the very particular, disciplinary nature of this translation process from the sixteenth century onwards that Weber and Foucault consider so important, and which Elias de-emphasises in favour of the notion of a civilizing process. Both share Elias's sense of self-discipline emerging as a strategy of self-advancement for ruling social groups, the court aristocracy, the administrative and legal elite, the bourgeoisie, but they move in a quite different direction when it comes to the question of its emergence among the working class. At that point it becomes more a matter of a coercive imposition of discipline through either human agency or historically specific social institutions: state intervention, religious ideology, bureaucracy, work organisation, disciplinary techniques, which defined what constitutes the proper organisation of the soul, and constituted the mediating instance between the 'requirements' of the social figuration and changes in individual behaviour and social interaction. From this perspective, the civilizing process can thus be regarded more accurately as a project, as 'a conscious proselytizing crusade waged by men of knowledge and aimed at extirpating the vestiges of wild cultures - local, tradition-bound ways of life and patterns of cohabitation' (Bauman 1987, 93).

Against this one can raise questions about the effectiveness of such strategies and institutions, which will lead one full circled back to Elias, who would say that it is only when people's habitus has changed so that people are sufficiently responsive to such strategies that they really take hold. One can turn to E.P. Thompson's (1967) analysis of time discipline as an example – all the attempts to eliminate 'Saint Monday' and get workers to pay attention to the clock only really began to take hold, one could argue from Elias's
perspective, once a range of other elements of workers’ lives had fallen into place and exerted their own distinctive pressures on workers’ everyday lives.

**Conclusion – thinking with Elias**
Elias’s work is complex and multi-layered, sometimes expressing deeply suggestive ideas that can serve as foundations for a variety of studies of numerous related topics, and at other times relying on simplified formulations that drive the specialist, especially in medieval history, to distraction, only to become ever more irritating at some other point by declaring adherence to a theoretical principle that ought to have made the original formulation impossible. In this respect he is much like most of the ‘classical’ sociologists – Durkheim, Weber, Marx, Simmel – as well as Freud and more recently Foucault. Despite having significant reservations about the accuracy of their accounts, and being able to identify innumerable counter-examples, the basic conceptual framework remains extremely useful.

The ideas that human emotional expression is a central aspect of social life, that it changes over time, that these changes can usefully be connected with broader changes at the level of social, political and economic structures, that it is important to think in terms of very long-term processes, in terms of centuries rather than decades, that court society stimulated the emergence of a distinctive emotional style and psychological orientation which continues to the present day, that emotional life is significantly shaped by the varying ways in which humans are linked together in webs of interdependencies, are all ideas worth pursuing and developing in the history of emotions. For example, his account of how the emotional dynamics of parent-child relations has been transformed over time, to bring about the ‘civilizing of parents’, provides a range of insights into the history of familial emotions (Elias…). One could argue that the appearance of fields like the sociology and history of emotions is itself a product of the civilizing process, a manifestation of the increased importance of emotion management as an outcome of increased competition and social differentiation (Wouters 1992).

This does not mean that one should regard Elias as any sort of final authority, he often breaks his own theoretical rules, there are many alternative explanations possible, there is lots of scope for reworking his analysis in the light of how it works in relation to new topics. This is exactly what is exciting and stimulating about his possible contribution. Our efforts are better expended pushing Elias’s analysis in new directions rather than focusing on proving him to be ‘wrong’. For example, Barbara Rosenwein’s criticisms (2002; 2007; Eustace et al 2012, 1493-4) are either easily deflected, often simply by referring to some other part of Elias’s work, or mere flesh wounds, nothing fatal. But what is interesting is her concept of ‘emotional communities’, because it highlights a different problem in Elias, his tendency toward a generalised and relatively homogenous view of *habitus* in any given historical period, despite his own sensitivity to the importance of group tensions and differences (Elias and Scotson 2008) and the actual reliance of the logic of the civilizing process on inter-group dynamics. It would be a significant and useful revision of how the
problems he was concerned with can be addressed to place more overt emphasis on the multiplicity of emotional dispositions in any historical period.

Peter Burke once said of Elias's reception in cultural history that '[o]ne might sum up the reaction of cultural historians to the ideas of Elias by saying that they are often critical of his interpretation of history, but have come to find his social and cultural theory very good to think with (2008, 55). This is equally true of Elias and the history of emotions – his formulations will be more or less appropriate and useful for any particular topic in the field, but a critical engagement with them remains likely to be 'good to think with'.

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