

## Occidental self-understanding and the Elias-Duerr dispute: 'thick' versus 'thin' conceptions of human subjectivity and civilization

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### **Abstract**

It has become central to Occidental self-understanding to see Western European identities and forms of social relations as historically unique. This is true both in everyday, commonsense understandings of what it means to be a person in contemporary societies, and in social scientific studies of Western culture and society, especially in history and sociology. However, there are arguments against an overemphasis on the uniqueness of the modern *habitus*, and against the picture which is then drawn of 'the Other': the inhabitants of previous eras and other cultures. This paper will examine and assess the arguments against seeing the modern, civilized *habitus* as radically different from that of previous historical epochs and 'non-Western' cultures, and for a greater sensitivity to the continuities in the historical development of social relations and psychic structures. The discussion will focus on Hans-Peter Duerr's critique of Elias in order to identify the underlying conceptual issues running through all historical and comparative sociology which these debates bring to the surface in an exemplary way, particularly the distinction between 'thick' and 'thin' conceptions of human habitus and subjectivity.

It is by now well known that one of the most vigorous of Norbert Elias's critics has been the German ethnologist, Hans-Peter Duerr (Kellner 1995; Mennell and Goudsblom 1997), who has written a series of four books under the general title *On the Myth of the Civilizing Process* (Duerr 1988, 1990, 1993, 1997). Duerr's overall argument is that although Elias set out to *analyse* the self-perception of Western Europeans' civilized nature and demonstrate the social conditions underlying processes of 'civilization', he ended up taking on that self-perception largely as his own, and actually believed that human conduct has become considerably more civilized. Moreover, argues Duerr, what placed the ideas of Elias and his followers in close proximity to a colonial ideology was the apparent *attribution* of the technical and military dominance of Western Europe over much of the rest of the world to 'a superiority in the modelling of drive structure' (Duerr 1993: 12).

There have been a number of responses to Duerr's critiques of Elias, both by Elias himself (Elias 1988) and by a range of other commentators (c.f. Marx 1996). The tendency in the debate, however, has been towards a rather combative stance which has produced less of a scholarly exchange of ideas and more of a points-scoring exercise. While it is possible to respond to Duerr's work with counter-critiques of his use of evidence and argumentation, others can and have engaged in this task far more thoroughly than I am either willing or able to (e.g., Mennell and Goudsblom 1997; Pallaver 1989; Wouters 1994; 1997). I would instead like to argue that there is a 'core' to Duerr's arguments which deserve to be taken seriously, and that a proper engagement with this 'rational core' is important for both the more effective take-up of Elias's work in social science and social theory more broadly, and for an adequate understanding of Occidental civilization and its associated forms of subjectivity.

### **Civilization as myth**

Duerr suggests that there is far more which we have in common both with our historical predecessors and with other cultures than Elias admits, and he works to identify those similarities in human conduct. With respect to our relations to our bodies, for example, Duerr argued that:

...those who today laugh at a myth like that of Genesis have themselves done nothing other than mythologise history, and that this 'myth of the civilizing process' obscures the fact that, in all probability, in the last 40,000 years there have been neither wild nor primitive peoples, neither uncivilized nor natural peoples....and it is part of the *essence* of humans to be ashamed of their nakedness, however this nakedness may be defined historically. (1988: 12, my translation)

One central focus of Duerr's analysis then, is to draw attention to those features of human relations in all cultural and historical contexts which produce roughly similar forms of behaviour. For example, 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 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, and Duerr gathers a range of historical evidence in support this point, as well as ethnographic data to reinforce it for the cross-cultural dimensions of the argument.

Elias did maintain that he was only pointing to *relative* differences in self-restraint, that sexuality and violence was simply *less* restrained, and that there is no 'zero point' to civilizing processes, no culture or historical period where humans beings are not subjected to some form of social regulation. However, for Duerr this is a central inconsistency in Elias's work, since his portrayal of medieval social life often made it look almost totally unrestrained and free of any social regulation. Duerr draws attention to a number of passages in *The Civilizing Process* where Elias seemed to be saying, not that sexuality was less removed from public view, but not removed behind the scenes at all (Duerr 1990: 12).

Despite Elias's protestations to the contrary, the way *The Civilizing Process* was written often gives readers the impression that the Middle Ages were understood as the *beginning* of a process of civilization, rather than seeing medieval social relations and conduct as themselves the outcome of particular processes of social change. Franz Borkeneau (1938) made a similar point in his early review of the book, and more recently Johan Arnason has also suggested 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).

Much of Duerr's argument is organized around the overlap between two different types of argument in *The Civilizing Process*. On the one hand, Elias was arguing that the nature of the

restraint exercised over our bodies and psychic dispositions *changed in form*, from being based on external, social agencies, to being located far more within ourselves as self-restraint. On the other hand, he also suggested that in this movement from external to self-restraint, the restraint itself became more *effective*, 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. These two lines of argument are not necessarily the same: the first change could take place with little corresponding change in the effectivity of psychological restraint, and similarly the second change could occur with little accompanying change in the way psychological restraint is exercised. Duerr is particularly interested in the former possibility: that although there has clearly been a historical change in the way in which social and self-control operate, this does not mean that the further one goes back in time, the *less* controlled and restrained people have been.

On the contrary, Duerr 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). Whereas for Elias the lengthening chains of interdependence characterizing industrializing and urbanizing societies can result only in the demand for greater foresight and self-restraint, Duerr suggests that ‘associating with many other people also means...a lack of ‘bindedness’ and thus a relational freedom’ (1988: 11). Being bound to larger number of people thus means that breaches of norms and social deviance are ‘less consequential; the person concerned does not lose *the* face, but *one* of their faces’ (1993: 28). Duerr agrees that urbanization and the decline of feudal economic relations had made traditional forms of social control far less effective, and that the forms of social control which emerged from around the Reformation and Counter-Reformation were more effective than the older ones in some respects. However, in other senses, ‘a certain degree of porosity also arose, which

was unknown to the forms of social control in 'archaic' times and which gave people opportunities for freedom which they had never had before' (1990: 24).

Elias's own argument about the historical emergence of the *homo clausus* conception of human psychology in the course of the civilizing process can be summoned in support of Duerr here. As the distinction between the private, individual, psychological realm and the social realm intensifies, social norms can be experienced less and less as integral to one's identity, as 'external', and thus less thoroughly observed. Indeed, Elias's later comments on how the particularly German separation of the requirements of private conscience from those of social rules led to a willingness to engage in socially-sanctioned barbarism reinforce the significance of this point still further. In other words, the historical emergence of more sophisticated forms of self-control alongside, or at times instead of, forms of external, social control, does not in itself guarantee an isomorphism between them, which is what Elias seems to have assumed in *The Civilizing Process*, and then recognized as false in his examination of the Nazi regime in *The Germans* (1996). This is why Elias moved from concentrating exclusively on *the* civilizing process to include an analysis of processes of both civilization and *decivilization* (Mennell 1990; Burkitt 1996).

Duerr is extremely sceptical about the idea that our habitus and emotional economy is linked to greater social differentiation and lengthening chains of interdependence. Medieval villages and members of tribal societies are, for Duerr, subjected to considerably more restraint than inhabitants of a modern industrial city. They were all 'bound up in a much more intimate way in finely meshed social webs, integrated into consanguine and affinitive kinship groups, alliance systems, age, sex, occupational and neighbourhood groups, secret and warrior societies than people in modern societies' (1993: 26-7). Duerr argues that individuals were 'subjected to an essentially more effective and inexorable social control than today' (1993: 26). This does not mean that in specific historical contexts there may not appear situations of relative behavioural freedom, but Duerr attributes this to the transition process between one type of social regulation

and another, from the ‘village eye’ to the self-constraint of urban industrial societies. For Duerr, the intensification of self-control is less a product of any *increased* demands on individuals of more socially differentiated societies, and more the form of social regulation suited to social relations where one encounters a larger variety of ‘interaction partners’ from diverse social and cultural backgrounds.

### **Does habitus change? ‘Thick’ versus ‘thin’ conceptions of habitus**

Apart from Duerr, similar scepticism about the extent to which personality structure or habitus changes in the course of history can also be found in the work of Nikolas Rose, working in a very different theoretical tradition and with quite different empirical concerns.<sup>1</sup> Although Rose’s argument is primarily concerned with the idea of increasing individualism in European social life, its overall thrust is to question the very idea of human ‘psychology’ having a history. This is not because Rose sees human subjectivity in ahistorical terms, but because he believes that our historical efforts should be focused on something quite different:

...the practices within which, in our own times and in the past, human beings have been *made up as subjects*: the presuppositions about human beings that have underpinned them,

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<sup>1</sup> Also important here is Bendix’s critique 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). He suggested that 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).

the languages, techniques, procedures and forms of judgement through which human beings have come to understand and act upon themselves as 'selves' of a certain type. (Rose 1996: 296)

Rose thus does not see human habitus as an entity which develops and changes over time, but as 'a site of a multiplicity of practices or labours' (p. 300). Subjectivity is constituted not as a personality structure with a given form, but as 'discontinuous surface, a multiplicity of spaces, cavities, relations, divisions established through a kind of in-folding of exteriority' (p. 300). Rather than examining the history of human psychology, then, Rose suggest that we should instead examine 'the intellectual and practical instruments and devices enjoined upon human beings to shape and guide their ways of 'being human' (p. 300).

A useful way to understand the issue is to use a distinction which Craig Pritchard has recently posed in sketching the difference between theorists of 'governmentality' such as Rose, and post-marxists more influenced by psychoanalysis. Pritchard suggests that we can approach the problem in terms of 'assumptions about the relative *depth* or *thickness* of human material'. Pritchard argues that the position taken up by Rose, following Foucault, is to treat the 'material' making up human subjectivity as relatively 'thin', sliding over 'the complex texture of social life briefly moving in and out of the tiny folds and marking which allow 'I's to become 'me's before moving on'. Psychoanalytically informed observers, on the other hand, see human beings as having more 'depth', 'relatively immobile and recalcitrant', so that particular social relations become 'sedimented' into human habitus in a consequential way, so that the 'second nature' Elias describes as an 'automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control' is 'firmly established' (1994: 446). Essentially, both Duerr and Rose lean towards a 'thin' conception of human habitus, whereas Weber, Elias, 'depth' psychological theorists like the Frankfurt School and post-marxists see it as 'thicker', with a history, if not entirely of its own, then certainly as worth examining alongside the history of society, state, and economy.

In response to Duerr, then, one could argue that Elias has the majority of historical

social scientists on his side; if he was wrong about a historical development in habitus, then so too were Weber, Simmel, Horkheimer, Mannheim and a wide range of social historians. As David Garland summed up the issue recently, there seems to be ‘a substantial body of historical evidence which would support the contention that something very like a civilizing process has indeed taken place, bringing about changes in sensibility and ultimately changes in social practice’ (Garland 1990: 233). However, Duerr and Rose would say that this is precisely the problem, that a certain orthodoxy has developed in the way we perceive European history which actually has the power of a mythology, persisting as an element of the structure of our thinking despite evidence to the contrary. Although Elias improves on a simplistic distinction between tradition and modernity (see Bendix’s 1967 critique) by posing a continuous process of development rather than distinct historical periods, the problem remains of *whether* human psychology today is really so different from that of earlier historical periods, and whether we are in fact studying social relations and practices (see Marx 1996; van Krieken 1989b).

## Conclusion

I would like to conclude by indicating a number of areas of Elias’s own thinking that provide a point of linkage between the two positions, and which in turn may point to a way past the conflict of perspectives. First, there is the tension in Elias’s own work about how *durable* habitus actually is in relation to social conditions, and whether a changed social context would rapidly produce a different habitus. In *The Civilizing Process* he declared that ‘the armor 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’ (1994: 253). However, in *The Germans*, and this is more consistent with his general perspective, he said that the emergence of brutalized and dehumanized behaviour within relatively civilized societies ‘always requires considerable time’, and argued that ‘terror and horror

hardly ever manifest themselves without a fairly long process in which conscience decomposes' (1996: 196).

The second is Elias's inconsistency about the degree of *correspondence* between habitus and social relations. Although in most of his work Elias clearly assumed a functional correspondence between the requirements of a set of social conditions and the habitus developed within people from childhood onwards, at some points he also posited a theory of possible 'lag' between social conditions and habitus, with social changes often moving faster and further than psychological structure (1996: 337).

Finally, many of the criticisms appear to arise in response to Elias's reliance on the concepts 'restraint' and 'constraint'. Elias's own theoretical position is that human habitus is socially constituted, but the notion of restraint, emanating from either outside or within an individual, implies the existence of some presocial 'nature' which requires restraining, despite his explicit argumentation against such a view. In order to capture the social *production* of subjectivity, desire and emotions, we appear to need a different concept. The German word which Elias originally used is *Zwang*, which can also mean 'compulsion', 'coercion' or 'obligation', and these concepts probably come closer to the reality of the relations between psychic and social life. Rather than speaking of a historical transition towards increasing self-*restraint*, then, it may be more meaningful to think in terms of the relations between social and self-*compulsion*, or *discipline* (see van Krieken 1989a; 1990), thus capturing the positive, productive aspects of the effects of social figurations on human habitus.

Taking up these conceptual and empirical issues with greater vigour may enable us both to go beyond the Elias-Duerr dispute itself, and to develop more consistent and meaningful conceptions of the cultural and historical specificity of Occidental subjectivity and self-understanding.

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