

APPROACHING THE STUDY OF CIVILIZATION: NORBERT ELIAS'S VIEW

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes and evaluates Norbert Elias's figurational approach to the study of civilization and the civilizing process in the context of other theorists, such as Guizot, Buckle, Burckhardt and Spengler. It delves into the semantics of the term "civilization", which is notoriously ambiguous and multifarious, by exploring its etymology, history, spread and utility in various linguistic contexts (French, German, English). It also takes into account the politics of civilization and ideological usage in the colonialist enterprise of European imperialism. Elias's original contribution to civilization studies turns out to be a uniquely figurational (or process-sociological) approach which views civilizations not as static but dynamic and developing. Societies move towards civilization through a civilizing process instigated by psycho- and sociogenesis. These processes gradually change society and how people perceive civility, etiquette and modes of morality. The civilizing process culminates into structured civilized behaviors that are closely related to the organization of Western societies into the form of states. Elias's theory of civilization has severe deficits, such as its neglect of religion (institutionalized or otherwise) and its limited generalizability due to its mere focus on Western civilization. However, his figurational approach is still highly valuable and may be fruitfully utilized for civilizational investigations.

Keywords: Civilization, Kultur, Norbert Elias, civilizing process, sociogenesis, psychogenesis, figurational sociology

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In contemporary discourse “civilization” is a much used, and oftentimes misused, term. It is employed to denote a variety of issues and might have multiple conceptional connotations in any particular application of the term, often confusing the debate, instead of clarifying it. That the concept of civilization is still very current, and also contested, is attested to by its manifold application in debates in current affairs, ranging from debates on immigration and integration, terrorism and radicalization, to citizenship and identity in plural societies. Some scholars even go so far as to say that we are experiencing an actual “clash of civilizations.”¹ In an age of globalization, in which our societies are ever increasing in plurality, the question of how to understand and define “our” civilization, vis-à-vis “their” civilization, seems to become ever more pertinent. All the more reason for the concept of civilization to be more properly addressed, analyzing it in detail and establishing how its utilization might bring more benefit and clarity to the debates in which the term is employed, instead of obscuring it.

As a matter of fact, civilization as a unit of study has been tackled by many scholars throughout history from a multiplex of disciplines and approaches. Scholars have differed as to how “civilization” should be defined, what are its exact contents, how it relates to other aspects of social reality, and what should be the best and most fruitful way to approach the study of civilization. In this paper I aim to survey how various scholars have answered these questions and how they have struggled to make sense of civilization as a unit of study.

The principle scholar I will focus on with more attention, as a more detailed example of such an approach, is the twentieth-century sociologist Norbert Elias, most famously known for his magnum opus *The Civilizing Process*, which is, I believe, of particular use because of the comprehensiveness of Elias’s approach, devoting a full study to the subject.² In addition, while written in the late thirties of the twentieth century, it still presents a very actual and current account of the study of civilization, which is evidenced by the resurgence of interest into the study of Elias’s thought in our contemporary times, in the form of publications on his thought

in general³ as well as studies that apply his theoretical framework and method.⁴ In fact, Elias’s works were predominantly unread and effectively ignored at the time when they were first published. It was only after the 1980s, when more and more translations of his works started to appear, that Elias started to gain more recognition.⁵ That being said, today Elias seems to finally have gained the recognition he deserved as a main social theorist amongst his peers, featuring such names as Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Karl Mannheim, and others, as attested to by such major contemporary scholars such as Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, who called him a “great sociologist.”⁶

In this paper, thus, I will elaborate on the thought of Norbert Elias in relation to the subject of civilization, comparing his approach with other theorists in the field of civilization studies in the process. First, I will delve deeper into the concept of civilization, as defined by various scholars, as well as by Elias himself. Then I will survey various approaches of the study of civilization, elaborating upon which theories were formulated in the field of civilization studies and placing Elias’s civilizational theory in the broader context of this field. Lastly, I will elaborate on some of the shortcomings Elias’s theory could be critiqued for.

I. CIVILIZATION AS A CONCEPT

As mentioned briefly above, civilization as a term has been used to denote different things and has encapsulated a large array of issues over time, contributing to the term’s ambiguity. As such, it is a word that has a huge “semantic and historical density,”⁷ but it is also notoriously

3 See for example Robert van Krieken, *Norbert Elias* (1998); Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction* (1999); Dennis Smith, *Norbert Elias and Modern Social Theory* (2001); and, more recently, Anette Treibel, *Die Soziologie von Norbert Elias* (2008); and Eric Dunning and Jason Hughes, *Norbert Elias and Modern Sociology: Knowledge, Interdependence, Power, Process* (2013). An edited volume was also devoted to the thought of Norbert Elias, including some fifteen essays from prominent scholars, called *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, edited by Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilly (2004). For a more critical study, see Richard Kilminster, *Norbert Elias: Post-philosophical Sociology* (2007).

4 For an example of the application of Elias’s theory and method in the field of organization studies, see Ad van Ijzerman, et al. (ed.), *The Civilized Organization: Norbert Elias and the Future of Organization Studies* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2002).

5 Robert van Krieken, *Norbert Elias*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 1.

6 Zygmunt Bauman. “The Phenomenon of Norbert Elias”, in *Sociology*, 13 (1979), 123.

7 Nauman Naqvi. “Civilization”, in *International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* (2nd ed.), ed. William A. Darity Jr. (USA: Macmillan Reference, The Gale Group, 2008), 557.

1 See for example Samuel P. Huntington’s controversial work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996). The main thesis of Huntington’s study is highly debatable, but still his work is a primary example of how the term “civilization” is employed in contemporary debates and Huntington’s work remains, perhaps, the most popularly quoted study in this regard.

2 Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations* (Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing, 2000, rev. ed.), originally published as *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation* (Basel: Haus sum Falken, 1939).

imprecise in its definition.⁸ An added confusion is that other words than civilization have been utilized in different contexts (cultural, geographical, linguistic, etc.) when speaking of what we would broadly consider “civilization” in the English language, such as the German *Kultur*. In fact, the word civilization is a Western invention, and a rather recent one at that.⁹ As such, the term was influenced by layers of ideological meaning, as I will elaborate on later. The distinction, though, between the “civilized” and the “barbarian” could be considered much older.¹⁰ In a sense human kind has always differentiated between “one” and the “other”, as would seem almost natural. We can trace this distinction to as early as ancient Greece.¹¹ That being said, Norbert Elias was acutely aware of the difficulty of the concept of civilization, as well as the multifarious types of usages of the word, as he devoted a full chapter in his *The Civilizing Process* to this issue.¹² But before going into his analysis of the concept, we will first delve into the history and etymology of the term, as well as how some other theorists in civilization studies dealt with the term.

A. Historical Use and Spread

Placing the word “civilization” in its historical context, it has been noted that its first use in the English language was during the early eighteenth century, limited to a legal context (a meaning that is out of use now).¹³ It only acquired the meaning which corresponds to our modern understanding of the term during the late eighteenth century, particularly during and after the French Revolution of 1789-1799, and even more extensively during the nineteenth century.¹⁴ As such it has also been connected to the rise of the historical consciousness of Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵ Although the roots of the concept may already be seen in the wake of the European expansion in the fifteenth century.¹⁶ But the idea of “civilization” reemerged in a more reinvigorated manner during the so-called “New World” discoveries and the “South Sea Explorations” of emerging European powers during

the eighteenth century, when they encountered the “primitive” peoples of the “New World”.¹⁷

The term's very first use (in its *modern* meaning) is generally attributed to Victor de Riqueti Mirabeau (1715-1789), who used it in his work *L'ami des Hommes* in 1756.¹⁸ In his book he says: “La religion est sans contredit le premier et le plus utile frein de l'humanité: c'est le premier ressort de la *civilisation*,”¹⁹ closely binding the phenomenon of religion to civilization.²⁰ Thus Mirabeau opened up a limited juristic term to more linguistic possibilities, broadening the term to refer to people in society who were “polished, refined, and mannered, as well as virtuous in their social existence.”²¹ From there on out the term spread throughout Europe and took on a life of its own.²² We encounter it in the Irish statesman and conservative philosopher Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* in 1790,²³ in the French historian and statesman François Guizot's *General History of Civilization in Europe* in 1828²⁴ and in the English historian Henry Thomas Buckle's *History of Civilization in Europe* in 1857,²⁵ to name just several examples of the numerous occurrences throughout Europe, which attests to the concept's great popularity. But the term also extends into modern times, most notable perhaps in Samuel Huntington's controversial work *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* in 1996, as well as in the work of our own thinker, Norbert Elias, in his *The Civilizing Process*.

Elias, on his part, while extensively analyzing German court behavior and middle class and court nobility in terms of changes in perceptions of civility, does not to a great extent delve into the history of the concept of civilization. Moreover, he does not seem to be aware of the history of the concept as described above; at least, he does not mention it explicitly, but very briefly in the context of the French counterpart of the term, *civilisation*.²⁶ Elias seems to

17 Ibid, 8. Mazlish has an extensive chapter on these developments, see chapter 2 “Civilization as a Colonial Ideology”, 20-48.

18 Naqvi, 558.

19 Cited in Mazlish, 5 (italics mine).

20 I will come back to the issue of religion and civilization towards the end of this paper.

21 Mazlish, 7.

22 Ibid, 17.

23 Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the French Revolution* (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1951), originally published in 1790.

24 François Guizot. *General History of Civilization in Europe: From the Fall of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution* (New York: D. Appleton & Co, 1840), originally published in 1828 in French under the title *Histoire de la Civilization en Europe*.

25 Henry Thomas Buckle. *History of Civilization in England* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1864), originally published in 1857.

26 Elias, 33. Elias *does* mention Mirabeau's contribution, even delving slightly into the historical and ideological background of his times, see 34 and 39.

8 Aziz al-Azmeh. “Concept and History of Civilization,” in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, eds. Neil J. Smelser & Paul B. Baltes (Kidlington, Oxford: Elsevier Science, 2001), 1903.

9 Bruce Mazlish. *Civilization and its Contents* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), ix.

10 Ibid, xiii.

11 Ibid, 2.

12 Elias, 5-43.

13 Naqvi, 557. Mazlish further explains that in a juristic context it “designates a society in which civil law has replaced military law”, 7.

14 Naqvi, 557. Mazlish corroborates this view saying it was first used in the late eighteenth century, 5.

15 Al-Azmeh, 1903.

16 Mazlish, 8.

find it sufficient to mention that a resurgence of the term occurred (in its German equivalent, *Kultur*) in 1919, partly, he explains, because a war was waged on Germany in the name of “civilization” and the country needed to redefine its cultural identity.²⁷

B. Etymological and Linguistic Background

The term civilization (sharing the same etymological roots as the term culture) has its linguistic roots in ancient Latin vocabulary, in words such as *colere*, *cultus*, *culture*, *civis*, and *civilis*.²⁸ Aside from the term civilization, another term has been in use that is closely related and sometimes used interchangeably, which is the word “culture”.²⁹ Similar to the term civilization, “culture” has been noted as one of the most complex concepts in social theory.³⁰ Due to various language configurations the term “culture” came to be used predominantly in the German linguistic context, in the form of the word *Kultur*.³¹ “Civilization”, on the other hand, was used mostly in the French (*civilisation*) and English linguistic contexts.³² Especially in the German context the term *Kultur* came to be associated with the “aesthetic of the lofty and the sublime” related also with the term *Bildung*.³³ In the French (and later on in the English) context the term civilization, in imitation of the concept of the German *Kultur*, expanded from the Latin word *civilis* and related mostly to orderly and civilized society (and not “culture” as such).³⁴ The terms culture and civilization have also been used in a way more distinctive of each other, such as in the tradition of Anglo-Saxon anthropology, where, studying “primitive cultures”, culture is a sequence in a hierarchy leading from “barbarous” or “savage” to civilization.³⁵ As a matter of fact, the German sociologist Alfred Weber, who was the brother of the more famous Max Weber, also stated that culture marks a step in the development of the process of civilization.³⁶

As for the term of culture, it has been divided into two different conceptions, one being

an *extended concept of culture* and the second being a *narrow concept of culture*.³⁷ The first conception of culture relates to “all man-made creations of human living conditions”, in contrast to all things found in nature.”³⁸ The second conception alludes to a more limited idea of the spiritual and the artistic, of something “higher and free of purpose”, mostly relating to what one may find in literature, the fine arts, and philosophy.³⁹ Interestingly, scholars in the fields of anthropology and ethnology were traditionally interested in the first conception of culture, while scholars in the field of sociology were generally concerned with the more narrow second conception of culture.⁴⁰ This is of course relevant when we consider that Elias was a practicing sociologist when he wrote his *The Civilizing Process*, while it must be said that he *did* make use of insights from both history and psychology. In addition, Elias work *did* mark shift in sociological scholarship away from so-called “high-culture”, to a concern for daily culture.⁴¹ Nevertheless, this consideration also speaks to the limits of Elias’s work and approach.

Elias, of course, is quite aware of the differences in usage between the German *Kultur* and its French and English counterpart civilization (or *civilisation*), as he draws our attention to it in the first part of his *The Civilizing Process*.⁴² He even refers to some of the differences in usage as “the antithesis of *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*.”⁴³ Extending the elaboration above, Elias explains that *Kultur* in the German context generally refers to achievements in the intellectual, artistic, and religious or philosophical realms and, additionally, that it draws a sharp distinction between matters of this sort and matters of political, economic, and social nature.⁴⁴ Civilization, on the other hand (in the sense of the German *Zivilisation*) refers more to the “outer appearance of human beings” or the “surface of human existence,” and therefore something, really, of secondary nature.⁴⁵ Civilization in French and English usages, on the other hand, might refer to the totality of their achievements as a nation, as “their pride in

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid.

41 As also evidenced by his other works on the sociology of daily life, such as his innovative research on sport as a sociological problem in his *Quest for Excitement: Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process*, co-authored by Eric Dunning (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986).

42 He discusses it quite extensively in the first part of his book called *On the Sociogenesis of the Concepts of “Civilization” and “Culture”*, 5-43. Elias also brings it to our attention very early in the preface of his work, x.

43 Elias, 9. Oswald Spengler in his *The Decline of the West* also speaks of culture and civilization in terms of an “antithesis”, 32.

44 Elias, 6.

45 Ibid.

27 Ibid, 9.

28 Ludgera Vogt. “Culture and Civilization,” in *Encyclopedia of Social Theory*, ed. George Ritzer (California, London and New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2005), 181.

29 Al-Azmeh, 1905.

30 Vogt, 181.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.

33 Al-Azmeh, 1905.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Vogt, 181.

the significance of their own nations for the progress of the West and of human kind".⁴⁶ In relation to *Kultur* Elias similarly connects its meaning to notions like *Bildung*, as in "inner enrichment" and "intellectual formation."⁴⁷ As for the French usage of civilization it appears to have started out, according to Elias, with meanings that are closely related to the negatively regarded conception of *Zivilisation* in German, including meanings related to courtly manners and politeness (including in terms such as *politesse* and *civilité*).⁴⁸ It seems that only later the term shifted towards a conception that civilization is not simply a state, but that it should be considered as a *process* that should be extended further. This, according to Elias, was a newly added meaning to the term.⁴⁹ It also acquired a meaning that was closer to what *Kultur* had meant for the German bourgeoisie, notwithstanding some of the layers of nuance in which both terms still differ.⁵⁰ We can conclude, then, that while Elias does not elaborately delve into the history of the concept of civilization, he *does* provide a rich and useful account of its etymological and linguistic background, testifying to his acute knowledge of the sensibilities relating to the concept in various cultural and linguistic contexts.

C. Civilization as an Ideology

"Imperialism is Civilization unadulterated," Oswald Spengler already, quite openly, stated in his *The Decline of the West*.⁵¹ Indeed, civilization is very hard to imagine and conceptualize without taking into account its historical relationship with (European) imperialism. Bruce Mazlish, in his excellent work *Civilization and its Contents*, elaborately explains that civilization as a concept in Europe was not neutral but loaded with ideology. Firstly, as a *colonialist* ideology related to the issue of racial superiority and effectively "supported" by racial-scientific world views, such as social Darwinism as "[r]ace had become destiny, and the determinant of civilization. Science had become ideology, as had the very notion of civilization itself".⁵² Rather conveniently so, of course, it was *Europe* and *Western* civilization that was seen "superior" to other "primitive" peoples. The term civilization thus came to be used for

those societies that were considered well-formed and ordered, as opposed to those societies that would be considered "barbarian or savage, yet to be civilized."⁵³ Elias readily admits this also when saying that civilization, as a concept, "expresses the self-consciousness of the West," and moreover, that it contains in it all in which Western society "believes itself superior to earlier societies or "more primitive" contemporary ones".⁵⁴

This is even truer, secondly, of the way the concept was employed as a *European* ideology, after the advent of the "New World" explorations, when in the mid-eighteenth-century Europe consolidated its position as a central political and colonialist power in the world. Mazlish mentions that the idea of racial superiority penetrated into "the whole of European culture and its discourse of civilization".⁵⁵ One of the most telling examples, perhaps, is to be found in the French historian and statesman François Guizot, when he states that the highest forms of civil life and development of society are to be found in Europe, and more particularly in France.⁵⁶ Even more explicitly Guizot claims that European civilization has entered "into the eternal truth, into the plan of Providence; it progresses according to the intentions of God. This is the rational account of its superiority", and that in European civilization France is "the most civilized country in Europe".⁵⁷ Thomas Henry Buckle said similar things in the case of England.⁵⁸

The term civilization has thus, in various *national* contexts (France in Guizot's case), been sensitive to particularistic and nationalist ideologies, as evidenced by the many publications in various European countries in the late nineteenth century.⁵⁹ In Western Eurocentric discourses on civilization the term was reserved for the European and Western context and associated with such notions as "urban and urbane; secular and spiritual; law-abiding and non-violent ... polished, courteous, and polite; disciplined, orderly, and productive; *laissez faire*, bourgeois, and comfortable; respectful of private property; fraternal and free; cultured, knowledgeable, and the master of nature".⁶⁰ This was totally opposed to so-called "uncivilized" societies, which was related to non-Western societies and associated with such notion as "rural ... savage, idolatrous, fanatical, literalist, and theocratic; unlawful and violent ... crude or rude; lazy,

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid, 24.

48 Ibid, 33-34.

49 Ibid, 41.

50 Ibid, 43. Additional differences Elias mentions, for example, are the notion that civilization stands for "progress" of *society*, while *Kultur* stands for *individual* cultivation and that civilization transcends national boundaries, while *Kultur* is rather limited to particular group identities, 7.

51 Oswald Spengler. *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. C. F. A. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1927), 36. (Originally published as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* in 1918 and 1922).

52 Mazlish, 47.

53 Al-Azmeh, 1905.

54 Elias, 5.

55 Mazlish, 51.

56 Ibid, 52-53.

57 Cited in Mazlish, 54.

58 Buckle, 227.

59 Al-Azmeh, 1905.

60 Naqvi, 557.

anarchic, and unproductive; communistic, poor, and inconvenienced or beleaguered; piratical and thievish; fratricidal ... and unfree; uncultured, ignorant, illiterate, superstitious, and at nature's mercy".⁶¹

The ideological use of the term civilization was not at all lost on Elias, which adds to the value of his study. He explicitly mentions that however various Western (i.e. European) thinkers and theorists might define the exact contents of civilization, the very least that we can say is that "all regard it as completely self-evident that theirs [i.e. their civilization] is the way in which the world of humans in general wants to be viewed and judged".⁶² Moreover, Elias traces the ideological use of civilization, at first in the name of Christianity, from the Middle Ages up until the modern-secular age (to use a Taylorian term⁶³), saying that "[i]n the name of the cross, and later in that of civilization, Western society waged, during the Middle Ages, its wars of colonization and expansion. And for all its secularization, the watchword "civilization" always retained an echo of Latin Christendom and the knightly-feudal crusade".⁶⁴ This vision of civilization, unfortunately I must admit, still persists until today, as we can readily see in recent history of American invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq under the banner of "civilization". Jacob Burckhardt might be an exemplary modern expression of this mindset when he mentions "the royal right of civilization to conquer and subdue barbarism, which must abandon its bloody, internecine warfare and abhorrent customs and bow to the moral principles of the civilized State".⁶⁵

61 Ibid.

62 Elias, 7.

63 See Charles Taylor's masterful work *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2007).

64 Elias, 47.

65 Jacob Burckhardt. *Reflections on History*, trans. Marie Donald Mackie Hottinger (London: Georg Allen & Unwin LTD, 1950), originally published as *Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen* in 1906.

II. APPROACHES TO THE STUDY CIVILIZATION

A. Studying Civilization: Relevance and Complexity

It was already noted by François Guizot that civilization is indeed worthwhile to study, as he famously stated that civilization is a "fact" and is "susceptible, like any other [i.e. fact], of being studied, described, narrated".⁶⁶ For Elias the study of civilization is relevant because it increases our understanding of our own (cultural) identity and in particular the *process* that is involved in the formation of what we now perceive of as "civilized" societies.⁶⁷

The study of civilization is certainly a comprehensive task that is both complex and challenging. Some of the challenges that theorists of civilization speak of relate to its periodization and categorization. Burckhardt says, for example, "[i]t is the most serious difficulty of the history of civilization that a great intellectual process must be broken up into single, and often into what seem arbitrary, categories in order to be in any way intelligible".⁶⁸

B. Gradual Civilization and Advancing Civilization

Many theorists of civilization perceive it in an "organic" way. That is, they perceive civilization metaphorically as an organism that goes through certain stages, from birth and flourishing to decline and finally death. We can see this, for example, in theorists such as Jacob Burckhardt, Henry Thomas Buckle, and Oswald Spengler. Burckhardt in his discussion on society and festivals mentions in this regard that "[e]very *period of civilization*, which forms a complete and consistent whole, manifests itself not only in political life, in religion, art, and science, but also sets its characteristic stamp on social life", thus alluding not only to the different "stages" a civilization goes through and how these effect society and culture, but also that these "periods" are to be understood as complete and consistent entities.⁶⁹ Thomas Henry Buckle also theorizes civilization in terms of stages, saying in his famous study on civilization in England that he wants to compare "the condition of mankind in every *stage of civilization*".⁷⁰ Oswald Spengler exemplifies, perhaps, the theorist of gradual civilization

66 Cited in Mazlish, 51.

67 Elias, ix.

68 Burckhardt, 1.

69 Jacob Burckhardt. *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1860, 186 (italics mine). In the same vein Burckhardt, alluding to civilization's different "stages", also speaks of the "phases of Italian civilization, of the "dawn of civilization" and of civilization reaching "its highest pitch", see respectively pages 59, 194 and 223.

70 Henry Thomas Buckle. *Civilization in England: Volume I* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co, 1869), 3 (italics

pur sang in his *The Decline of the West*.⁷¹ Spengler says about civilizations that they are the “inevitable *destiny* of Culture” and that they are the “most external and artificial *states* of which a species of developed humanity is capable”.⁷² In terms of “decline” Spengler darkly states that after reaching the pinnacle of civilization they are “doomed” to move on to “final self-destruction”.⁷³

Another way to approach civilization is to see it as a process of *progress*, of the accumulation, step by step, of ever higher degrees of development (be they intellectual, cultural, artistic, scientific, political, economic, social, etc.). Burckhardt, for example, alludes in relation to this to particular districts in Italy “where civilization had made little progress”.⁷⁴ Buckle says in this regard that civilizations are advancing,⁷⁵ and similarly speaks of “the progress of civilization”.⁷⁶ Aside from thinking civilization in terms of stages, Spengler also perceives civilization as a process of progress, namely as developing out of the earlier stage of culture, as he speaks in his work of civilization in terms of “the organic-logical sequel, the fulfillment and finale of a culture”.⁷⁷ Moreover, Spengler spoke about civilization having “fully ripened”.⁷⁸

C. Elias's Contribution: Civilization as a Process

Norbert Elias, in his *The Civilizing Process* perceives civilization as a *process* and not as something static. In that sense he differentiates this process into two separate, but related, processes, namely the *psychical* process of civilization (or *psychogenesis*) and the *social* process of civilization (or *sociogenesis*).⁷⁹ In comparison with the above theorists Elias also speaks in terms of “gradual civilization” and he *does* speak on many occasions in terms of “phases” and “stages” of civilization, but he particularly relates it to the concept of civility, etiquette, and

modes of morality (related to feelings of *shame* and *delicacy*), as they develop through time.⁸⁰ But, in contrast with the other theorists mentioned above, Elias is not interested *per se* in discovering the “beginning” of the process of civilization (i.e. the first stage of the “birth” of a civilization).⁸¹ And in contrast to thinkers like Guizot and Spengler, Elias is also not interested in Eurocentric notions of “our civilized mode of behaviour” as being “the most advanced of all humanly possible modes of behaviour” or in terms of decline that civilization is somehow “doomed” to self-destruction.⁸² He simply registers that there is such a thing as a civilizing process without involving ideology; a trap that many theorist before him have fallen into.⁸³ Elias is thus particularly interested in understanding how this process of civilization works so that we can better understand the specific problems and challenges that come with societies being “civilized”.⁸⁴

Elias believes that by studying how human behavior changed over time we can get a glimpse of how societies change towards civilization and how the so-called “civilizing process” actually functions. He tries to do this by studying the etiquette or modes of civility (*civilité*) that formed around European courts and later in feudal states amongst the knightly elites, further through the ages, up until the modern times. Elias says about this approach that when linking “civilization to its ancestor *civilité*, one finds oneself suddenly on the track of the civilizing process itself, of the actual changes in behaviour that took place in the West”.⁸⁵ The only way to do so properly, according to Elias, is to study “documents of historical experience”,⁸⁶ which he does in the form of studying books of etiquette that were used through time, such as Erasmus's *On Civility in Boys*, which became hugely widespread and influential throughout Europe.⁸⁷

Linking the psychical process of civilization to its social dimension Elias alludes, for example, to changes in courtly behavior as “an advance in the threshold of repugnance and the frontier of shame, or as a process of “refinement” or “civilization”.⁸⁸ These types of changes

mine). Compare also with page 8. Buckle speaks of the “grades of civilization” and “consecutive steps” and “gradations”, 29 and 194.

71 Oswald Spengler. *The Decline of the West: Form and Actuality*, trans. Charles Francis Atkinson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1927), originally published as *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* in 1918 and 1922.

72 Spengler, 31 (italics of second citation mine).

73 Ibid, 107.

74 Burckhardt, 235.

75 Buckle, 6. He mentions the “advancement of civilization” throughout his work. Compare for example with 119, 176, and 195.

76 Buckle, 16. He mentions “civilization as progress” throughout his work. Compare for example with 42, 175, 180, and 198.

77 Spengler, 31.

78 Ibid, p. 37. Compare also with “fully-ripened civilizations”, 164.

79 Elias, x-xi.

80 Ibid, x.

81 Ibid, 54.

82 Ibid, xiv.

83 Ibid, off course, has written copiously about “detachment” and “objectivity” in scientific work, influenced as he was by the sociology of Max Weber. Elias wrote extensively on this topic in a collection of essays called *Involvement and Detachment* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 2007, 2nd ed.).

84 Elias, xiv.

85 Ibid, 51. Elias already mentioned in the preface of his work that his study is mainly limited to the Western experience, ix.

86 Ibid, x.

87 Ibid, 48.

88 Ibid, 86.

also occurred, according to Elias, in the relationships between adults and children.⁸⁹ Meaning that the “social standard of shame and repugnance is gradually reproduced in the children”.⁹⁰ But for Elias, through the processes of psycho- and sociogenesis, civilization finds its pulpit in the formation of the state, which possesses the “monopoly of force and violence” and is in the position to implement and regulate standardized forms of civility unto society at large. In this regard Elias also says that “the more complex and stable control of conduct [i.e. by the state] is increasingly instilled in the individual from his or her earliest years as an automatism, a self-compulsion that he or she cannot resist even if he or she consciously wishes to”.⁹¹ In this regard Elias also mentions explicitly that “the structure of civilized behaviour is closely interrelated with the organization of Western societies into the form of states”.⁹²

Elias thus, making extensive use of Weberian and Freudian terminology, develops a complex theory of civilization, starting from the *psychic* level of human behavior, via the familial dimension, to the *social* level of state and society. He traces in this process how human attitudes towards civility changed over time, and which feelings, emotions, and drives were an impetus towards this process of civilization. Elias takes note of earlier theorists before him (while he does not explicitly engage with the theorists mentioned in this paper) but follows his own trodden path. His *The Civilizing Process* could be seen, thus, as an original contribution to the field of civilization theory.

D. Critiques of Elias's Approach

This, of course, does not mean that Elias's approach doesn't have its shortcomings. As a matter of fact, Elias also readily admits to this fact, saying at the beginning of his study that he aims to focus especially on “Western” civilization.⁹³ This might not be a problem as such, but it becomes a problem when one wants to develop a “general theory of civilization”. And while Elias explicitly states in the beginning of his book that he is not intending the construct a general theory⁹⁴ this is in fact what he is doing throughout his work. Moreover, Elias seems to contradict himself, when he mentions towards the end of his study that “the *theory of civilization* developed in this study offers a key for solving these problems [i.e. problems

relating to civilization]”.⁹⁵ The fact that these words were written in a postscript many decades later in 1968 might indicate that Elias shifted his position somewhat. His limited approach though, focusing solely on the Western experience, makes the generalizability of his theory highly questionable.

Another aspect that I think is missing from the picture is the role of religion, especially in its institutionalized form (i.e. the Christian Church in the case of Western civilization) in the civilizing process. It cannot be denied that the Christian Church had a huge impact and influence in medieval Western societies, extending well into the modern times. Other theorists have concurred that, in fact, religion is an inseparable part of civilization and its development. This can be seen from the quote of Mirabeau cited earlier in this paper, and also Burckhardt mentions that “among the people religion has from all time been the essential stuff of civilization”.⁹⁶ In spite of that, Elias hardly mentions religion in relation to civilization, or the role of the Church in the civilizing process of Western societies. This, I think, is a huge deficit in his study.

As for Elias's historical account of civility in the courtly life of Western societies, Bruce Mazlish mentions that this account now is somewhat outdated and needs to be amended.⁹⁷ But in general Elias's thesis on the transformation of civility in Western civilization still seems to be holding ground.⁹⁸

89 Ibid, 119 and 142.

90 Ibid, 159.

91 Ibid, 367.

92 Ibid, xii.

93 Ibid, x.

94 Ibid, xiv.

95 Ibid, 476 (italics mine). Compare also with page 480.

96 Burckhardt, *Reflections*, 55. Oswald Spengler is a notable exception to this rule saying in his *The Decline of the West* that “religion does not enter into the matter [i.e. civilization]” and that “the essence of every civilization is irreligion”. Citations to be found on 356 and 358.

97 Mazlish, 10.

98 Ibid, 11.

Conclusion

In summary we could thus say that the study of civilization is conducted from various approaches, depending on what a particular theorist understands when he is using the concept of civilization. Since the meanings that are allocated to the term civilization differ greatly, the content and focus of various studies on civilization (in general or on a particular civilization) are also multifarious. The additional historical relation between the concept of civilization and ideology further complicates its use and in some cases obscures, rather than clarifies, when a theorist is elaborating his theory of civilization.

Elias represents in this context, to my mind, an example of a theorist who has understood the problem of ideology and was also acutely aware of the ambiguities and difficulties with regards to the variety of usages of the concept of civilization in various geographical and linguistic context. This adds to the usefulness and clarity of Elias's theory of civilization. Furthermore, while his theory and approach to civilization shows resemblance with other theorists in relation to thinking of civilization as something gradual, his figurational (or process-sociological) approach to the topic differs significantly and represents a genuinely original contribution to the field of civilizational theory. That being said, his theory *can* be said to have shortcomings in its analytical applicability, particularly with regards to the blind eye it turns towards the role of religion (institutionalized or otherwise) and its relationship to civilization and the civilizing process. Elias's theory can also *not* be said to be a "general theory of civilization", as his study limits itself to Western civilization, which differs greatly from non-Western civilizations.