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Civilization and ambivalence*

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to reassess Norbert Elias's central theme of the 'civilizing process' with reference to the Holocaust in Nazi Germany. My argument is that the process of 'civilization' must be seen as thoroughly ambivalent, following Zygmunt Bauman's use of the latter term to denote the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category. The practice of naming and classifying social behaviours or processes as 'civilized' or 'barbarous' is ambivalent, because they can never be placed so unequivocably in one or the other category – certainly not in a social scientific way. I then trace out ambivalences in the three central features of the 'civilizing' process as Elias conceives it – the monopolization of means of violence, the removal of physical violence 'behind the scenes', and the lengthening chains of interdependence between people. I shall argue that these ambivalent features are as much potential forces of destruction as they are of internal pacification and 'civilization'.

In a review essay on the two volumes of Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process*, Christopher Lasch crystallizes what has become a common criticism of Elias's approach to the issue of 'civilization'. Lasch says that

> Elias takes for granted what many of us have come to doubt, that history records the triumph of order over anarchy. There is no irony or ambiguity in his account of the civilizing process. Even today, he retains an optimism increasingly alien to our age. 'I don't share the pessimism which is today à la mode', he said in an interview in 1974. Alas, pessimism is no passing fad; more and more, it looks like the only tenable attitude in the face of our century's horrors. (1985: 708)

This paper attempts to reassess Elias's central theme of the 'civilizing process' with an eye to one of our century's greatest horrors – the Holocaust in Germany organized by the Nazis. My argument is to be that the process of 'civilization' as understood by Elias must be seen as a thoroughly ambivalent legacy left to contemporary women and men.

As Lasch notes above, an initial reading of Elias can leave one with the impression that he is describing the onwards march of human progress and enlightenment which will herald the eventual triumph of civilization

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over barbarity. However, a deeper and more imaginative reading of Elias reveals precisely that sense of irony and ambiguity that Lasch finds missing in his work. Here, I will use the term 'ambivalence' with regard to the 'civilizing' process, following Zygmunt Bauman's (1991a) use of ambivalence to denote the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category. Such ambivalence is a normal function of the linguistic practice of naming and classifying, and it is my argument that the practice of naming and classifying certain behaviours or human achievements as 'civilized' is, by its very nature, ambivalent. Human behaviour can never be placed so unequivocably in such a category.

To underscore this argument, it must be remembered that one of Elias's fundamental aims in *The Civilizing Process* was to account for the socio-genesis of the term 'civilization' and its opposition to the term 'barbarism'. As Mennell (1989) notes of Elias's method, he uses the term 'civilization' in two ways: firstly, to describe how the concept developed in everyday discourse and the way it came to refer to those behaviours and achievements of which western people were most proud. But, secondly, Elias also uses the concept in a social scientific context, in order to delineate the social changes and structural dynamics that brought into being what we learned to call 'civilized' behaviour. The social relations that lay behind the development and deployment of the notion of 'civilization' were relations of power and domination, where 'civilization' was used to refer to the actions and sensibilities of the upper classes, while 'barbarity' referred to the behaviour of the lower classes and to people of other nations or cultures. As Bauman says of the imposition of such categories and orders

> In dichotomies crucial for the practice and the vision of social order the differentiating power hides as a rule behind one of the members of the opposition. The second member is but *the other* of the first, the opposite (degraded, suppressed, exiled) side of the first and its creation. Thus abnormality is the other of the norm, deviation the other of law-abiding, illness the other of health, barbarity the other of civilization . . . (1991a: 14)

I take Bauman to be saying that the defining moment of the 'civilized' and the 'barbarous' are one and the same, the supposed dichotomy between the two created with the same stroke. The two words, while seeming to describe opposites, are actually locked together in the reciprocal relation of classification. One could not have the notion of barbarity without that of civilization, and the latter is the defining power that lies behind the linguistic usage. Elias (1982) points out that there are two connected ideas contained in the use of the concept 'civilization'; first, it is a counterconcept contrasted with an earlier stage of society understood as 'barbarism', and second, 'civilization' thus represents a 'higher' form of moral existence for humanity. This becomes the self definition of 'civilized' society.

As Elias (1978) charts the development of this self definition, the term *civilisé* is first used by the aristocracy and sections of the nobility in France and England to define the 'refined' manners and tastes of that class and to assert what they saw as their superiority over other classes and other nations. The notion of *civilisé* gradually begins to transform into the idea of 'civilization' with the growing power of bourgeois intellectuals and bureaucrats, who believed that social and economic relations were ordered processes reaching a higher level of advancement in the West and were in themselves forces that brought about moral improvement. The intelligentsia and bureaucrats believed that governments could not create or control such processes and instead had simply to provide the necessary conditions, the framework of social order and education, in which these partly autonomous processes would take root and flourish. So, bourgeois reformers, such as the physiocrats, turned the notion of 'civilization' around on the aristocracy and began to lend it their own definition and to invest it with their own growing sense of superiority. Again, this definition of the 'civilized' was accompanied by a definition of the 'barbarous', and the new sense of order and rationality arose alongside a feeling for what was disordered and irrational.

> . . . in the hands of the rising middle class, in the mouth of the reform movement, the idea of what is needed to make a society civilized is extended. The civilizing of the state, the constitution, education, and therefore of broader sections of the population, the liberation from all that was still barbaric or irrational in existing conditions, whether it be the legal penalties or the class restrictions on the bourgeoisie or the barriers impeding a freer development of trade – this civilizing must follow the refinement of manners and internal pacification of the country by the kings. (Elias 1978: 48)

However, Elias is not just interested in the concept of civilization and its origin. He wants to look at the social changes that led to the development of certain forms of human behaviour that would eventually become self-conscious and labelled as 'civilized'. From what Elias has already said, it is clear that changes in peoples' behaviour were linked to the changing power relations of various social classes and groups and their relative dominance or subordination. The process of the internal pacification of the population, including both social and economic relations, accelerated with the rise to power of the aristocracy and the centralization of the nation-state around the absolute ruler. This process involved the gradual monopolization of the means of violence around the nation-state and the king or the prince, allowing them to eliminate their rivals and to take the means of force out of their enemies' hands and out of the hands of the people. In place of the violent conflicts between different noble estates that often raged in the Middle Ages, and the pillage and banditry that bedevilled travellers and merchants, there emerged more internally

pacified societies where people become more interdependent and sensitive to one another's needs. While violent conflicts still occurred between nation-states, internally these states became more pacified; they were places where people had to settle their conflicts without resorting to open physical violence. Here we see the extension of forms of social behaviour that in later phases would be referred to as 'civilized'. Elias says

> When a monopoly of force is formed, pacified social spaces are created which are normally free from acts of violence. The pressures acting on individual people within them are of a different kind than previously. Forms of non-physical violence that always existed, but hitherto had always been mingled or fused with physical force, are now separated from the latter; they persist in a changed form internally within more pacified societies. They are most visible so far as the standard thinking of our time is concerned as types of economic violence. (1982: 235)

In western societies, then, people have become more preoccupied with the 'visible' forms of force, such as the economic exploitation and domination described by Marx, or the use of what Pierre Bourdieu (1992) has called 'symbolic violence'. In the social awareness of these types of power, concern for the power derived from the control of the means of violence diminishes as the use of such means is less prevalent in the internal, everyday life of society. The means of physical violence are stored 'behind the scenes' so that it is a rare sight in societies that have gone through a process of internal pacification to see the army out on the streets, or even the police out in full force. This does not mean that this cannot, or occasionally does not happen, simply that it is not the way in which peoples' actions are controlled on an everyday basis. The forms of force used against us are generally less evident as 'violence' and, in many ways, are more insistent and consistently present pressures. And there is always the implicit threat, only semi-consciously realized by individuals, that the massed state forces of violence are ready to oppose them should they step too far out of line. However, with the means of violence monopolized by the state, individuals and groups are compelled to settle their day-to-day conflicts without resort to physical violence as a means of coercion: instead, they must practice more 'pacified' techniques of competition.

However, the question that remains about Elias's theory of the civilizing process is one stated clearly by Bauman (1989). This is, has Elias become trapped in the self-definition of the West – that it is composed of 'civilized' societies – by accepting at face value the claim that monopolization by the state has led to pacification? Bauman answers this question in the affirmative, adding

> The disappearance of violence from the horizon of daily life is thus one more manifestation of the centralizing and monopolizing tendencies of modern power; violence is absent from individual intercourse because

> it is now controlled by forces definitely outside the individual reach. But the forces are not outside *everybody's* reach. Thus the much vaunted mellowing of manners (which Elias, following the etiological myth of the West, celebrates with such a relish), and the cosy security of daily life that follows have their price. (1989: 107)

The price that is to be paid is the removal of the means of violence from the hands of the people and, thus, their removal also from the field of moral calculation which is rooted in all interaction. Taken out of this field, the means of violence can be used by those who control and manage them without moral restraint. Hence, in the Nazi rule and during the Holocaust, 'civilization proved incapable of guaranteeing moral use of the awesome powers it brought into being' (Bauman 1989: 111). This was especially so after the Nazi state had eliminated all the channels for democratic participation in decision making, including election of national and local government and the independent labour unions. The state and bureaucracy was then free to use its monopoly of violence in a purely technical and instrumental-rational way without having to bother with moral consideration. Thus, the myth that 'civilization' has led to moral improvement is totally undermined.

However, this was never claimed by Elias. The idea of the physiocrats that bourgeois 'civilization' automatically brought moral improvement was a claim *noted* by Elias and set in its social context, but *not* one that was approved or celebrated by him. Equally, in the first volume of *The Civilizing Process*, when Elias refers to earlier claims to 'civilized' forms of behaviour, he observes the 'mellowing of manners' in a heavily ironical way, placing the development of such conduct in its backdrop of class rivalries, conflicts, and the use of manners as marks of status and distinction. He is certainly not saying these really were more civilized ways of behaving. Indeed, in his studies on court society (Elias 1978; 1983) it is clear on many occasions that Elias sees the court as riddled with rivalries, hatred and spite. It is just that conflict is now settled in a different way, one that has come to be labelled – by those who practice it – as more 'civilized'. I feel, then, the notion that Elias observed these developments without irony or ambiguity is one that has to be rejected. Certainly, he did not celebrate them.

The ambiguity is also reflected in his view of the centralized state monopoly of violence. In fact Elias expresses views similar to those of Bauman's above, which are used as criticism against him. The difference in their approaches is that Elias is trying to balance out 'the Janus faced character of the civilizing process' (Kuzmics 1988: 158), its functions for both the controllers and non-controllers of the means of violence.

> Such monopolies of physical violence – which at present are normally controlled and managed by governments and represented by the military and police as their executive organs – are, like so many human inventions, highly equivocal. Just as the taming of fire favoured

> civilized progress in the cooking of food as well as the barbarian burning down of huts and houses . . . the social invention of the monopoly of the means of violence is equally ambiguous. It is a dangerous instrument. From the ancient pharaohs down to present-day dictatorships, the power of disposal of the monopoly of violence is used for the benefit of certain small groups. But the function it has for its monopolists is not its sole function. The state monopoly of force also has a highly significant function for people living together within a state. Our pacification – the relatively peaceful collective life of large masses of people – is in good part based on this institution. (Elias 1988: 179–80)

For Elias, then, the crucial point is the balance between these two functions of the monopoly of violence – 'the function for its controllers and for the members of the state-regulated society and, thus, the degree of internal pacification' (1988: 180). How this balance tips depends on the distribution of power within society; if the balance of power relations move too far in favour of those who control the monopoly of violence it can be used for their own purposes, without the consent of the people and even against certain sections of the people. This explains why the Nazis were able to rise to power in Germany and to use violence in the way they did: a populist, militarized social movement was able to gain support in the chaos and trauma that preceded Germany's loss of the First World War, and in their rise to power they were able to crush a weak and fledgling German democratic republic. Circumstances that prevailed in Germany between the wars allowed for the monopoly of violence to pass into the hands of a group of terrorists and the dangers inherent in the 'civilizing process' came to the fore.

However, at this point, tensions do begin to arise in Elias's account. The first apparent tension is that he continues to use the term 'civilization' and 'civilizing' to refer to social processes he has claimed are ambiguous. Yet these terms, as Bauman illustrates, are designed to *dispel* ambiguity, to unequivocably oppose 'civilization' to 'barbarity'. Although Elias hopes to use such terms in a social scientific way, as opposed to their value-laden usage, the terms themselves and their very function constantly serve to defeat him. And there are many occasions where Elias clearly uses these terms in opposition to each other, seeing in them mutual exclusives rather than ambivalences. The second tension becomes evident when he refers to 'barbarity' emerging only after 'civilized' social organization has broken down, implying that far from the 'civilizing process' being ambiguous, it is resoundingly unambiguous in its exclusion of 'barbarity'. Therefore, acts that we label as 'barbarous' can only appear after a process of 'decivilization' has taken place. Elias then talks of the Germany experience of Nazism as exemplifying

> a path towards barbarity and dehumanization which always takes considerable time to unfold in relatively civilized societies. Terror and

> horror hardly appear in such societies without a long process of social disintegration. (1988: 197)

This definitely is falling into the etiological myth of civilization because it is claiming that what we call 'barbarism' is something *other* than 'civilization'. It is not just the return of the repressed or a showing of the other side of the Janus face, but a return of the banished and the almost completely forgotten. It is hard, then, even for those sympathetic to Elias's work, to come away from a reading of it with the impression that, when he refers to 'civilization' and the internal pacification of society, he does not see this as anything other than gradual progress towards the elimination of violent conflicts from the public spaces of western and, eventually, all other societies, that will one day be successfully secured. Irony and ambiguity is then lost with a surrender to civilization's own self-image.

This does not imply that theories of 'decivilizing' are not important, and both Mennell (1990) and Fletcher (1994) have explored this issue. Fletcher has succinctly detailed what could be involved in a 'decivilizing process', surmised from the notion of what a civilizing process entails. The three key elements of a 'civilizing process' are drawn out, which include, first, a shift in the balance of social constraints away from constraint by others and towards increasing self-restraint; second, the development of a social habitus in which the constraint upon spontaneous expressions of emotion and behaviour become more even, stable and differentiated; and third, an increase in the mutual identification between people in a society, both within and between different classes and groups. All three elements are based on the monopoly of physical violence by the state which pacifies the social spaces in which people interact and polices their disputes. A 'decivilizing' process is one where the three elements of 'civilization' go into reverse, meaning that the balances tip back towards external social constraint, less even pressure on spontaneous expression of emotion, and a loss of mutual identification between people. This is likely to be accompanied by loosening of state control over the monopoly of force. Such a decivilizing process could be said to have occurred with the collapse of the centralized state in the former Yugoslavia, although the issue of whether soldiers fighting a civil war (or any war) lose self-restraints is a debatable point. However, this does not explain the inhumanity that occurred in Nazi Germany where, after a period of instability, state control was secured and strengthened and, as can be seen from Bauman's account of the Holocaust, self-restraint was not lost in favour of outbreaks of uncontrolled feelings or 'barbarous' behaviour. Mutual identification between the German and the German Jewish population was lost but, as we shall see, there were special circumstances surrounding this.

Although the concept of decivilization may have interesting applications in some circumstances, it would be wrong to assume that all outbreaks of what we regard as 'uncivilized' behaviour have to be

accompanied by a collapse of 'civilization' and all its social structural supports. The theory of 'decivilization' can fall into the myth of 'civilization' by claiming that 'decivilizing' involves a reversal of 'civilizing' processes, or that 'decivilization' is but an episode in a much longer process, a short term regression in a longer term development. But such theorizing tends to become enveloped in the strategies Bauman (1991a: 18–20) examines for playing down the importance of the Holocaust. It is either marginalized as a one-off historical episode, exoticized as a peculiarly Jewish or German phenomenon stemming from anti-semitism or from the legacy of German culture, or it is seen as the puzzling, abrupt eruption of pre-modern, pre-civilized forces. This last strategy is easy to pursue, for

> it falls in with the well established habit . . . to define all alternative modes of life, and particularly all critique of the modern virtues, as stemming from pre-modern, irrational, barbaric positions and hence unworthy of serious consideration: as a specimen of the selfsame class of phenomena which modern civilization swore to confine and exterminate. (Bauman 1991a: 19–20)

The danger that serious consideration of an event such as the Holocaust could throw an extremely critical light on the working of modern 'civilization' is swiftly and effectively neutralized by regarding the event as not civilized and therefore of little concern. All ambivalence is effectively eliminated. In what follows I will argue that this strategy is not tolerable and that 'civilization' must be seen as an inherently ambivalent process, containing within itself the potential to unleash the forces it would label 'barbaric' on an unprecedented scale. The reason this can happen is because of deep ambivalences in each aspect of what Elias regarded as central elements in the process of 'civilization' – the monopoly of physical force and the internal pacification of society; the removal of violence 'behind the scenes' and the growing repugnance towards acts of violence; and, finally, the lengthening chains of interdependence between people and the more inclusive mutual identification this creates. These processes are ambivalent because attempts to classify them as forces propelling a 'civilizing' curve hide the dangers and the ambiguities inherent in each of them. I now want to explain in more detail what I mean by this.

AMBIVALENCE IN THE PROCESSES OF 'CIVILIZATION'

The Monopoly of the Means of Violence

One of the paradoxical elements of the 'civilizing process', fully brought out by Elias (1978; 1982) in his own account, is what a violent struggle the process was that led to a centralized state formation and, thus, eventually,

internal pacification. This process was not planned or controlled by any single person or group, but involved the violent conflict between social classes which eventually led to one of them (in Britain and France it was the aristocracy) gaining monopoly of control over physical force. In the Middle Ages in Europe the long wars of attrition between noble estates were possible because no single section of the nobility was able to gain a decisive advantage over their opponents and so secure a monopoly of resources that would give them the upper hand in the power struggle. This began to change when the aristocracy managed to gain a steadily increasing domination over other groups through the monopolization of both physical force and taxation. They were then in a position to hire the larger armies to defeat their opponents.

The story seems simple and without ambivalence if we are to assume that the centralization of physical violence is unproblematic. However, this is far from the case. Elias has shown what a violent process this was, something which has been emphasized in recent studies of the rule of the two Renaissance princes, Vlad Dracula in Wallachia (now part of Romania) and Ivan the Terrible in Muscovy (Russia). Both rulers were the first to gain a monopoly of physical force within their principalities, and both used it within their territories to physically destroy their enemies (who were those sections of the nobility that resisted their rule). An example of the way Dracula used the centralized forces at his disposal can be seen by the mass impalement of dissenting boyars (nobility) in the courtyard of his palace during the Easter celebrations of 1457. While the people feasted among them, the old boyars and their wives were impaled on wooden stakes while the young and able-bodied were rounded up and put to work on the reconstruction of Castle Dracula. This was a long and arduous task during which many died from accidents or fatigue. During his reign of terror, Florescu and McNally (1989) estimate that Dracula's victims numbered between 40,000 to 100,000 people, at a time when the total population of Wallachia did not exceed 500,000. In Muscovy, Ivan the Terrible assembled his own band of soldiers to enforce the expropriation of land from the boyars and to put his opponents to death. As Benson Bobrick (1987) has claimed, these troops, known as the *Oprichniki*, weirdly foreshadowed Hitler's SS in their appearance, behaviour and function. If there is a dark shadow from the past that shows the way in which centralized forces can be used, and which warns of what the new 'civilizations' are capable, then these two regimes of terror form that shadow.

While such examples taken from the very early period of the Renaissance may help to draw out some of the ambivalences in the monopolization of the means of violence, other aspects of Elias's work spell out this ambivalence more clearly. For while he claims that monopolization led to internal pacification of nation-states, in their external relations with one another such states are no more pacified than were the feudal barons of the Middle Ages. As Elias puts it

> a strange fault line runs through our civilization. When the word 'civilization' is used, it is often assumed that it refers to a firm entity. That is not the case. There is a very sharp distinction between the standard of civilized behaviour and experience in domestic as distinct from international relations. In domestic relations violence among people is taboo and, wherever possible, punished. In international relations a different standard prevails. Every large state continuously prepares for acts of violence against other states. And when such acts of violence are carried out, those who carry them out are held in high esteem. They are often praised and rewarded. (1988: 181)

Although this quotation does show some of the irony and ambiguity disappearing in Elias's use of the term 'civilized' (the inverted commas around the term have been dropped and he appears to equate it in an implicitly normative way with pacification), it also shows his awareness of the instability and deep fault lines of our 'civilization'. Although we claim to be 'civilized' people we still prepare for war against other nations, or blocs of nations, and are always on guard against the possibility of attack upon ourselves. Indeed, as 'civilizations' grow stronger the threat of violence on a massive scale can intensify as super-powers threaten one another from a distance – more recently, with nuclear weapons. Whatever sense of security modern people may have gained from the monopolization of physical force and its relative invisibility in everyday life, we may have lost in the fear of global wars and the unprecedented destruction they could unleash.

However, this leads to the question of whether the sense of security modern people gain from an internally 'pacified' society is a false sense. If massed forces of the state can be used by those who control them against their internal enemies, and these forces are always ready to be used against external enemies, then the fault lines of 'civilization' run deep. For example, Anthony Giddens (1981; 1985) claims that the monopolization of means of violence by the state allowed weapons technology and its management to be honed to a fine but deadly degree. Western civilizations are militarized to a high level because of intensified inter-state conflicts and because forces of coercion are also necessary in the creation of integration within states. Standing armies and police forces, specialists in their own fields, work to perfect the techniques of warfare, in the former case, and of surveillance and coercion, in the latter. Thus, the monopolization of physical force and its removal, within a state, behind the scenes, allows for the means of violence and coercion to be built up to a level never known before. This leads into the ambivalences that surround the relative 'invisibility' of violence in modern 'civilization' and the growing repugnance towards public displays of cruelty.

The Removal of Violence 'Behind the Scenes'

There are ambivalences other than the ones mentioned above in the modern invisibility of violence. The main one I want to concentrate upon

here is that the removal of visible violence allows the very acts we find repugnant to continue behind the scenes, unchecked by moral constraints of daily interaction. Elias (1978: 117) shows how this process occurs with regard to the killing of animals and their preparation as food. The killing of livestock was gradually removed from sight within everyday life, and the function of slaughtering passed from being a household task to being a specialist one. Also, during the Renaissance, the carving of whole, cooked animals gradually became less of a gastronomical ritual to be performed at the table and, instead, it took place away from public view in the kitchen. Today, in many meat dishes, the animal form of what is to be eaten is concealed so that we do not have to consciously associate it with what was once a living creature. This demonstrates for Elias how the gradual removal from sight of a particular act goes hand-in-hand with an increased feeling of repugnance towards it – the feeling that such an act is abhorrent and not something that 'civilized' people would gaze upon. However, the ambivalence in such a classification of activity is that this is precisely what 'civilized' people do every day, only they remove the acts labelled as 'uncivilized' from sight. This allows them to continue – in this case the butchery of animals – behind the scenes. Elias says that, in his book, 'it will be seen again and again how characteristic of the whole process that we call civilization is this movement of segregation, this hiding "behind the scenes" of what has become distasteful' (1978: 121).

However, this also applies to the slaughter of human beings. If we recall for a moment the example cited earlier of Dracula and the mass impalement of the boyars, this could be done, deliberately, on a feast day when the massacre would be visible to Dracula's courtiers and to the people. Indeed, the visibility of the murders, and of other atrocities committed by rulers like Dracula and Ivan the Terrible, is part of their function; it is a display of the rulers' power and the effectiveness of the deployment of the main resource behind that power – the means of violence. In terms of a twentieth-century holocaust, like the one perpetrated by the Nazis, this was no longer the case. Even a tyrant like Hitler could not display the power of the state that he commanded in such a way. The Holocaust took place 'behind the scenes', in concentration camps mainly outside of Germany, and their existence was never officially acknowledged. Although rumours about the camps spread by 'word of mouth', it was possible in such circumstances for people not to believe the rumours or to look the other way. As Elias emphasizes, when something moves behind the scenes it corresponds to something that people find distasteful or totally abhorrent; the knowledge of what has disappeared is not completely erased, but continues to exist in the unconscious as knowledge that is denied or repressed. It is darkly ambivalent to contemplate, but these aspects of the 'civilizing' process may have made it possible for the Holocaust to happen in the way that it did.

Another example of this given by Bauman (1989) is that the advanced technology of modern weapons allows people to kill one another at a

distance, and this has made killing others in times of war easier on the conscience. When people fought hand-to-hand the act of killing was immediately visible and humans were forced to be conscious of what they were doing. There is evidence that, in such circumstance, stricter codes of conduct surrounded the actions of warriors. For example, in the Middle Ages, the codes of chivalry in which the young knights were educated provided an elaborate set of rules of conduct which protected women and children from harm, and established the right of enemies to take sanctuary in a church. From the Renaissance onward, two developments undermined the codes of chivalry. First, the invention of gunpowder meant that enemies – including civilians – could be killed from a distance and this introduced an impersonal element into the act of killing. Second, the paid armies of professional soldiers, including mercenaries, were taught to kill rather than disarm and had the equipment to do so. They were bound in their duties and in following commands by few moral codes (Florescu and McNally 1989: 27). This ties in with Bauman's view that 'the civilizing process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus' (1989: 28). An example of this could be seen on a recent British television programme about fighter pilots in the Gulf War. Pilots launched the bombs on Iraq using a computer keyboard and watched the impact of the missiles on their targets through the graphics on the screen: it was easy to believe that the crews were doing no more than playing computer games rather than taking human lives. Bauman refers to this as the act being made 'psychologically invisible'.

At this stage, though, we must be cautious. There is a danger of romanticizing times past and casting them in a hazier glow of nostalgia than they deserve. What I am saying here is *not* that hand-to-hand combat and codes of chivalry led the people of the Middle Ages to be less violent or to suffer less violence against their person. *Nor* am I saying that when the use of violence could be openly paraded there were constraints that operated effectively against it. *The point I am making* is that the type of constraints operating upon people, both the rulers and the ruled, and the power relations between them, have shifted: with this there has been a corresponding shift in terms of the things that can happen in public and the things that cannot. Because of greater democratic powers (something I will come to later) and a greater repugnance against acts of violence, such acts have moved behind the scenes. But that does not mean that such acts cannot happen in 'civilization' or that its social structures must collapse for 'barbarity' to return. Certain mechanisms may operate within 'civilizations', in the way I have just described, which allow violence to be perpetrated more easily and on a larger scale. Is there such a thing as a more 'civilized' way of killing people?

Increasing Chains of Interdependence and Mutual Identification

Elias's theory of the 'civilizing process' centres on the idea that a stable monopolization of means of violence by the state will lead to internal

pacification of society, constituted through the lengthening chains of interdependence between people and an enlargement of the scope of mutual identification. The idea of 'decivilization' was based on the notion that if a combination of these factors begin to break down, then 'civilized' or internally pacified society will collapse as all these elements gradually unravel. I want to suggest that this does not have to be the case and that long networks of interdependence in society can lead to a loss of mutual identification. Sections of the population can then be persecuted, discriminated against, or even killed, while the central features of 'civilization' remain intact. As Bauman (1989) claims, while the racist propaganda of the Nazi regime failed to stir the German people against the Jews, what was effective in creating the conditions for the Holocaust was the long chains of interdependence within bureaucracy which created moral indifference. Bauman refers to this as the 'social production of moral invisibility', meaning that, in the long chains of command and organization that compose bureaucracies, people rarely see the outcomes of their own actions or decision making. Many people in the network mediate between one's own actions and their practical outcomes, to such an extent that one may never have to view the consequences of these actions or take moral responsibility for them. Bauman succinctly puts this as follows

> The increase in the physical and/or psychic distance between the act and its consequences achieves more than the suspension of moral inhibition; it quashes the moral significance of the act and thereby pre-empts all conflict between personal standard of moral decency and immorality of the social consequences of the act. With most of the socially significant actions mediated by a long chain of complex causal and functional dependencies, moral dilemmas recede from sight, while the occasions for more scrutiny and conscious moral choice become increasingly rare. (1989: 25)

In this way bureaucracy and other forms of extensive social organization create the conditions for immoral actions. Therefore, it does not necessarily mean that lengthening chains of interdependence will create the conditions for greater mutual identification between people and, as in the circumstances above, the opposite may indeed be the case. As Mennell (1990) points out, the Nazis had to work hard at breaking down the identification between Germans and fellow-Germans who were Jewish. This was done by their physical removal to the ghettos, then, 'under the official pretext of "resettlement in the east", they were removed to transit camps, labour camps, and finally extermination camps.' However, as Mennell goes on to say, '"mutual identification" was apparently not negligible, but we are still left with the vast sociological, and moral, question of why it was so relatively easily by-passed' (1990: 216).

Others have sought an answer to this question by examining the way that the victims of the Holocaust were removed from the universe of obligations (Fein 1979). Bauman rephrases this in terms of the victims

being evicted in stages 'from the realm of moral duty' (1989: 191). It is not just that victims are removed physically from the sight of the majority, but that they are denied moral claims upon them. Put in Bauman's terms (following Emmanuel Levinas) they are denied as 'faces' who can make moral claims of those with whom they are interdependent. These faces are 'effaced' in the sense that, through a number of techniques, the 'moral responsibility for the Other is suspended and rendered ineffective' (Bauman 1991b: 145). The Other is then denied all claims as a human being and may simply become the object of instrumental-rational action within long chains of mediated interdependence, rather than a person like ourselves within the circle of reciprocal moral interactions. The difference here between Bauman and Elias on the subject of interdependence is that Elias studies the effects upon the 'civilizing' process of more human beings, non-human creatures, and objects, being drawn into the realm of mutual identification: Bauman studies the effects upon the 'civilizing' process of some human groups being excluded from mutual identification and moral recognition. He is also showing how the networks of interdependence between people do not have to break down – nor need there be a loosening of mutual and self-restraints or a collapse of the monopoly of physical force – for some groups to become excluded from mutual identification and to be turned into the dehumanized victims of rationally organized violence. The lesson from this is that, in a 'civilizing' process, the universe of mutual identification and obligation does not just go on expanding; it can also contract, and the long chains of interdependence within modern 'civilizations' can play a part in its contraction.

CONCLUSION

In this piece, I have been concerned with the ambivalences of a 'civilizing' process and the dualities in the main features which Elias identified as central to such a process. As Elias illustrated, terms such as 'civilization' and 'barbarism' have a social and normative origin, their function being to define the behaviours of one set of people as morally good and superior, and the behaviour of others (the lower classes and those of other cultures) as debased and inferior. However, social behaviour cannot be so simply classified, and such attempts conceal behaviours which, when fully examined, are highly ambiguous and troubling. It has been suggested that Elias is simply reproducing the etiological myth of 'civilization', claiming that a process of internal pacification – supported by a state monopoly of the means of violence, lengthening chains of interdependence, and an enlarging sphere of mutual identification – actually makes for a more civilized society. For violence and terrorization to exist a combination of these elements would have to collapse and go into 'reverse' so that a 'decivilizing' process would occur. I have been arguing here, using the work of Bauman as a critical point of comparison, that this need

not be the case and, because of the ambivalent nature of the 'civilizing' process, its central features can become mechanisms which actually suppress mutual identification and can lead to a form of 'civilized' violence and terror. To fully draw out the irony and ambivalence in Elias's account it needs to be shown how processes of modernization and 'civilization' have created a potential for *both* the development of internal pacification *and* for more destructive and amoral institutions. The 'civilizing' process is double-sided.

However, there is another ambivalence to draw from this double-sided process, which is, as Bauman sees it, 'the notorious duality of the modern tendency . . . spawning at the same time the most horrifying of contemporary dangers and the most effective means of preventing them – the poison and the antidote' (1991a: 52). For both Bauman and Elias, the antidote to social dangers is democracy and pluralism, which is the only effective means by which contemporary women and men can guard against those who control and manage the means of violence using them for their own purposes and against sections of the internal (or external) population(s). Whilst democracy is not an automatic or fail-safe protection, the experience of Nazi Germany shows that democratic institutions – such as national and local democracy, labour unions and other independent social movements – have to be dismantled and effectively suppressed for modern terror to fully prevail. And the full ambivalence of a 'civilizing' process is realized when we understand that it is only through such a process, involving the pacification of everyday life, that the social space is created in which democratic institutions and social movements of opposition can emerge. It would have been inconceivable in the days of Dracula or Ivan the Terrible for a social movement like, say, the peace movement, to have even existed let alone thrived. But this is the full duality of modern 'civilization', creating the potential for violence on a terrifying scale whilst, at the same time, forming the social basis for the movements that oppose the use of this potential.

Elias's work is crucial in helping us to understand how such a society develops and what the central features are that support it. However, the full irony and ambivalence in his account needs drawing out and emphasizing, so that *The Civilizing Process* can be seen as a work, published in 1939 on the eve of war, which provides not just a reassurance but a warning.

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NOTES

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