Stephen Mennell

the American Civilizing Process
THE AMERICAN CIVILIZING PROCESS
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Polity
## Contents

*Preface*  viii

**Prologue: Civilizing Processes**  1
- The theory of civilizing processes  4
- Established-outsiders relations  18
- Conclusion: The plan and major themes of the book  20

1 ‘American Civilization’  23
- The Founding Fathers as *philosophes*  25
- ‘Progress’  26
- Fugitive government  28
- ‘Human nature’  33
- Conclusion  38

2 ‘Fellow Americans’ and Outsiders  40
- Others: the Native Americans  41
- Others: the blacks  43
- Others: the Europeans  44
- Anti-Americanism: how the outsiders view the established  48
- Conclusion  50

3 American Manners Under Scrutiny  51
- American manners books  53
- Americans observed  56
- Technology, hygiene and deference  67
- Victorianism  73
- Informalization  75
- Conclusion  80
vi Contents

4 American Aristocracies 81
   The colonial gentry 82
   The South: American Junkers? 85
   The North: working upper classes 94
   From cumulative to dispersed inequalities? 100
   A significant absence: an aristocracy of office 103
   Conclusion 104

5 The Market Society 106
   The constraints of the market 107
   The constraints of organization 115
   Conclusion 120

6 Violence and Aggressiveness 122
   Long-term trends in violence 123
   Is America peculiarly violent? 133
   The Western myth as a form of romanticism 137
   No duty to retreat 138
   Capital punishment 149
   Conclusion 154

7 And Wilderness is Paradise Enow: 158
   From Settlements to Independence
   Autarky, but not terra nullius 160
   Population 163
   Early phases of the American state-formation process 165
   Conclusion 179

8 But Westward, Look, the Land is Bright: 180
   From Frontier to Empire
   Manifest destiny and latent dynamics: 181
      a necessary theoretical digression
   The balance between the planned and
      the unplanned in US territorial expansion
   ‘Sovereignty’ as a function of power ratios 190
   The frontier 193
   Beyond manifest destiny: the beginnings of an American
      empire
   Conclusion 212

9 Integration Struggles 214
   Urbanization and resentment of the city 215
   Immigration 218
Preface

A book’s intellectual antecedents can often be traced back in an author’s mind far beyond the time spent in actually writing it. My own fascination with American history, society and politics dates from when, as a first-year undergraduate (in economics) at Cambridge in 1963–4, I attended the lectures of Sir Denis Brogan and Lord Annan, and tutorials with Maurice Cowling.

After graduating, I spent a year in the old Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, in which the cohabitation of sociologists, anthropologists and clinical and social psychologists offered an unrivalled interdisciplinary stimulus to young social scientists. I had been drawn there by the reputation of Talcott Parsons, then the world’s most famous sociological theorist. Parsons was in his late ‘evolutionary’ phase and I read his book *The System of Modern Societies* (1971) in draft, finding its depiction of America as the ‘lead society’ irritating but not demonstrably wrong. Other members of that star-studded department lit long-delayed time fuses which have made more positive contributions to this book. I was inspired by Seymour Martin Lipset, and took a seminar with Robert Bellah when he had just completed his celebrated first essay, ‘Civil Religion in America’. I read *The Lonely Crowd* and went to talk to David Riesman – who did not care much for teaching graduate students, but was friendly, helpful and encouraging if one specially sought him out. These early influences are shown in the fact that my very first published journal article was on Prohibition in the USA; and a little later (with John Stone, my friend from Cambridge days) I edited the volume on Alexis de Tocqueville for the University of Chicago Press’s Heritage of Sociology series.

Something else which I took back with me from Harvard when I returned to Europe in 1967 to begin my career as a university teacher was
a preoccupation with the set of intellectual problems that sociologists refer to as ‘macro/micro relations’, the ‘action/structure’ or ‘agency/structure’ dilemma, and the ‘individual and society’ issue. Under whichever label, these concern the question of how to reconcile two equally obvious propositions: on the one hand, that people’s behaviour and feelings and social character – what sociologists now fashionably call ‘habitus’ – are shaped within the structure and culture of the societies in which they live; and, on the other, that the structure and culture of societies are the product of, and continuously re-enacted through, the activities of individual people. I remember timidly discussing the question with George Homans, who was critical of many then-prevalent ideas in sociology. He shrugged his shoulders and barked that it was a non-problem. Quite right. But there has long been a tendency among sociological theorists and philosophers to believe that the apparent contradiction between these two truisms could be resolved conceptually. If the macro/micro problem really is a problem, though, it is essentially one to be resolved through the theoretical–empirical investigation of social processes of change or of relative persistence in particular times and places. C. Wright Mills put it best in his still inspiring book *The Sociological Imagination* (1959), when he described the task of sociologists as being ‘to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two in society’.

In retrospect, I can now see how serendipitous was my encounter with Norbert Elias, whom I met for the first time in 1972. At that time, already 75 years old, Elias had just begun to achieve belated academic celebrity in Germany and The Netherlands, but was still almost entirely unknown in the English-speaking world. His two early masterpieces, *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* and *Die höfische Gesellschaft*, written in the 1930s, were still unavailable in English, and Elias was yet to write or complete another dozen or so books in the remaining 18 years of his life. I only slowly came to know *The Civilizing Process* – as it subsequently came to be called – but in the end it certainly made a great impression on me. For here was a theoretical and empirical study which suggested how very long-term trends in European society – the division of labour, urbanization, and the growth of trade, the formation of states and the monopolization of the means of violence – were connected with changes in people’s habitus, seen in rising social pressures towards more habitual self-constraints and foresight, and the advance of thresholds of shame and embarrassment. In 1998, in a straw poll of members of the International Sociological Association, *The Civilizing Process* was even voted seventh in a list of the ten most influential sociology books of the century (there was no pretence, however, of the poll being properly representative of all the world’s sociologists). Vigorous, if minority, groups of researchers were busily using Elias’s ideas in their own research, testing and extending them
to new topics and in new areas – not just in Europe, but in the other con-
tinents: South America, Asia, Australia.

Yet a puzzle remained: why (to adapt the famous question posed by
Werner Sombart about the absence of strong socialist movements) was there no ‘Eliasianism’ in the United States? Or, if not literally none, then very little.

One reason why Elias’s work may not have achieved the resonance in
the USA that it has elsewhere is the long tradition of ‘American excep-
tionalism’. From John Winthrop’s vision of the New World as a ‘city upon
a hill’, a beacon for Old Europe, there has been a proud sense that America
is different: it is not Europe. And Elias often seems to be preoccupied with
just those features of European societies – notably aristocrats and courtiers
and well-defined class boundaries – that Founding Fathers like Thomas
Jefferson were very determined they had left behind. But debates about
American exceptionalism often resemble the proverbial dispute about
whether a glass of water is half full or half empty. It depends on the
observer’s angle of vision. If one looks at human beings from a sufficiently
high level of abstraction, they and their societies can all look alike. If one
chooses a very low level of abstraction, the differences between human
groups are so numerous that any pattern is lost in a mass of detail.

The chapters of this book can be read as a series of essays centring on
why America is as it is, and especially on how it resembles and how it
differs from Europe. But why I have chosen to write on these topics, and
how they are connected with each other, can only be understood through
their relation to Elias’s theory of civilizing processes and its various exten-
sions. For that reason, in the Prologue I have provided a brief sketch of
his main ideas.

It is now common for sociologists to concoct a theoretical pot-pourri
of concepts drawn from a number of recent ‘theorists’ and invoke them
at will at various points in what one is writing. Elias, in contrast, even
when he was little known, wrote – in Richard Kilminster’s phrase (1987:
215) – as if his own theory had ‘the right of way’. I have done so too, using
it as a ‘central theory’ (Quilley and Loyal, 2005) even though it is by no
means familiar to all social scientists, especially in the United States.
Although I refer to many other sociologists, historians and political sci-
entists, this book is laid out along the lines of Elias’s The Civilizing
Process, the structure of the two books loosely corresponding to each
other. After reading Elias’s masterpiece many times, I am still overawed
by it, still finding new insights. Yet Elias saw it as just one step along the
way towards understanding the problems of human coexistence with
which it was concerned; if his book was only exploratory, my own must
emphatically also be regarded as little more than an exploratory stimulus
to further research and discussion.
I am very much aware that an undertaking such as this carries risks for an author who is not himself American. Introducing a book about America by the great Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, Herbert Rowen shrewdly wrote:

When a foreign historian undertakes the study of the history of another country, he characteristically seeks to combine the native’s familiarity with the outsider’s freshness of approach. It is seldom that he can achieve the insider’s full sureness of touch, but he can come close to it by dint of sustained study. His new thoughts may on occasion betray not novelty but naïveté, yet at his best he sees clearly and sharply things that the native in his very familiarity with the material takes for granted. (In Huizinga, 1972a: viii)

Responsibility for any remaining outsider’s naivety is my own, but many friends and colleagues have helped to divert my steps from many more pitfalls. For their encouragement, advice and assistance, I should like to thank Rod Aya, Godfried van Benthem van den Bergh, Reinhard Blomert, Peter Burke, Randall Collins, Mark Cooney, Manuel Eisner, Alice Feldman, David Garland, Tom Garvin, Ademir Gebara, Daniel Gordon, Johan Heilbron, Andreas Hess, John Hudson, Tom Inglis, Richard Kilminster, Hermann Korte, Helmut Kuzmics, Steve Loyal, Arthur McCullough, Herminio Martins, Kevin Matthews, Bruce Mazlish, Barbara Mennell, Aogán Mulcahy, Ian O’Donnell, Margaret O’Keeffe, Steve Quilley, Chris Rojek, Richard Sennett, Richard Sinnott, Pieter Spierenburg, Ruud Stokvis, John Stone, Bram de Swaan, Arpád Szakolczai, Ariadne van der Ven, Nico Wilterdink, Alessandro Guardamagna and other members of my Master’s classes at UCD in 2004–6, and Stephen Hannon who drew the maps. Eric Dunning, Johan Goudsblom and Cas Wouters read each chapter as it was written, as well as the complete draft; my intellectual debt to them and to other members of the ‘figurational family’ over many years is immense. I should also mention that this already large book would probably have contained even longer discussions of informalization and relations between the sexes, and of sport and the rise of spectatorship, had it not been for the existence of comprehensive publications, especially by Cas and Eric, which I saw no reason to duplicate.

I should also like to acknowledge the indispensable gift of time to conduct this research arising from the award by University College Dublin of a President’s Research Award; it enabled me to spend the year 1999–2000 at St Antony’s College, Oxford, once again as the guest of Theodore Zeldin. Later, Tom Inglis, as a good friend and colleague, kindly agreed to deputize for me as Head of the Department of Sociology at UCD so that I could spend the first half of 2004 working on the book. Last revisions were made at the start of a sabbatical year in 2006–7 back in
Cambridge through the hospitality of my old college, St Catharine’s, and
with the support of a Government of Ireland Senior Research Fellowship
awarded by the Irish Research Council for the Humanities and Social
Sciences. Finally, my thanks to the Toledo Museum of Art, Toledo, Ohio,
for permission to reproduce the painting by Broughton on page 165.

Writing about American history today often raises questions of nomen-
clature in light of powerful standards of political correctness, which nev-
ertheless change so quickly that there is a danger of the rapid onset of
anachronism. Over the last few decades, there has been a whole sequence
of terms considered to be the polite way of referring to the descendants
Americans’, ‘people of colour’. Similarly, ‘Native American’ has super-
seded the older ‘Indian’. I have attempted to avoid both offence and
anachronism by using an older term whenever a newer term might read
incongruously.
Prologue: Civilizing Processes

Viewed from Europe, America is a land of familiar paradoxes. An agreeable civility habitually prevails in most everyday relations among people in America – yet the United States is almost the last bastion among advanced democratic nations of capital punishment.1 In most parts of America, the laws and social customs strongly restrain people from doing harm to themselves and others by smoking – yet the laws and social customs only weakly restrain people from doing harm to themselves and others by the use of guns, and the murder rate is about four times as high per capita as in Western Europe. Ever since independence, Americans have fostered a spirit of New World egalitarianism proudly contrasted with the stuffy and hierarchical Old World – yet that spirit has coexisted with social inequalities greater in many respects than those found in Western Europe. The USA is the world’s remaining superpower – yet internally the American state is in some ways strikingly weak. America leads the world in science, technology and higher education – yet religious belief and observance has risen there while it has fallen in Europe.

Can history and the social sciences help to explain these seeming paradoxes and show how they are related to each other? This book is intended to make a contribution by using Norbert Elias’s theory of civilizing processes to shed some light on the course of American social development since the beginnings of European settlement. Elias developed his theory through the study mainly of European history. He linked changes in people’s everyday behaviour, in the codes of manners they followed and in their typical feelings and emotions, to the formation of states with relatively effective monopolies of violence and to changes in the balances of power between social groups within states. The aim of this book is to look both at whether underlying processes similar to those traced by Elias
through European history can also be seen at work in the development of the USA, and at those aspects in which the American experience is evidently different.

The sense of being different from Europe has played a leading part in American thought since the beginning of European colonization. So too, however, has been the sense of America’s being an offspring of Europe, and of Europe’s sternly critical parental watchfulness over all things American. Both elements were already present in the famous remarks of John Winthrop, first Governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, supposedly delivered on board the *Arabella* just before landing at the site of Boston in 1630:

> wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man, wee must entertaine each other in brotherly Affeccion, wee must be willing to abridge our selves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities, wee must uphold a familiar Commerce together in all meekenes, gentlenes, patience and liberallity . . . allwayes having before our eyes . . . our Community as members of the same body, soe shall wee keepe the unitie of the spirit in the bond of peace . . .: for we must Consider that we shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are uppon us; soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. (1994 [1630]: 111–12)

The relevance of Europe to subsequent American social and political development has been debated among American intellectuals for many decades. In the late nineteenth century, at the high tide of social evolutionism, Herbert Baxter Adams of Johns Hopkins University was the leading advocate of what came to be known as the ‘germ theory’ of American institutions. Against the view that America represented a new beginning, he argued:

> Wherever organic life occurs there must have been some seed for that life. . . . It is just as improbable that free local institutions should spring up without a germ along American shores as that English wheat should have grown here without planting. Town institutions were propagated on New England by old English and German ideas, brought over by Pilgrims and Puritans, and as ready to take root in the free soil of America as would Egyptian grain which had been drying in a mummy-case for thousands of years. (1882: 8)

A little later, Edward Eggleston set out to make an inventory of the ‘mental outfit’ of the early colonists, because:

> In taking account of the mental furniture of which the early English emigrants carried aboard ship with them, we shall gain a knowledge of what
may be called the original investment from which has been developed Anglo-Saxon culture in America. The mother country of the United States was England in the first half of the seventeenth century, or, at most, England before the Revolution of 1688. (1901: 1)

The early colonists’ minds were thus furnished not just with various kinds of Christian religious belief but also, among other things, with beliefs in astrology and horoscopes, spontaneous generation, an invisible world and witchcraft, a taste for brutal pastimes such as bull-baiting, and codes of behaviour deeply permeated by the consciousness of hierarchy.

How far, though, did the European ‘germs’ multiplying in American soil develop into strains distinct from those which grew in eighteenth-, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe, and why? The most celebrated counterblast to the germ theory was Frederick Jackson Turner’s 1893 paper, ‘The Significance of the Frontier in American History’. In essence, Turner contended that from the earliest decades of European settlement in America, the availability of free land on the westward-moving frontier had set American society on a profoundly different track of development from that followed by European societies. Life on the frontier had meant a recurring return to ‘primitive conditions’, from which American social development had been ‘continually beginning again’. At first, the wilderness mastered the colonist, and then ‘little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not the old Europe’ (Turner, 1947: 3). Later in this book I will argue that, for all its imprecision and overstatement, the ‘Turner thesis’ contains insights still valuable in understanding important facets of American society. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, however, it fell greatly out of favour and was picked to pieces by historians drawing on a wealth of later research. In fact, the political theorist Louis Hartz swung to the opposite pole. The Turner thesis, commented Hartz, ‘by seizing on the “native” factor of the frontier, reflected the loss of memory of Europe in American history as a whole’ (1964: 69). Hartz himself revived something resembling the old Johns Hopkins germ theory. He viewed the USA as one of several ‘fragment societies’ which broke off from Europe in the early modern period – other examples being Latin America, South Africa, Canada and Australia. He suggested that such societies continue to exhibit the characteristics of Europe at the time they broke away, and that ‘when a part of a European nation is detached from the whole of it, and hurled outward on to new soil, it loses the stimulus towards change that the whole provides. It lapses into a kind of immobility’ (ibid.: 3). This is surely an overstatement in relation to the United States, and could seem even barely plausible only to someone whose preoccupation was principally with the history of political ideas
rather than with the development of social structures, institutions and people’s social character.²

The fundamental fault in debates of this kind is that they have tended to be cast in dichotomous and static terms. It is not an either/or question. America’s institutional and intellectual debt to Europe cannot be assessed for all time as a fixed percentage. Nor can the relative autonomy of the development of American society from that of Europe. The debt plainly diminished and the autonomy equally plainly increased over time, as America grew and as the balance of interdependence between it and the countries of Europe swung in America’s favour. Yet even if the autonomy of American development increased over time, it has never been total.³ What is needed, in understanding the connections between superficially disparate aspects of America, is a thoroughly processual and relational model which takes into account how the connections change over time.

In this context, Norbert Elias’s theory of civilizing processes is useful in several ways. As a model of the interconnectedness of many strands of European social development, it shows something of what Eggleston called the ‘original investment’ that European settlers brought with them to America. At the same time, it helps in avoiding the shopping-basket image in which American borrowings from Europe (and vice versa) are recorded as lists of discrete items: the inheritance was of highly interconnected processes, not just of shreds and patches.⁴ The rest of this prologue will be devoted to sketching Elias’s theory in outline, in preparation for a prolonged investigation of how far it can help to account for the character and development of American society.⁵

The theory of civilizing processes

All the main elements of Elias’s theory are to be found in The Civilizing Process, although many of them were further developed and refined in later books and articles. His magnum opus was first published in German in 1939, but little known until reissued 30 years later, and not available in English until 1978–82.⁶ Elias saw his work as exploratory, never as the definitive and exhaustive study, and later he often spoke of ‘civilizing processes’ in the plural, because there are many interwoven component parts. Moreover, although he was studying Europe, he did not intend to imply that what had unfolded in Europe was the single and unique civilizing process. Nevertheless, the book has become known as The Civilizing Process. It is organized into four parts, to which corresponds the structure of the present book.
Civilization and culture

One of the ways in which people in the modern West most like to see themselves is as ‘civilized’. The connotations of collective self-approbation which have become attached to the word ‘civilization’ certainly complicate the use of the concept of ‘civilizing process’ as a tool of relatively detached analysis. Elias confronts this problem in Part I of The Civilizing Process, where he discusses the origins of the concepts of civilisation in France and Kultur in Germany. He makes it clear from the beginning that his is not a theory of ‘progress’, let alone of inevitable progress. Nor is it an instance of the Western triumphalism that Edward Said (1978) would later discuss under the rubric of ‘orientalism’. Elias was not putting his own moral evaluations of good and bad on the ideas of ‘civilization’ and ‘civilized behaviour’, but showing the social historical context in which all sorts of positive evaluations had accreted around particular facets of behaviour and of cultural expression (and negative evaluations around others). As a ‘commonsense’ rather than a scientific concept, the term ‘civilization’ had come to serve a specific social function:

[T]he concept expresses the self-consciousness of the West. . . . It sums up everything in which Western society of the last two or three centuries believes itself superior to earlier societies or ‘more primitive’ contemporary ones. By this term Western society seeks to describe what constitutes its special character and what it is proud of: the level of its technology, the nature of its manners, the development of its scientific knowledge or view of the world, and much more. (Elias, 2000: 5)

The new word civilisation came into use in France with these collectively self-approving connotations from the latter half of the eighteenth century. Enlightenment intellectuals were the first to use it in connection with ideas of progress and social reform, deriving it from civilité, the word which courtly aristocrats had used since the sixteenth century to describe their own polished manners and courtly modes of behaviour. By the nineteenth century, the ways in which people in the West used the word civilization showed that they had forgotten the long process of civilization through which their ancestors’ behaviour and feelings had changed and been socially moulded from generation to generation. They had come to think of the traits they considered in ‘civilization’ as innate in themselves and their fellow Westerners, and indeed as inherent in what they unabashedly then termed the ‘white race’.

Elias, however, regarded these evaluative connotations simply as sociological data, as changes at the level of ideas corresponding in complex ways to changes in people’s actual behaviour and feelings. To be more exact, his central concern was with changes in what he called Habitus.
Elias defined habitus as ‘second nature’ – it refers to that level of habits of thinking, feeling and behaving which are in fact learned from early childhood onwards, but which become so deeply ingrained that they feel ‘innate’, as if we had never had to learn them. These are especially the characteristics which individuals share with fellow members of the groups in which they have learned them, and they become unconscious of the process of learning. So the next section of *The Civilizing Process* is a study of the changes in the course of which certain forms of behaviour came to be regarded among the secular upper classes in Western Europe as superior and others as inferior.

**Civilization as changing habitus**

Central to Elias’s conception of a civilizing process is the *increasing social constraint towards self-constraint*. The long-term growth of complexity, of the spreading web of social interdependence, is associated with a tilting of the balance between external constraints (*Fremdzwänge* – literally constraints by strangers, or more generally by other people) and self-restraints (*Selbstzwänge*), towards the latter’s greater weight in the steering of individual people’s conduct. Steady and consistent social pressure towards self-constraint is most effective in tilting the balance in favour of more demanding social standards of habitual self-control.

For evidence, Elias looks to changes in manners in Europe since the Middle Ages. His principal sources are the numerous ‘manners books’ of Germany, France, England and Italy which, from the thirteenth to the nineteenth century, set out the standards of behaviour that were socially acceptable among the secular upper classes. The earlier ones dealt with very basic questions of ‘outward bodily propriety’ which it would later become embarrassing even to mention. They told their readers how to handle food and conduct themselves at table; how, when and when not to fart, burp or spit; how to blow their noses; how to behave when urinating or defecating or encountering someone else in the act of doing so; how to behave when sharing a bed with other people at an inn, and so on. In earlier centuries, such matters were spoken of openly and frankly, without shame. Then gradually, from the Renaissance said Elias, thresholds of shame and embarrassment advanced: a long-term trend became evident towards more elaborate codes of behaviour, towards more demanding standards of habitual self-control and towards silence in later centuries on some of the topics that earlier books had discussed at length.

Eating, drinking, urinating, defecating, spitting, blowing one’s nose, sleeping, having sex are things that human beings cannot biologically avoid doing, no matter what society, culture or age they live in. All societies have always had some conventions about how they should be
handled – there is no zero-point, no ‘state of nature’ in which there are no social constraints whatsoever on how people handle these things. On the other hand, there is a zero-point in the individual lifetime: human infants are born without such habitual constraints and have to learn whatever are the standards prevailing in their time, place, social stratum, national or ethnic group. Since the lifetime point of departure is always the same, if changes take place from generation to generation in the social conventions that children have to learn, changes are especially clear in relation to these universal matters of outward bodily propriety. But changes can also be tracked in conventions governing other matters which will be more central to this study of the USA, such as in the use of violence and in ways of expressing superiority and inferiority.

Priests had for centuries drawn up Latin compendia of precepts of Christian behaviour, but the manners books studied by Elias were addressed to the secular upper classes, and mainly in the vernacular languages of Europe. Early authors in the genre include some famous names: Tannhäuser in the thirteenth century, Caxton in the fifteenth, Castiglione and Erasmus in the sixteenth. The books’ audience was in the beginning specifically a courtly one. All the early terms for good behaviour – courtesy, courtoisie, cortezia, Hofzucht – refer to courts, to a specific powerful and prestigious location in society. Standards appear to have been set first in courtly circles around great lords. Later, the audience for the books widened to include provincial knights and nobility – and even the higher bourgeoisie who might aspire to join the court and to emulate the courtiers’ standards of seemly behaviour. By the eighteenth century, separate books for the bourgeoisie appeared, setting out standards which resembled those of courtly circles perhaps a generation earlier. As we shall see in chapter 3, there was a ready market in America for European manners books or imitations of them.

Table manners illustrate the general pattern of development. Compared with later periods, the medieval books place relatively few prohibitions on behaviour at table. One was told not to slurp soup from one’s spoon or smack one’s lips noisily. Everyone took food from a common dish, placed it on a plate or a trencher of bread and ate with the fingers, but it was bad manners to put something one had chewed back in the pot. One should not blow one’s nose on the tablecloth. For cutting up food, one used one’s own general-purpose knife or dagger. By Caxton’s time (about 1477–8), there were some prohibitions on the use of knives – they were not to be passed blade first to other people, nor pointed at one’s own face. The fork made its appearance in elite circles in the sixteenth century, but took centuries to trickle down the social scale. By 1560 it was more common for each guest to have his or her own spoon. By the late seventeenth century, one no longer ate soup directly from the common bowl. Courtin reported
in 1672 that there were now some gens si délicats that they would not wish to serve themselves from the soup tureen when someone else had helped himself to a second helping with a spoon that had already been in his mouth. So one must at least wipe one’s spoon on one’s napkin or, better still, ask for a clean spoon for the purpose. Such was the stage reached by table manners in the best circles in Europe a few decades after the beginning of European settlement in North America, and there is no reason to suppose that most of the early settlers were among the avant garde in these matters. In later manners books, many of these things no longer needed to be said (except to small children), and even to mention them would be embarrassing and/or amusing. A similar sequence is found in what the successive manners books have to say about nose-blowing, spitting, the ‘natural functions’, dressing and undressing, and sexual relations.

What common pattern of development underlies these changes in social standards in relation to the various aspects of behaviour?

In general, says Elias, the medieval standards, in comparison with later times, could be described as simple, naive and undifferentiated. The impulses and inclinations were less restrained, the commands direct: don’t slurp; don’t put gnawed bones back in the common pot; don’t blow your nose on the tablecloth; don’t urinate on the staircase. Over and over again, down the centuries, the same good and bad manners were mentioned, and yet ‘the social code hardened into lasting habits only to a limited extent in people themselves’ (Elias, 2000: 70). Then, at the time of the Renaissance, change becomes perceptible: the social compulsion to check one’s behaviour increased. To Caxton, in the late fifteenth century, it was already evident that social standards had been set in motion: ‘Things once allowed are now reproved’, he remarked in his Book of Curtesye (c. 1477). Erasmus, writing half a century later, was himself a pivotal figure in an age of transition – in his minor work on manners as much as in his important contributions to the larger intellectual world. He showed all the old medieval unconcern in referring directly to matters later too disgusting to mention, and yet at the same time his recommendations were enriched and nuanced by considerations of what people might think. He tells boys to sit still and not constantly shift about because that gives the impression of always farting or trying to fart. This tendency became more pronounced over the generations. In 1672 Courtin told his readers not to use fingers when eating greasy foods, since that led to the need to lick one’s fingers, which was ‘distasteful to behold’. The rule about not eating with one’s hands was not at first as absolute and consistent as later, and only very gradually did the prohibition become an internalized habit, an aspect of ‘self-control’.9

As many things were no longer spoken about, so were they increasingly moved behind the scenes of social life. This is seen most obviously in the
case of urination and defecation, in the greater privacy of the bedroom and in feelings about nakedness. It is also seen in the requirements for greater care and discretion in spitting or blowing one’s nose in the presence of others. It is also possible to speak figuratively of things being moved behind the scenes of mental life. Since newly forming standards were at first generally not absolute and unambiguous but conditional upon circumstance – especially the company one was in – conformity with the latest in refinement might require conscious effort even among adults. But in due course children were trained by adults not only to conform in their behaviour, but also to feel shame, embarrassment and disgust – automatically, and in circumstances which a generation or two earlier would not have been felt at all, even among adults. Why, for instance, did people come to feel disgust at eating with sticky fingers? Because social superiors made subordinates feel inferior when eating like that, and because adults told children that such habits were disgusting:

[T]he displeasure towards such conduct which is thus aroused by the adult finally arises through habit, without being induced by [the present action of] another person. . . . The social standard to which the individual was first made to conform from outside by external restraint is finally reproduced more or less smoothly within him or her, through a self-restraint which operates to a certain degree even against his or her conscious wishes. (Elias, 2000: 109)

The advance of the threshold of shame and embarrassment (or repugnance) thus involves a tilting of the balance between external constraints and self-restraints in the steering of conduct that is central to Elias’s conception of a civilizing process.

What were the social and psychological processes that led to these changes? They were not driven wholly by rational consideration of, for example, hygiene – changes in standards of behaviour tended to predate advances in relevant medical knowledge. A clue lies in the reasons given in the manners books for the merits of the newer over the older standards. The earlier and less restrained behaviour was said to show a lack of respect for one’s social superiors. Only after a long period of transition did shame in such matters come in the nineteenth century also to be felt by the superior in the presence of inferiors, and as the standard came to apply more equally to all ranks, so the controls became more and more automatic, ‘unconscious’ and ‘natural’ for all adults. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, this process had not run its full course in Europe, so the very great concern of early settlers in America with questions of social rank is not so surprising as it sometimes appears to modern readers who have been brought up to think of the settlers as egalitarian.
Correct behaviour and its relation to social rank appear to have become more of a problem in Europe at the time of the Renaissance. In the feudal society of the Middle Ages, ‘the behavioural differences between different estates in the same region were often greater than those between regionally separate representatives of the same social stratum’, and models of behaviour developed in one stratum permeated only slowly and imperfectly to other ranks of society (Elias, 2000: 100). Towards the end of the Middle Ages, however, the old ruling class of warriors was in decline – thinned out through warfare, economically undermined by the growth of the market economy and the emergence of rich and powerful entrepreneurs, and increasingly subordinate to a small number of powerful kings. There was no sudden emergence of an egalitarian, non-hierarchical society, but old social ties were loosened, individuals of different social origins were increasingly thrown together and the social circulation of ascending and descending groups and individuals speeded up (ibid.: 68). Then, slowly, in the course of the sixteenth century, a more rigid social hierarchy began to be established once more, as a new aristocratic upper class began to form from elements of diverse social origins. This started earlier in some parts of Europe than others – England was among the earliest – and there were reversals well into the seventeenth century. But everywhere in Western Europe there was emerging a new upper class of courtiers. The old warrior nobility was being tamed; over the generations some families sank into provincial obscurity, but others adhered to the growing royal courts. Also attracted to the courts were other people whose origins lay in the professional and commercial bourgeoisie. Forced in the courts to live with one another in a new way, these people were more acutely confronted with the problem of what constituted a uniform standard of good behaviour. As Elias shows in more detail in The Court Society (2006), very gradually, in accordance with the newly emergent power ratios, courtiers had by the reign of Louis XIV (1643–1715) developed a high level of sensitivity to status on the basis of fine nuances of bearing, speech, manners and appearance.

Nuances of behaviour, indeed, became a principal mark of distinction among the courtly elite; for it was what Elias (following Georg Simmel) termed a ‘two-front stratum’. With the growth of absolutist monarchies in France and Spain, and later in Prussia, Austria and other states of the Holy Roman Empire and Italy, courtiers became highly dependent on kings ‘above’ them for lucrative offices and positions of prestige – all the more dependent because their social identity became more and more tied up with a style of life that many could ill afford to maintain. At the same time, they were exposed to ‘pressure from below’ by the rising commercial and official bourgeoisie. The customs, behaviour and fashions of the courtly elite were continually being imitated by the strata immediately
beneath them. Indeed, by asserting their power as definers of *savoir-vivre*,
courtly circles actively promoted the adoption of their ways by inferiors:
in effect they ‘colonized’ the bourgeoisie, as Elias puts it. Yet, as elite
manners were imitated, they inevitably lost something of their value as a
means of distinguishing the upper class. This compelled those above
towards still further refinements of their standards, as a means of ‘repul-
sion’ of those below.

Courtly characteristics were never dominant in the North American
colonies – though stronger in some colonies than others. That should not
blind one to the possibility that some of the processes at work in courtly
circles in Europe could be observed at work in rather different times and
contexts in America; one need only mention Thorstein Veblen’s account
in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) of ‘conspicuous consumption’
among American plutocrats in the ‘Gilded Age’ at the end of the nine-
teenth century.

**Violence and state-formation**

Aggressiveness, violence and cruelty are another area of habitus in which
a similar long-term curve of the civilizing process can be discerned among
Western European people. Theologians, philosophers and social theorists
have speculated for centuries about whether aggression and violence are
innate and universal in human beings. Certainly they have never been
absent from any human society, and the shocking wars and genocides of
the twentieth century make it tempting to believe that they are constant
and universal. Yet the social moulding even of aggressiveness is well doc-
umented: not its elimination altogether, but its modelling or moulding.

In the early Middle Ages, the majority of the secular ruling class in
Western Europe were leaders of armed bands. For them, war was a
normal state of society, and they had little social function other than to
wage it. It is difficult, says Elias, for many people today to grasp the joy
and exultation they felt in the clash of arms, but still less easy to come to
terms with the sheer pleasure warriors then derived from cruelty, from the
torment and destruction of other human beings. Long into the Middle
Ages, the mutilation of prisoners was practised with evident relish. So
were rape and pillage in victory. Very gradually over the centuries, these
military pleasures were subjected to increasingly strong control anchored
in the state organization. Indeed, tighter discipline and control over the
impulses came more and more to be conditions of success in the chang-
ing circumstances of military conflict: the wild venting of aggressive
impulses in hand-to-hand combat became a steadily less sufficient condi-
tion for victory. The pleasure taken in cruelty, torment and killing was by
no means confined to a military context. For centuries, people at large
also experienced well-documented pleasurable excitement in the spectacle of burning heretics, public torture and executions.

Elias did not suggest that medieval people were constantly aggressive, violent and cruel. More characteristic of their temperament – and here Elias drew on the insights of Johan Huizinga (1972b [1924]), confirmed by much subsequent historical research – was their volatility, their propensity to switch suddenly from mood to mood, from merriment via sudden offence at a joke taken too far, for example, to violent brawling. Elias argued that aggressiveness and impulses towards cruelty and ready resort to violence – not unlike eating behaviour or the ‘natural functions’ – underwent a long-term process of moulding, curbing and taming. They too came to find expression in more ‘refined’ and indirect forms. But something resembling the earlier volatile habitus may survive, or be recreated, in parts of modern societies where levels of danger and incalculability remain high and where ‘civilizing’ pressures are weak and inconsistent (see chapter 6). Today, some criminologists describe delinquents in much the same way as Elias’s account of the medieval character-type, and offer much the same explanation in terms of uneven social controls and poorly developed self-controls (see, for instance, the concept of ‘control balance’ advanced by Tittle, 1995).

The taming of aggressiveness is thus linked, according to Elias, to a broad change in the structure of society. Medieval society had lacked any central power over large territories to compel people to restrain their impulses towards violence, but he contended that, ‘if in this or that region the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of the affects and the standards of emotion-management are very gradually changed as well’ (2000: 169; translation modified). This proposition leads Elias into an extended investigation of the formation of states in Western Europe, which occupies the major part of the original second volume of The Civilizing Process. Readers are still sometimes surprised and puzzled by this jump from the apparently ‘micro-level’ study of behaviour to the apparently ‘macro-level’ study of states. Elias was later to explain it as follows:

One could imagine a condition of human coexistence where people do not need external restraint in order to refrain from the use of violence in their relationships with others. One could imagine a society whose members are able to rely entirely on self-restraint – without any extraneous restraint – in observing the common rules that they have worked out over the course of generations, as regulators of their lives together. In that case, individual self-restraint would be strong and reliable enough to make any external restraining force unnecessary. . . . That would be a very advanced form of human civilization. It would require . . . a measure and a pattern of
individual self-constraint all round which, at the present stage of social development, and within it, of the civilizing process, are not yet attainable. Nor is it certain that they will ever be attainable, though it is worth trying. As long as this condition has not been reached, the individual self-restraint of men and women requires reinforcement through external restraints, by means of agencies which are specially licensed to threaten or to use physical violence if that is necessary, in order to ensure a peaceful coexistence of people within their society. (2007a: 140–1)

Elias’s account of state-formation takes its departure from Max Weber’s (1978 [1922]: I, 54) definition of the state as an organization which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule-making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. (Throughout my book, the term ‘state’ is used in this sense, unless the context makes clear that I am referring to the states of the Union. The normal meaning of the word ‘state’ in America denotes an entity that under other systems of government might be called ‘provinces’ or Länder.) To the idea of a monopoly of violence, however, Elias added ‘and taxation’. In the earliest stages of the formation of effective states, it is futile to try to draw a clear line between the ‘economic’ and the ‘political’. The threat of or the actual use of violence are the necessary means by which warrior lords – leaders of armed bands – extract tribute in kind (or, less probably, in cash) from peasants and tradesmen. Such tributes, equally, are the necessary means by which an armed band can be maintained, its monopoly established and its territory extended. To call them taxation at this early stage would be to beg the question; the line between taxation and what in a different context we would now call a ‘protection racket’ is a fine one. The word taxation becomes justified only when an effective and stable monopoly apparatus has been established, and (generally even later) when the subjects at large within the territory have come to recognize that only that apparatus has a legitimate right to make such exactions. By that stage, the violent aspect of the monopoly may – like so many other repugnant aspects of life – to some extent be hidden behind the scenes of social life. Force is, literally and figuratively, confined to barracks.

To say that a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence and taxation has been established does not mean, of course, that other people – outside the apparatus – never resort to violence in their dealings with each other. What it means is that, however legitimate and justified people may consider their own resort to violence in their private dealings with each other, the agents of the monopoly do not consider it so, and take action to assert their monopoly. Less abstractly, if one commits an act of violence against one’s neighbour within the territory of an effective state, one must reckon with a high probability of being punished for it. Indeed, like ‘taxation’,
the word ‘punishment’ becomes justified only when an effective and stable monopoly apparatus has been established: without established state authority, there are only feuds and revenge killing. ‘Punishment’ requires a monopoly of the power to punish.

Elias sought to show in much more detail than did Weber the long-term processes through which increasingly effective monopolies of violence and taxation have taken shape. The first section of the original second volume of *The Civilizing Process* (2000: 195–256) discusses the period of the early Middle Ages, after the fall of the Roman Empire in the West, when the centrifugal forces dominant in the process of feudalization resulted in the extreme fragmentation of Western Europe into countless tiny territories each controlled by a local warlord. The process proceeded faster in the area approximating to what we now call France than in that centred on what we now call Germany (although political fragmentation was to persist in Germany, and in Italy, for a long time after a large state had emerged in roughly the hexagon of modern France). The principal reason why centrifugal forces dominated over centripetal tendencies – in an era of reduced population, decaying roads, declining long-distance trade and repeated invasions by marauding bands – was that the only means kings then had of paying subordinates to administer distant territories was to give them the land from which they could support themselves. The means of supporting themselves were identical with the means of making them rulers of the territory independent of the king to whom they nominally owed allegiance. Political autarky went hand in hand with economic autarky: they were mutually reinforcing.

Early in the second millennium AD, at least in the region that was to become France, the balance tilted once more in favour of centripetal, centralizing forces. A very long section of Elias’s work is devoted to the twists and turns of how the early modern French state emerged (2000: 257–362). It was not inevitable that there would be a single country corresponding to France in its present boundaries: it was not preordained nor in any sense planned that the kings whose principal seat was Paris would extend their territories until they reached the boundaries of the hexagon, and then stop. For much of the Middle Ages the Paris kings were locked in combat with other French-speaking kings whose principal city was London, but who often controlled more of what is now France than did the Paris kings. Even towards the end of the medieval period, there was a resurgence of centrifugal forces when members of the royal family, assigned regions as apanages to govern on behalf of the king, used them to reassert their autonomy.

Even if state-formation in Europe did not unfold in linear fashion, and its outcome was in considerable measure affected by chance and accident, Elias was able to point to a number of part-processes running fairly
consistent through it in the long term. State-formation was a violent competitive process through which there emerged successively larger territorial units with more effective monopoly apparatuses. Initially, around the year 1000, there were relatively small disparities in strength between the rulers of the many small territories, who fought out an ‘elimination contest’ with each other, the victor in each round absorbing his defeated rival’s land, so that a smaller number of steadily larger territories arose. In explaining this, Elias alluded to the westward expansion of America, quoting what was once said of an American pioneer: ‘He didn’t want all the land; he just wanted the land next to his’ (2000: 312). The more or less continuous warfare between neighbouring magnates in the European Middle Ages is not to be explained primarily by the aggressive psychological characteristics of warlords. In an age when power was so directly correlated with the amount of land one controlled, it was impossible for a ruler of unusually pacific temperament to sit idly by as his neighbours slugged it out with each other, for the victorious neighbour would then control a larger territory and be able next to defeat the would-be passive observer. True, there is much evidence that most medieval warriors thoroughly enjoyed warfare, but they had to: they would not have survived in a social situation so structured had they not. Aggressiveness, remarked Elias, may more nearly be explained as the outcome of conflict than conflict as the outcome of aggressiveness – though, to be more accurate, it is a two-way relationship through time.

The state-formation process was Janus-faced. On the one hand, larger territories underwent internal pacification. On the other hand, the scale of warfare steadily increased through European history. In what became France, for instance, the local skirmishes in the early stages of the elimination contest gave way to a struggle between the Paris kings and the London kings, which was prolonged over several centuries. When the Valois were finally victorious, they immediately entered a lengthy contest with the Habsburgs and the Hohenzollerns, the process culminating in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 and the two ‘World Wars’ of the twentieth century. Long before that, of course, several of the European states had begun to control territories beyond Europe, to acquire empires in other continents – including in North America – where they fought wars both with each other and with previous inhabitants.

Although the precise outcome differed from case to case, within each of the developing states of Western Europe certain common processes can be discerned. One of them Elias calls the monopoly mechanism. In the course of the elimination contest between many territorial magnates, a smaller number of central rulers emerged with more extensive lands and, by extension, with more of other power resources by which they were able gradually to make their monopoly of the means of violence and taxation
within their territories more complete and effective. Alongside this operated the royal mechanism, the accretion of power to the social position of kings and princes through their ability to play off rival social interests against each other – typically, by the late Middle Ages, the relatively evenly balanced forces of the old warrior nobility and the rising commercial bourgeoisie. Kings often threw their weight on the side of the second most powerful group as a counterbalance to the most powerful. A necessary third component was the transformation of private into public monopolies. Administrative functions became too large and varied to be handled by a king and his immediate staff, so bureaucracies of an increasingly ‘public’ character developed.

Each stage in these processes was fought over. The old warrior nobility did not give up its regional autonomy without many struggles. In France, the last big aristocratic rising was the Fronde, early in the reign of Louis XIV, after which le roi soleil completed the ‘courtization’ of the remaining warrior caste and its thorough subordination to the royal power, which played so important a part in the development of courtly civility. In England, in a period that coincided with the first decades of European settlement in America, events took a different turn. Although the Tudors and early Stuarts appeared to have established a more secure royal monopoly than their French contemporaries, and to be well on the way to creating a court society and royal absolutist regime, the consequence of their efforts was the civil wars of the mid-seventeenth century, the beginning of a cycle of violence which diminished but did not finally die away until the early eighteenth century. Although the monarchy was restored in 1660, the balance of power between the king and the landowning class was never afterwards so unequal as it became in France. Moreover, as much by chance as otherwise, the outcome of the cycle of violence in England was a relatively equal balance of power in Parliament between two factions of the landowning class, a circumstance conducive to their evolving into the Whig and Tory parties, which peacefully alternated with each other in office. This was the social context in which John Locke wrote, and such were the nascent institutions which were to influence the early development of America.

If Elias pays most attention to state-formation, he sees it as only one important thread interweaving with others in a long-term overall process of social development which enmeshed individuals in increasingly complex webs of interdependence. It interweaves with the division of labour, the growth of towns and trade, the use of money, and increasing population, in a spiral process. Internal pacification of territory facilitates trade, which facilitates the growth of towns and division of labour and generates taxes which support larger administrative and military organizations, which in turn facilitate the internal pacification of larger