



Mary Fulbrook, ed. *Un-Civilizing Processes? Excess and Transgression in German Society and Culture: Perspectives Debating with Norbert Elias.* Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 296 pp. \$86.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-90-420-2151-8.

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Dismembering and Remembering the Civilizing Process in German History

In this enticing book, editor and author Mary Fulbrook examines the problematic of the civilizing process in German history. At first glance, the analytic focus of the contributions seems to be concerned with Germany's uneasy path toward modernity, as suggested by the first descriptive portion of the book's title. But this commitment is further qualified by the final and somewhat obtuse title segment: the phrasing "perspectives debating with Norbert Elias" holds a theoretical and analytical promise not fulfilled by the contributions assembled in this publication. So what is the primary goal of this edited volume?

In her introductory chapter, "The Character and Limits of the Civilizing Process," Fulbrook assesses the shortcomings of the European civilizing project as envisioned by philosopher and social scientist Elias in an attempt to contest the notion of a German "special path" or *Sonderweg* to modernity. However, this revisionist enterprise, which wants to situate German society firmly within a European trajectory of a normal western modernity, proceeds by an inspection of the German past from the Middle Ages through the twentieth century. As Fulbrook writes, "we have chosen to approach Germanic culture and society from a variety of perspectives: exploring both 'high culture'—quintessential medieval, classical and modern literary texts—and broader cultural and social currents, including art, music, laughter and table manners; exploring both the developments of the language and imagination, as well as the social and political structures and the often violent events which marked the

twisting patterns of German history" (p. 2). In this ambitious project, theoretical controversies regarding the normality or aberration of Germany's violent modernity are analytically ignored, the works of Elias are invoked as a heuristic device that simultaneously supports and disturbs the civilizing process in German social history. Thus, according to Fulbrook, the chapter contributions "focus on moments of excess and transgression, moments when the culturally defined boundaries and norms of 'civilized conduct,' the very boundaries of 'civilization,' are both constructed and challenged" (p. 2). Throughout the book, the concept of the "civilizing process" is continuously reified by its deployment and invocation as a canvas for measuring German conformity or deviation from the presumed European standard of civility.

The underlying motive for this critical excavation of German social history is forged by an attempt to demystify the tragedy of National Socialism and to rethink the incomprehensible atrocities committed under the Nazi regime. Such an inquiry would, however, require a concentrated investigation of the potential or actual formation of a violent modernity in twentieth-century Europe. Yet, the debate with Norbert Elias, which is postulated in terms of "point[ing] up gaps, inconsistencies and problematic assumptions underlying his approach" (p. 2), diffuses this issue entirely. The demolition of Elias's work is another project altogether. A meaningful fusion of these distinct aims would require an analytic framework that integrates Norbert Elias's precursory insights about the nexus between society, state apparatus, and emotions

with more recent scholarly understandings on the making of modern subjectivities (such as Michel Foucault, Sherry Ortner, Slavoj Žižek, myself, James Faubion, and others). In addition, the volume's introductory promise of providing multiple perspectives on these matters is negated by the fact that almost all of the contributors come from departments of German, which may explain why the volume (with a single exception) does not engage important advances in social science theorizations on modern violence.

Elias, who left Germany after Hitler came to power in 1933, published *The Civilizing Process* in 1939, a multi-volume work in which he linked the individual psyche with broader changes in the historical and political context to explain changing thresholds of shame and embarrassment. The contributors to Fulbrook's volume *Un-Civilizing Processes* apply select facets of his ideas to German society within different historical periods. Among the topics discussed in the eleven chapters are the regulation of cursing and swearing in German through the ages, transgression in modern wars, music chambers in Wilhelmine Germany, and the West German anti-authoritarian movement and the semiotics of dirt.

The initial several chapters following the editor's introduction critique Elias's work by focusing on notable shortcomings and absences. In chapter 2, we learn about the role of laughter in medieval courtly society. In "Laughter and the Process of Civilization in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*," Sebastian Coxon analyzes how the German nobility in the High Middle Ages used laughter as a "communicative gesture" (p. 28), an insight presumably lacking in Elias's works. In a somewhat contrived integration of the "civilizing process," Coxon seeks to correct what he describes as Elias's overly "simplistic" depiction of medieval courtly society, where laughter could be variously deployed to connote "offense, mockery and wit" and where laughing functioned as a means for "conflict avoidance, resolution or provocation" in specific social situations (p. 38). In chapter 3, Geraldine Horane similarly aims to remedy blind spots in Elias's works by examining the role of language use. In "(Un-) Civilized Language: The Regulation of Cursing and Swearing in German through the Ages," Horane adopts a relativistic position by arguing that "every speech community in every historical period develops its own communicative repertoire" with corresponding "boundaries of expression" (pp. 40-41). While critiquing Elias and corroborating his "model of civilization," Horane concludes that each era "has to establish new systems of external enforcement and self-regulation to protect civilized soci-

ety" (p. 64). Chapter 4 seems to depart further from a coherent application of Elias's analytical insights to the gradual formation of a modern subjectivity. In "Civilization, Un-Civilization, Transgression: On Goethe's *Faust*," Martin Swales examines continued political appropriations of Goethe's literary work in twentieth-century Germany, where it—like Elias's analysis—"continues to haunt us" (p. 83). Although these essays provide interesting insights into the subject matter analyzed by the individual authors, they appear theoretically disjointed and do not sufficiently push their insights toward an enhanced understanding of the volume's primary agenda.

The next several chapters seem to hit that target more closely. Chapter 5 contains an insightful, analytically highly illuminating essay by Susanne Kord, who engages the place of colonialism in the German national imagination. In her essay, "The Colonial Imagination: Race and Revolution in Literature of the Napoleonic Period," Kord examines contact zones between the colonizers and the colonized. She eloquently turns to an analysis of the civilizing process of the colonial "Other" as it is mimetically imagined in several literary works. Following Elias's lead on how the imposition of European civility on "natives" in the colonial borderlands produces "new unique entities" focused on "racial alterity" and socio-cultural differences (pp. 87, 90-91), Kord shows how German literary renditions of the Haitian rebellion against the French was configured as a "de-civilizing process" that nourished the "German emancipation" from France in nationalist fantasy (p. 114). This astute contribution is followed by another insightful essay titled "Violence and Civilization: Transgression in Modern Wars" by Mark Hewitson. In this chapter, Hewitson examines the "affect structure" of German soldiers in nineteenth-century wars. He points out that while Elias was correct in tracing civilized norms of pacification during the modern era, militarization also intensified domestic fantasies of violence in peacetime. This development, in turn, he argues, allows us to examine war in the twentieth century as a partial extension of an existing domestic culture of violence. In chapter 7, Ernest Schonfield provides us with insights about the implications of commensality. In "Civilization in the Dining Room: Table Manners in Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*," Schonfield illuminates rules of conduct at the dining table. His analysis heavily draws on Georg Simmel (rather than Elias) in disentangling the social meanings of food, eating, and culinary practices. In this context, readers of this volume might legitimately reflect upon the congruence between the literary imagination of a modern author and past social practices. A discussion of the limits

of interpretation when analyzing historical facts through fiction would have been helpful for social science readers like me.

In chapter 8, readers encounter a theoretically more sophisticated contribution by Maiken Umbach. In "The Civilizing Process and the Construction of the Bourgeois Self: Music Chambers in Wilhelmine Germany," Umbach provides a brilliant analysis of the nineteenth-century transformation of sensual regimes. In a close reading of Elias, she pursues "civilization as a political project" and "way of governing self" (p. 177). The music chamber encoded the societal response to the modern project in the geometry of the room, in gender dynamics, in the cultivation of feelings, emotional introspection, and sentimentality, and in an "aesthetic minimalism that transformed a sensuous experience—the enjoyment of music—into an exercise of disciplining the senses" (p. 185). Modern subjectivity, Umbach concludes, was integral to a new bourgeois order that configured transgression and obedience, rationality and affect, and self-control and indulgence in a dialogic dynamic.

The remaining chapters seek out the civilizing trace in the twentieth century. In chapter 9, Stephanie Bird focuses on torture and sexual transgression, desire and shame in the literary imagination. In "Norbert Elias, the Confusion of Tårless and the Ethics of Shamelessness," Bird analyzes the "demonization of emotion and desire as feminine" (p. 223). In chapter 10, Mererid Puw Davies examines the political uses of body practices among the New Left in the 1960s. In "Bodily Issues: The West German Anti-Authoritarian Movement and the Semiotics of Dirt," Davies focuses on the body performances of the members of the infamous Kommune 1 in West Berlin as well as the participants in Vienna Actionism: the former used carnevalesque actions (like defecating in court) to provoke state and other institutions in symbolic ways, while the latter staged public performances using living human bodies, dirt, animal blood, food, or bodily substances to enact liberation from repression. Fulbrook provides the concluding chapter,

"Changing States, Changing Selves: Generations in the Third Reich and the GDR," in which she traces continuities and discontinuities in social violence from the National Socialist era in the "East German dictatorship" (p. 284) and among East German youths.

Fulbrook attempts to provide a conclusion to the volume in the last several pages of her final essay. She writes: "Whether through all this, there is any directionality in 'modernity' or 'civilization', or whether indeed any aspect of the alleged 'civilizing process' posited by Elias is integrally related to any other, is another matter entirely. The evidence of the long sweep of German society and culture over the centuries, and the radical changes in the last century in particular, would suggest otherwise" (p. 293). Perhaps a separate concluding chapter would have better assisted readers to think through this assemblage of contributions in a coherent way. But such an integrating moment is missing from the volume. The inquiry into whether Germany's violent modernity should be interpreted as an aberration in European history remains inconclusive. The preoccupation with finding flaws in Elias's theory of the "civilizing process" diverts attention from a critical examination of the deployment of this construct in a progressively racialized society; the coupling of "civilization" with modern notions of "race" is scarcely addressed by the contributions in this volume. At the turn of the twentieth century, European and German assertions of a civilized superiority were legitimated by recourse to medicine, biology, eugenics, and race science. Should we continue to use and reify a concept of "civilization" without acknowledging its strategic place in a European imaginary that seeks to normalize the use of violence against presumed "uncivilized" others within the national and across the global terrain? Our understanding of genocide in a modern and presumably civilized society requires a systematic investigation of the boundaries that are constructed to exclude populations and peoples from the imagined construct of a "civilized" national community by dehumanization and racialization. On a final technical note, the volume lacks an index and bibliographic reference section.

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