

Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes

Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes:
Figurational Approaches to American Culture

Edited by

Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke
and Johannes Voelz

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P U B L I S H I N G

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A different version of Loïc Wacquant's article "Decivilizing and Demonizing: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto" previously appeared in *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*, edited by Steven Loyal and Stephen Quilley, 2004. Copyright Cambridge University Press 2004, reproduced with permission.

Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz
Frankfurt am Main, December 2010

CHRISTA BUSCHENDORF, ASTRID FRANKE, AND JOHANNES VOELZ

Introduction

The articles collected in this volume explore the theoretical framework of figurational or relational sociology as represented by Norbert Elias and Pierre Bourdieu with regard to its relevance to American history, culture, and literature. The theoretical concepts developed by the two sociologists have received very little attention in the discipline of American Studies. Nor has the partial congruence of their basic concepts and methodological approaches been adequately analyzed and fructified.

As the title suggests, the emphasis of this collection of essays is on Elias's theory of the "civilizing process" and the question in how far his study of the European process of state formation and the correlative psycho-social changes is relevant to the analysis of the development of the American nation state and the habitus of Americans. It is important to understand that in contrast to the normative connotation of "civilization," Elias established a technical meaning of the civilizing process. It refers, in the concise summary by Loïc Wacquant, to "the long-term transformation of interpersonal relations, tastes, modes of behavior, and knowledge that accompanies the formation of a unified state capable of monopolizing physical violence over the whole of its territory and thus of progressively pacifying society" (Wacquant, in this volume 151). The changes Elias observed in social relations from twelfth-century feudalism to the absolutist French court are based on the increasing division of labor and differentiation of functions which in turn resulted in increasing interactions among individuals or, in Elias's term, in a "lengthening of the chains of interdependence." These transformations on the level of social structure (*sociogenesis*) are interrelated to changes on the level of personality, i.e., modifications in the psychological make-up of individuals (*psychogenesis*). In general, the latter are characterized by a shift from external constraints to self-restraint in managing emotions and desires. A gradual elevation of the threshold of shame leads to alterations in manners. Thus, for example, body functions are more and more banned from public space, and extremes of the swings of the emotional pendulum are slowly

replaced by “a more continuous, stable and even regulation of drives and affects in all areas of conduct” (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 374).

U.S. society and culture seem to be a particularly apt field for further exploring and developing the theory of civilizing and decivilizing processes, because it opens up to scholars a new way of addressing the old but never really disappearing question of the United States’ peculiar characteristics, beyond the parameters set by an ideology of “American exceptionalism.” On the one hand, one may ask to what extent an approach developed through the examination of elites and institutions may have something to say about a society whose self-image emphasizes democratic egalitarianism. On the other hand, American history provides us with various instances where the civilizing process deviates from the European pattern. According to Elias, the most significant difference is that in the USA the state monopoly of physical violence was not as firmly established as in most European states, since “a white male majority ... participated without clearly distinct organisation in whatever emerged, in the course of time, as the state monopoly of physical power” (Elias, “Further Aspects” 222). What one may regard as a minor factor has in fact major consequences both for the shaping of the national habitus (especially with regard to violence and the inclination to take the law into one’s own hands) and the stark power differential between whites and minorities (particularly black slaves and their descendants who were largely excluded from participating in the emerging state monopoly of power as well as from the protections guaranteed by that very monopoly). Moreover, compared to the Northeast, southern plantations and the frontier were characterized by a lesser degree of functional differentiation, shorter chains of interdependence, a less firmly erected state monopoly of power, and, consequently and most conspicuously, a higher level of violence. As the editors of *The Germans* point out, “Elias recognized clearly that civilizing and decivilizing processes can occur simultaneously in particular societies, and not simply in the same or different societies at different points in time” (Elias, *Germans* xv). In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, it is the black ghetto that has undergone a decivilizing phase due to which it has turned into a highly dangerous, depacified space, in which fear and violence dominate everyday life (see Wacquant’s essay in this volume).

One of the reasons why the theoretical approach by Elias lends itself to cultural and literary studies has to do with its long-term historical perspective in combination with its emphasis on cultural practices connected to (table) manners, gender relations, sports, ageing and dying, and time management. Moreover, the concept of correlating changes in the social order with transformations of the patterns of personality structure

allows the cultural historian to connect macro- and micro-level processes usually kept apart. Thus one can prove that in correlation with the process of state formation, the shaping of the American habitus also shows patterns deviating from European models. In contrast to England, for example, where a unified good society protects itself from intrusion by rather strict gate-keeping rules, there are several competing good societies in the U.S. and, as a consequence, much less regulated social mobility and boundary-maintenance. The high levels of social competition between a great number of ethnically different groups that cause feelings of insecurity and anxiety is related then to the seemingly paradoxical combination of the habit of friendliness and a tradition of violence (see Wouters's contribution in this volume).

If indeed the concepts of figurational sociology offer a promising new approach to American cultural history, why then have they been largely ignored? A major impediment in the reception of Elias's concept of the civilizing process has been the term itself. The everyday meaning of "civilized" has come to imply the alleged superiority of western civilization vis-à-vis so-called "primitive" peoples, a notion widely used by colonizing nations to ascertain white supremacy. Thus when Elias distinguishes between different levels of the civilizing process, it seems to be difficult even for scholars to consider such a statement as non-normative.

With his insistence on the interrelation between sociogenesis and psychogenesis, Elias overcomes the antinomies of macro- versus micro-analysis or structure versus agency that have come to dominate the discipline of sociology. In order to surmount the false opposition between society and individual, he coined the term "figuration" which he defined as "network of interdependencies among human beings ..., a structure of mutually oriented and dependent people" (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 481-482). Elias's concept of interdependent human figurations which he discusses, for example, in his book *The Society of Individuals* links his social theorizing to Bourdieu's "thoroughgoing *relationalism* which grasps both objective and subjective reality in the form of mutually interpenetrating systems of relations. All three of his core theoretical notions – habitus, capital, and field – are designed to capture the fundamentally recursive and relational nature of social life" (Wacquant, "Bourdieu in America" 320). According to Wacquant, it is the very relational character of Bourdieu's method which has led to a truncated reception of his work especially in the United States: "Thus the first move of American scholars is often to try to read Bourdieu's sociology into the dualistic alternatives – micro/macro, agency/structure, interpretive/positivist, structuralist/individualist, normative/rational, function/conflict, and

so forth – that structure their national disciplinary space ..., however ill suited these alternatives might be to apprehending the conceptual economy of Bourdieu's sociology" (324). The same is true for Elias. The publication of *The Civilizing Process* in two volumes with the misleading titles of *The History of Manners* and *Power and Civility* annihilates the essential systematic idea of the interrelation of psychogenesis and sociogenesis. Accordingly, most of the studies inspired by Elias's concept of the "civilizing process" concentrated on the history of American manners, while the interrelation between state formation process and the shaping of national habitus was largely neglected.

In addition, both Elias and Bourdieu have suffered from a fragmented reception that focuses on a small selection of publications and a limited number of concepts ignoring the conceptual framework put forth in their theoretical writings. The neglect of these theoretical texts (e.g. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* and *The Logic of Practice*, and Elias, *What is Sociology?*; *The Society of Individuals*; *Involvement and Detachment*) prevents the reading of the empirical studies in the light of theory and thus contributes to the disregard of the systematic character of the sociologists' work (cf. Wacquant, "Bourdieu in America" 240). Another factor that has hindered an integrative view of their approach is the fact that both developed and constantly modified their methodological and theoretical reflections on the basis of new empirical evidence. Moreover, both gained this evidence in a great variety of field studies that cover a broad range of topics and are situated in several disciplines. In both cases, the effect is not just that their work has been read only in part but, more importantly, that a core issue central to both theories – power relations – has been overlooked. As Cas Wouters points out, Elias "had planned to expand his established-outsider theory into an encompassing theory of power relations" (Wouters, in Elias and Scotson, *Established and Outsiders* xiii). Yet, as much as we might have profited from such a study, Elias's work as it stands provides us with highly pertinent reflections on power relations. In fact, competition and power struggles between interdependent groups drive the civilizing process as much as they determine the social figuration investigated in *Established and Outsiders* or the habitus of the Germans Elias analyzed in *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. As to Bourdieu, the scientific community has only fairly recently realized the importance of his concept of "symbolic power" which allows for recognizing and conceptualizing inconspicuous forms of domination and structures of inequality prevalent in our times.

The notion shared by both sociologists that the individual is not “a self-contained unit – a *homo clausus*” (Elias, “Towards a Theory” 26-27; cf. Elias, *Civilizing Process* 471-474) but is shaped by group processes, or, in Bourdieu’s terms, that habitus is both structured by the social forces as well as structuring social practice, frequently evoked the critique of a deterministic world view (cf. Guillory, “Bourdieu’s Refusal;” Holton, “Bourdieu and Common Sense” 89). But while Bourdieu indeed insisted on the “hysteresis,” i.e., the inertia of the individual habitus, he also claimed that it can change under the pressure of crisis or cross-cultural contact (see Holton 90). And while Elias maintained that there was a structural regularity underlying the civilizing process, he strongly emphasized its principal reversibility. After all, as a German Jew who was forced to emigrate, Elias suffered his whole life from the consequences of this severe reversal of the civilizing process of a whole nation or, in his words, the “barbarization” of German society (cf. Elias, *Germans* 302-304). It is evident then that neither the civilizing process nor power relations between interdependent groups, be they power struggles between established and outsiders, males and females (as analyzed in Bourdieu’s *Masculine Domination*), or the working class and the bourgeoisie, can be considered as predetermined. On the contrary, according to Bourdieu and Elias, they are part of highly complex long-term processes. But even if relational thinking is not misconstrued as determinism, it is still opposed to the American ideal of individualism by denying the high degree of autonomy which the American notion of personal freedom grants the individual. Consequently, approaching cultural and literary phenomena from the perspective of figurational sociology provides a corrective to the ideology of individualism.

At the same time, this approach also raises the more general question of the methodological benefits of reading cultural practices and literary works by making use of sociological concepts. Again, we would claim that both Bourdieu’s and Elias’s theories lend themselves particularly well to cultural and literary studies. Not only were both of them cultural sociologists, but, what is more, they repeatedly and deliberately drew on works of fiction in their sociological investigations. Elias claimed, for example, that “used critically, novels can help to reconstruct a past society and its power structure for us” (Elias, *Germans* 47). Bourdieu read Virginia Woolf’s novel *To the Lighthouse* in order “to analyze, in its contradictions, the masculine experience of domination,” and admired her “incomparably lucid evocation of the female gaze” (*Masculine Domination* 69). Similar to the fieldworker’s ethnographic observations of people’s dispositions and practices, the novel emphasizes the viewpoints of social agents; in fact,

novels usually provide a much more extensive and multifaceted presentation of human experience than any fieldwork could offer (for further methodological considerations on reading literature by utilizing sociological concepts, see Buschendorf's contribution in this volume).

Both sociologists also dealt with the question of the cultural function of literature. One of the driving forces of the civilizing process is, according to Elias, the division of labor and the differentiation of functions that create ever lengthening chains of interdependence and growing networks of human interaction. On the level of psychogenesis, this increases both mutual consideration and the control of affects. As a result, inter-personal conflicts are transformed into internal tensions. Consequently, in the course of the civilizing process the emotional pendulum swings more moderately, and the individual looks for compensation in the fictive worlds of dreams and the arts (cf. Elias, *Civilizing Process* 375). If in addition we take into account the increasing differentiation of the literary markets and, taking our cue from Bourdieu's theory, consider the growing autonomy of the literary field, the question of the function of literature in society becomes more complex. Most of the literary studies based on Bourdieu have focused on his field theory, which is, indeed, an extremely valuable instrument for analyzing the position of an author or a literary movement within the cultural production of a given period and its relation to the fields of power (see Leypoldt's contribution to this volume). Combining Bourdieu's field theory with Elias's theory of the civilizing process, it is interesting to observe that artists who defend the autonomy of the field of cultural production will propagate an ideal of art characterized by the emphasis on formal control and aesthetic expertise. This ideal is achieved in a process of aesthetic production (and reception) that is dominated by distance and sublimation rather than emotional involvement. In other words, the imperatives of the autonomy of the literary field are analogous to the forces directing the civilizing process.

Another question that was raised by critics of the theory of the civilizing process and Eliasian scholars alike pertains to the direction of social and psychic processes beyond the nineteenth century. Is Elias's theory able to account for the extensive changes in the regime of manners and control of emotions in the twentieth century? What can it contribute to the analysis of the much more relaxed and diverse behavior observable in the present? Does the overall tendency of a decreasing hierarchical distance between different status groups and a lessening of formal behavior suggest a reversal of the civilizing process? Drawing on Elias's supposition of a "controlled decontrolling," Cas Wouters developed the concept of "a twentieth-century spiral process of informalization," a

“theory of formalization and informalization as phases in processes of social and psychic integration” (Wouters, *Informalization* 6, 226-237). Like the theory of the civilizing process, the concept of informalization can be deployed to characterize typical American regimes of manners and emotions and, thus, allows for describing American “exceptionalism” without any norm-setting implications.

* * *

Most of the papers of this volume go back to an international conference which took place at Goethe Universität in Frankfurt am Main in November 2007 that brought together sociologists, historians as well as cultural and literary scholars to discuss “Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: A Figurational Approach to American Studies.” The volume tries to cover the broad range of as yet unexplored possibilities of the approach by considering examples of sociohistorical perspectives on the American civilizing process (Section I), challenges to the civilizing process (Section II), interpretations of literary works using the tools of relational sociology (Section III), and, finally, questions related to the trend of informalization (Section IV).

The first of the four sections of the collection takes up the major question of the applicability of Elias’s theory of the civilizing process to the development of the United States. Stephen Mennell’s book *The American Civilizing Process* (2007) which investigates the American counterpart to the European process, had just been published when we convened for the conference. In the essay printed here, Mennell focuses on a few central aspects of the differences in the development of the American habitus and nation state. Regarding habitus, he contrasts the American competition between several model-setting elites with the monopoly status of the nobility in Europe. More particularly, he juxtaposes the educated and mercantile class of New England with the slaveholding “aristocracy” of the southern states with its prominent code of honor enforced by the practice of the duel. Mennell also points to the significance of the marketplace in shaping American manners and the increasing pressure it exerts on people. Furthermore, he addresses what most people consider a major factor of American “exceptionalism,” namely the level of violence in the United States. Compared to Europe, the rate of homicides in the U.S. is significantly higher, and within the U.S. it is significantly higher in the South and in parts of the West. The fourth aspect Mennell discusses is the state formation process and the specific

conditions under which the American acquisition of new territories and the monopolization of the legitimate use of force took place.

Since it seems to be important to position Elias's approach within the discipline of historiography and thereby reflect upon the principal limitations of the concept of the civilizing process, we asked Mary Furner, a specialist on American social thought and intellectual history, to offer an assessment of Elias from the point of view of her discipline. Furner juxtaposes a brief summary of Elias's main arguments with intellectual and social historians' accounts of several phases of American history, particularly of the nation's founding. These various moments in U.S. history are characterized by complex negotiations between various social groups; the debates about the constitution are a telling example of how conscious deliberation led to political decisions. Furner underlines how the historian's view of these developments differs from an Eliasian perspective, while also indicating how intellectual history could profit from Elias's concepts. As she suggests near the end of her essay, "historians of manners and culture already plow Eliasian ground, whether consciously so or not" (Furner, in this volume 57). This pertains particularly to historical studies of the body and of the plasticity of identity. And perhaps Elias also holds a clue for understanding the fact that some segments within the contemporary public "seem utterly irrational, without foundation, senseless, to other segments" (57).

In her essay "Drinking and Democracy in the Early Republic," Astrid Franke links the concern with individual alcohol consumption and thus with citizens' capability of self-restraint to political anxieties about the stability of the process of state formation. American debates on drunkenness differ significantly from European ones. Drawing on Cas Wouters, Franke argues that due to a lack of firmly erected class barriers Americans displayed a high degree of status anxiety which in turn led to a strong desire for self-control. There was "an anxious awareness of the decivilizing forces tied to slavery and westward expansion in the early republic, and the well-founded fear that these decivilizing tendencies do not only undermine the self-image of the young republic as a beacon of civilization but may also cause its failure and collapse" (Franke, in this volume 64-65). Exploring the relation between state formation and habitus in her discussion of temperance as a democratic virtue, Franke underlines the cultural rather than sociological dimensions of the phenomena, and while drawing on Benjamin Rush's tracts and sermons on alcohol, education, and society, she also interprets poems by Philip Freneau. The latter show that the moderation Freneau propagates as a concerned patriot is incommensurate with the ardor of poetic expression. As Franke points out,

there is a great advantage in aesthetic experience. In its attempt to understand the social world, it forms a unit of “affect and cognition” (66) that sociological analysis cannot provide.

By juxtaposing the nineteenth-century boarding school efforts to turn Native Americans into “civilized” American citizens with Elias’s concept of the civilizing process and his understanding of established-outsider relations, Ruxandra Rădulescu discusses major reasons for the necessary failure of this ambitious civilizing project. In Eliasian terms, the white educators, advocates of the Victorian progress theory, interfere with the unplanned civilizing process by founding their educational efforts on a planned repressive training that attempts to cut short a long-term development and, in addition, molds the natives according to white standards of civilized behavior. Moreover, while the popular token of alleged success, namely the photographs taken of Native American pupils before and after they had undergone the disciplinary regime of boarding schools like Carlisle, were convincing to white educators of the time, they show that the detribalized Indians deprived of their indigenous culture and alien to the norms of western civilization necessarily remained outsiders even when in outward appearance they resembled modern American citizens.

While it is important to distinguish Elias’s concept of the civilizing process from historical and colloquial notions of the “civilized” as opposed to the “barbarous,” it is interesting to note that the (proto-) theoretical and the common meaning frequently intersect in American political discourse. As Rachel Hope Cleves argues in her article “‘Savage Barbarities!’: Slavery, Race and the Uncivilizing Process in the United States,” there is a recurrent overlapping of the two different denotations in American debates. In American history, the “uncivilizing discourse” gave expression to the fear of the instability of the republic by articulating proto-theorems that would later play a role in Elias’s theory of the civilizing process. For instance, after the American Revolution, the bloodshed of the French Revolution moved American Anti-Jacobins to appeal to citizens’ affect control in order to keep what seemed to be infectious violence from spreading in the United States. While originally used in the service of a reactionary movement, the civilizing discourse, with its twofold reference to “civilization,” was soon embedded in the national disputes on race, e.g. when the slaveholders’ violence against African Americans became considered a threat to American civilization. Whereas in her book *The Reign of Terror in America* (2009), Cleves focuses on the connection between proslavery claims of the “barbarous” nature of Africans and antislavery arguments of the brutalization of the nation through slavery, in this chapter she follows the uncivilizing

discourse throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, demonstrating that advocates of minority rights repeatedly intertwined the critique of violence committed against civilized Native Americans and African Americans with the notion of the uncivilizing process, namely the danger such lack of self-control poses to the stability of the nation-state.

Johannes Voelz's article "Regeneration and Barbarity: *Dred* and the Violence of the Civilizing Process" contributes to the section "Challenges to the Civilizing Process" by placing Harriet Beecher Stowe's second anti-slavery novel *Dred* in the radicalization of the sectional conflict of the 1850s. Voelz develops his analysis on two different levels. In his interpretation of Stowe's narrative about an aborted slave insurrection, he offers a detailed case study of what Rachel Hope Cleves calls the "uncivilizing discourse." Voelz emphasizes the novel's ambivalent stance towards violence that clearly transcends the author's didactic message. It is because violence is presented at once as a threat to order and a promise of revolutionary emancipation that Voelz goes on to offer, on a second level of analysis, an Eliasian interpretation of the role *Dred* played in the build-up of tensions prior to the Civil War, which demanded of the parties a rising willingness to turn violent against their civil enemies. It became the function of fiction to provide the experience of violence in the imagination and thus to help overcoming the discomfort most likely connected to such an uncivilized impulse. Methodologically, Voelz questions the adequacy of interpreting the "as-if-realities" of narrative fiction with the help of figurational sociology, and instead suggests to apply a figurational approach for reconstructing the functions of literary texts for the societies from which they emerged.

Loïc Wacquant's previously published analysis of the de-civilizing of the African American ghetto since the 1960s is such a pertinent example of an Eliasian approach that the editors of this volume decided to include a revised version of "Decivilizing and Demonizing: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto" here. Apart from Wacquant's detailed scrutiny of Elias's concept of the civilizing process, his approach to the interrelating processes that turned the "communal ghetto" into what he calls "hyperghetto" offers a multifaceted analysis of interdependent factors that accounts for psychogenetic as well as sociogenetic aspects of the radical transformation the black ghetto has undergone in the past decades. Wacquant follows Elias in stressing the role of the state in this dynamic. As he points out, state retrenchment is partial: the welfare state is reduced and increasingly replaced by the repressive components of the penal state (cf. Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor*, 2009). According to Wacquant, the decivilizing process is connected on a symbolic level to the demonizing of

the black sub-proletariat that journalists, scholars and policy makers have labeled “underclass.” In contrast to a socio-historical perspective, this term naturalizes the problem and thus tends to depoliticize it. As Wacquant demonstrates, the processual and relational conception of his approach allows us to go beyond simplifying monocausal models of explanation still prevalent in both public and scientific discourses.

Like the period of the early republic, the postbellum years are a phase of immense political and social turmoil. In the challenging process of psychologically adjusting to the comprehensive reorganization of American society, Reconstruction literature “served the important function of imaginary nation-building,” as Kirsten Twelbeck claims in her contribution, “The New Rules of the Democratic Game: Emancipation, Self-Regulation, and the ‘Second Founding’ of the United States.” According to Twelbeck, the necessary adaptations to the dramatic changes in social stratification involved the development of new modes of affect-control whose negotiations in contemporary fiction she approaches with Elias’s concepts. Twelbeck mainly focuses on two popular works of the 1860s, which were first serialized before published as books: Louisa May Alcott’s novella *Hospital Sketches* and Henry Ward Beecher’s novel *Norwood*. As Twelbeck argues, the problem literary scholars encounter when applying a theory describing long-term processes to fictive constructions that render, as it were, but a static image, may be solved by linking the “fictional ‘stills’ to the larger cultural transformations” (Twelbeck, in this volume 181). Moreover, on the level of psychogenesis, fictional texts more so than manners books allow the reader to become acquainted with a broad range of ideas and emotions representative of a changing American habitus in the turbulent post-war era.

Günter Leypoldt’s study of “Emerson and the Romantic Literary Field” reconstructs the major divisions of the nineteenth-century transatlantic field of Romanticism and specifically examines the difficulties the “Sage of Concord” encounters in confronting the alternative between the peer-group-based symbolic capital of the avant-garde writer and the commercial success of the popular writer who enjoys the recognition of a broader public. While many authors grapple with this dilemma in the process of literary professionalization, it seems to be exacerbated in the case of Emerson whose understanding of the role of the public intellectual involved staying in touch with the “common.” As Leypoldt shows, Romantic writers draw on an ambivalent discourse of primitivism to depict both their attachment to the common man and their detachment from the common reader who, in analogy to the “social cannibal” of the French revolutionary mob, is considered a “savage.” According to this Romantic construct, the

crude taste of the primitive reader indulges in pleasures of stimulation evoked by mere sensual effects, exaggerated forms and exciting subject-matter. As Leypoldt concludes, it is this ambiguity of the primitive that allows Emerson to criticize highbrow formalism and instead praise “the near, the low, the common,” while at the same time distancing himself from the primitive desires satisfied by mass products.

For political reasons independent of the dynamics of the field of literary production (see Buschendorf, in this volume 231 note 13) the 1960s novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones* by the southern author Jesse Hill Ford has received very little scholarly attention. Christa Buschendorf’s article “Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford’s Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*” highlights the sociological dimension of a narrative that with regard to plot might be called a melodramatic thriller, and it demonstrates that Ford’s representation of the social conflicts in a small southern town at the beginning of the Civil Rights movement gains precision and depth when approached with the instruments of Elias’s theory of established-outsider relations and Bourdieu’s theory of symbolic power. At the same time, Buschendorf’s reading emphasizes that in addition to a sociological analysis, a literary work is able to provide the agents’ perspectives in vivid detail by means of aesthetic techniques that guide and enhance the reader’s empathy. “Habitus,” a concept used by both Elias and Bourdieu, “ensures the active presence of past experiences” (Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice* 54) and thus is a particularly apt category when it comes to understanding how an institution of the past, e.g. slavery, shapes collective and individual schemes of perceptions and actions in the present. Ford, endowed with the writer’s gift of a sharp eye for the subtleties of human interrelations, expresses insights, such as the notion of “habitus,” in non-scientific language.

On the basis of American, Dutch, English, and German manners books Cas Wouters has studied the trend towards a seeming reversal of the civilizing process, namely an informalization of manners since the late nineteenth century (see Wouters, *Sex and Manners*, 2004; *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890*, 2007). In his contribution to this volume, “Status Competition and the Development of an American Habitus,” Wouters focuses on the interrelation of social stratification and manners in the United States. In contrast to England, where a unified good society protects itself from intrusion by rather strict gate-keeping rules, there are several competing good societies in the U.S. Consequently, social mobility and boundary-maintenance are much less regulated. By discussing examples taken from American manners books and fiction, Wouters deals

with changing rules of introduction or greeting, the increasing interest in interracial etiquette, as well as expressions of high status competition. From Wouters's perspective, typical American types of behavior, as, for example, "'have-a-nice-day' manners," or the "'take-it-easy' custom" (Wouters, in this volume 279), serve as pacifying measures needed in a country with a prominent "tough-guy tradition." Social competition between a great number of ethnically different groups, which causes feelings of insecurity and anxiety, is related then to the seemingly paradoxical combination of the habit of friendliness and a tradition of violence. Finally, Wouters explores the "connection between American class-denial, death-denial and insecure national we-identity" (283), which is linked, for example, to the prominent role the death penalty plays in the U.S.

According to figurational sociology, the western civilizing process for centuries was dominated by a trend of formalization, i.e., the tendency of increasingly rigid regimes of manners and emotions. In contrast, a long-term process of informalization, proceeding not in a linear fashion but in repeated spurts or waves, has characterized the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. This reversal has raised the question in what ways we may have to reinterpret Elias's theory. Jesse F. Battan explores this controversial issue by analyzing various twentieth-century movements rallying for "free love." These movements prove particularly conducive for investigating changes in the emotions connected to love and sexuality. Battan's essay "'De-Civilizing' Sexuality? Intimacy, Erotic Life and Social Change in Modern America" provides an historical overview of the regulation of erotic emotions from the Romantic and Victorian ideals of love to the prominent "sexual revolutions" of the 1920s and 1960s. He then takes up the controversy between the proponents of the theses of "decivilization" and "informalization." Whereas the first see in the new forms of sexual relationships indications of moral decline and thus of a decivilizing process, advocates of informalization claim to the contrary that the management of externally less strictly regulated love relations requires a much higher level of internal control. Studying the connection between the erotic ideals and the social and political programs of American sexual radicals, such as the Free Lovers, the Beat movement, or the Sexual Freedom League, Battan concludes with Elias and Wouters that "new forms of intimacy have demanded even more stringent efforts to internalize the regulation of affect" (Battan, in this volume 289).

"What is the possible contribution of figurational sociology to American studies and, more specifically, to American cultural studies?" Winfried Fluck's article "Multiple Identities and the New Habitus: Figurational Sociology and American Studies" opens with a question that

in various ways all essays of this collection address. Fluck, however, answers it explicitly by raising the issue of figurational sociology's compatibility with more prominent approaches and concepts in American studies, above all, cultural radicalism and the concept of multiple identities. By way of a thorough critique of Stuart Hall, a major proponent of the idea of "multiple identities," and of Daniel Bell, who posited a "cultural contradiction" between the realm of the economy as a sphere of self-regulation and that of culture as a sphere of liberation from discipline, Fluck draws on figurational sociology in order to reconsider the hopes attached to the multiplication of identity options: "'Multiple identities' do not provide a liberation from the prison-house of a unified identity, but signal the arrival of a new habitus made for a time in which 'flexibility' has become the new norm (and thus the new iron cage) ..." (Fluck, in this volume 316). The precarious working situation of today's young generation of intellectuals is an illuminating example of the challenging requirements involved in the practices of enhanced flexibility and networking which result from new patterns of social interdependencies. As Fluck argues by drawing on the terminology of *Habits of the Heart* by Robert Bellah, the self-fashioning of "expressive individualism," based on the multiplication of identity, forms a new kind of habitus, a habitus whose insistence on volatility and flexibility cannot be captured by the Eliasian concept of self-restraint or by Bourdieu's notion of habitus. Yet Fluck follows the relational thinking of both sociologists when he claims that "their theoretical premise that identities are shaped by changing constellations of power and social interdependencies continue to be helpful also for an analysis of the new habitus" (326).

Such unorthodox reconsiderations of figurational thinking suggest the perhaps most productive contribution the editors hope to make with this volume. Besides demonstrating the many uses of figurational approaches for American studies, this collection of essays can also be seen as foraying into new directions within relational and figurational thought. At least implicitly, the import of sociological theory into cultural and literary studies leads to revisions of the theories themselves, adding a level of self-reflexivity to the project. Each essay in this volume partakes in this self-critical endeavor in one way or another, whether by feeding the insights gained from aesthetic analysis back into the sociological theories of Elias and Bourdieu, by integrating cultural studies of more recent socio-economic tendencies (e.g. neoliberalism) into figurational thought, or by short-circuiting the theory of the civilizing process with an historical reconstruction of discourses concerned with civilization and its undoing. And as the contributions by Mennell, Wacquant, and Wouters make clear,

in applying Norbert Elias's ideas to American conditions, sociologists, too, continue to extend and revise some key tenets of figurational thinking. Elias's closing credo, stated at the very end of *The Civilizing Process* – "la civilisation ... n'est pas encore terminée" (447) –, can certainly be transferred to the theorizing of civilizing and decivilizing processes.

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STEPHEN MENNELL

The American Civilizing Process: A Skeptical Sketch

It was in Frankfurt in the early 1930s that Norbert Elias conceived the grand project that led, on the eve of the Second World War, to the publication of *Über den Prozeß der Zivilisation*, now known in English as *The Civilizing Process* (2000). At the time, Elias was serving as academic assistant to Karl Mannheim, who took up the chair of sociology at the University of Frankfurt in the spring of 1930. Mannheim is now remembered especially as a key figure in the development of *Wissenssoziologie*, or “the sociology of knowledge.” It is often overlooked that Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*, too, is centrally a study in the sociology of knowledge. Certainly, its pioneering section on the development of conceptions of good manners in Western Europe from the Middle Ages until the nineteenth century is most famous, and the theory of state formation that follows is also increasingly influential. But both of these form part of the broader architecture of a study of the emergence of the collective self-image of modern Europeans, especially of the part played in that by notions of “civilization” and “culture.” Just as much overlooked is Elias’s recognition of the fragility of the thin veneer of “civilized behavior,” something that he was later to make much more explicit in books such as *Studien über die Deutschen* (*The Germans*, 1996), but which is implicit from the beginning and evident to the attentive reader of *The Civilizing Process*. Like most work in the sociology of knowledge, this book undermines many taken-for-granted assumptions that people at large hold about themselves and others.

In writing a book with the title *The American Civilizing Process*, I was quite consciously following the model of Elias’s original book. In light of the presidency of George W. Bush, the title is often found amusing. Most Europeans laugh, and ask whether there shouldn’t be a question mark in the title. But the apparent oxymoron and the general ambiguity in the title are intentional.

I intended it to be reminiscent of early American books such as Amelia Simmons’s *American Cookery* (1796) or the anonymous *The American Chesterfield* (1828), which were Americanized versions of British cookery

and manners books respectively. I wrote the book as an Americanization of *The Civilizing Process*, using as far as possible evidence from American history where Elias had drawn from the European past. A more important ambiguity is the question of whether the title refers to the civilizing *of* Americans, or to civilizing *by* Americans, including their attempts to “civilize” other people (for instance, by dropping bombs on them from a B52 at 30,000 feet)? The answer is “both.” I think the Bush II presidency has told us things about the United States that most people would prefer not to know – but which it is our duty to remember, to digest, and to interpret. And in that task, the theory of civilizing and decivilizing is highly relevant.

My original reason for embarking on this research was my puzzlement that relatively few American historians and social scientists seemed to pay much attention to the extensive writings of Norbert Elias. If one studies Americans’ bibliographical citations of Elias, they are nearly always to the first volume of *The Civilizing Process* – misleadingly known as “The History of Manners” – and occasionally to *The Court Society*. Moreover, when they do draw upon Elias, American scholars generally use the static concept of “civility,” meaning interpersonal politeness. “Civility,” for Elias, was an emic term from European history, not an etic term capable of being used sociologically. For him, “civilization” was to be understood in its original processual sense. It is a process without beginning or end. There have been and are no “uncivilized” societies, still less any *perfectly* “civilized” ones. They largely overlook the second volume – which in the U.S. also had a misleading title, “Power and Civility.” By ignoring that, they miss the whole powerful thrust of the connection Elias makes between the “micro” level of habitus and emotions on the one hand and the “macro” level of changing structures of power in a society as a whole. The kernel of Elias’s argument is 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.
(*Civilizing Process* 169; translation modified)

One reason that Elias has not caught on much in the United States is that he writes *about* Europe, and especially about such topics as aristocrats and their foppish manners that the Founding Fathers thought they had left behind. What I set out to do was to show how Elias’s theoretical perspective as a whole could be applied to America today and in the past.

The Formation of American Habitus

For Elias, there were many variations on civilizing processes. In particular, he argued that people's habitus typically bears the marks of their country's history and government, of the state under which they live:

In the conduct of workers in England, for example, one can still see traces of the manners of the landed noblemen and gentry and of merchants within a large trade network, in France the airs of courtiers and a bourgeoisie brought to power by revolution. (*Civilizing Process* 384)

I argue that the equivalent central feature that has left its mark on the habitus of Americans is the experience of becoming steadily more powerful vis-à-vis their neighbors, from the earliest European settlements until the present day.

This may at first glance seem at odds with the perception common among Americans of the egalitarianism of their own society internally, a belief to which many of them firmly adhere in spite of the factually huge inequalities that have characterized American society in the past and continue today.

It is true that in the British colonies in North America, society was initially fairly flat. Few members of the social elite of seventeenth-century England – members of the nobility or landed gentry – traveled to the colonies, and, equally, relatively few of the really poor strata arrived there. Most settlers came from the lower reaches of the educated classes – clergy, lawyers, merchants – together with many artisans. Nevertheless, the settlers brought with them from Europe the great status-consciousness of the home society, and a stratum of colonial gentry soon began to form. The demand for European manners books in colonial America is one small symptom of this (see Mennell 51-56). The decades after independence do indeed appear to be a period of diminishing status differences, and Alexis de Tocqueville was probably right about the generally egalitarian manners in a relatively egalitarian society; he was visiting America in the Jacksonian era when such characteristics were at their apogee. The U.S. probably did lead Europe in the establishment of norms about the avoidance of what Cas Wouters (2007) has dubbed “superiorism” – a neologism that he intends as a general term for the *overt* expression of feelings of superiority whether on grounds of class, sex, race, or whatever. Yet after the Civil War, in the so-called Gilded Age, there was a strong trend towards gross economic inequality, and it was correlated with at least some symptoms of a yearning on the part of the *nouveaux riches* to

adopt the “superiorist” manners of late nineteenth-century Europe. That period may seem an anomaly, for during the period of roughly half a century after the First World War, the dominant trend was towards somewhat more even distribution of income and wealth (see Mennell 249-265), and the egalitarianism of American manners became entrenched through a long process of “informalization” (Wouters).

In the last three decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first, however, the underlying trend in the United States has been towards ever-grosser economic and social inequalities, seen not just in the distribution of income and wealth but in social provision, especially health care, which has become a crippling financial burden for many middle-class Americans and from which something approaching 15 per cent of the population are excluded (Barack Obama’s health care reform initiative). Although there is little evidence that factual inequality (and factually low rates of social mobility) are as yet undermining the egalitarianism of superficial manners, one must begin to ask whether the dominant American ideology of social equality does not represent a form of what Marxists used to call “false consciousness.”

Tocqueville wrote that America had never had an “aristocracy.” More strictly, he should have said that the United States never had a nobility – it never had hereditary titles of rank. But it did have several social formations that might be described as “quasi-aristocracies” (see Mennell 81-105), which each to some extent functioned to set models of manners and feeling. The difference between the U.S. and many of the countries of Western Europe was that no single group established itself as the model-setting center to the extent that that happened in Europe. Rather, there were several competing model-setting strata. The pattern in detail is complex. Each major city had its own local influential upper stratum. During the past century, one should no doubt pay attention to the influence of Hollywood and the mass media more generally. Here, however, I want to dwell upon two competing model-setting strata that were historically of particular significance. As it happens, both of them invite comparison not with the British models to which their members probably tended semi-consciously to look, but rather with social formations that were significant in the development of Germany.

First, there is what I have called the New England *Bildungsbürgertum* – the educated professional and mercantile upper class of the northern states. Arguably this still looms too large in European (and especially British) perceptions of what shaped American social character. Certainly to them, and to the pressures of commercial and professional life, can be attributed to some extent the egalitarian strain in American habitus, not

showing open disdain towards their fellow citizens, even if they were inwardly confident of their superior education, understanding and feeling. Visiting the United States in the 1830s, not long after Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau (III, 10) commented upon the great cautiousness that was entrenched early and deeply in northern people; she described as “fear of opinion” something very similar to what Elias termed the habitual “checking of behavior” in anticipation of what others would think. She thought she could distinguish northern from southern members of Congress simply by the way they walked:

It is in Washington that varieties of manners are conspicuous. There the Southerners appear at most advantage, and the New Englanders to the least; the ease and frank courtesy of the gentry of the South (with an occasional touch of arrogance, however), contrasting with the cautious, somewhat *gauche*, and too deferential air of the members from the North. One fancies one can tell a New England member in the open air by his deprecatory walk. He seems to bear in mind perpetually that he cannot fight a duel, while other people can. (I, 145)

Which brings us to the other great rival aristocracy, that of the slave-owning South. From Independence to the Civil War, Southerners held the lion’s share of political power in the Union. The reference to dueling among them is highly significant. As Norbert Elias has argued, in nineteenth-century Germany the quality of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit* – being judged worthy to give satisfaction in a duel – became a principal criterion for membership of the German upper class (see *Germans* 44-119). Shearer Davis Bowman has suggested that the plantocracy of the South can fruitfully be compared with the Prussian *Junkers*. One similarity is that they both provided a large part of the officer corps of the national army. At home, they both ruled autocratically over what the Germans called a *Privatrechtsstaat* (“private law state”), having the right to adjudicate and enforce their judgments on their own estates, with little or no interference by agencies of the government. State authorities did not intervene in relations between white masters and blacks, whether during slavery in the antebellum period or during the long decades of the Jim Crow laws and lynching between the end of Reconstruction and the interwar period. Nor did they intervene in what is now called “black on black” violence.

But neither were white-on-white quarrels very much the business of state authorities. The social arrangements of the Old South were also associated with the prevalent code of “honor,” and questions of honor were commonly settled by the duel. Many European travelers, from

Harriet Martineau to the great geologist Sir Charles Lyell, were astonished by its prevalence: it was remarked that in New Orleans alone, someone died in a duel on average every day. The code of “honor,” in its various forms in Europe and America, has been widely discussed. Roger Lane contrasts the Southern “man of honor” with the New England “man of dignity,” who would very likely take a quarrel to court rather than fight a duel. The propensity to litigation through the legal apparatus of the state is a function not only – not mainly, indeed – of culturally conditioned individual dispositions, but also of the degree of internal pacification and the effectiveness of the state monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in a given territory. Yet the difference between the codes of “honor” and “dignity” *is* associated with different personal and emotional styles: the Southerner, like the *satisfaktionsfähige* gentleman of the *Kaiserreich*, displayed a “hard,” unemotional style; it has been suggested that a legacy of this can be seen in the hard, speak-your-weight-machine delivery of many American military spokesmen today.

This social formation cast a long shadow. It is easy to forget that the South was still overtly a racist society only a generation ago; and indeed the astonishingly high rate of incarceration of black people today is enough to demonstrate the covert part that race continues to play in the United States today. And, with the balance of power shifting to the South since 1970, the South should play a more important part in outsiders’ perception of America and its behavior in the world.

The final irony is that, while there has been a monopolistic model-setting class to a much lesser extent in the U.S. than in many Western European societies, the U.S. has today established a monopolistic position as a sort of world upper class, which people throughout the world emulate – while continuing to resent it bitterly. American spokesmen often see the worldwide pervasiveness of the products of the American media and business – from Disneyland to Starbucks – as a form of “soft power” deployed in the service of American national interest. But it should be remembered that, while the French bourgeoisie under the *ancien régime* aped the manners and tastes of the nobility, they simultaneously resented them. Soft power did not prevent the French Revolution (see Elias, *Court Society*).

Markets

If the United States never had a courtly aristocracy of the kind that often influentially shaped manners and habitus more widely in Western Euro-