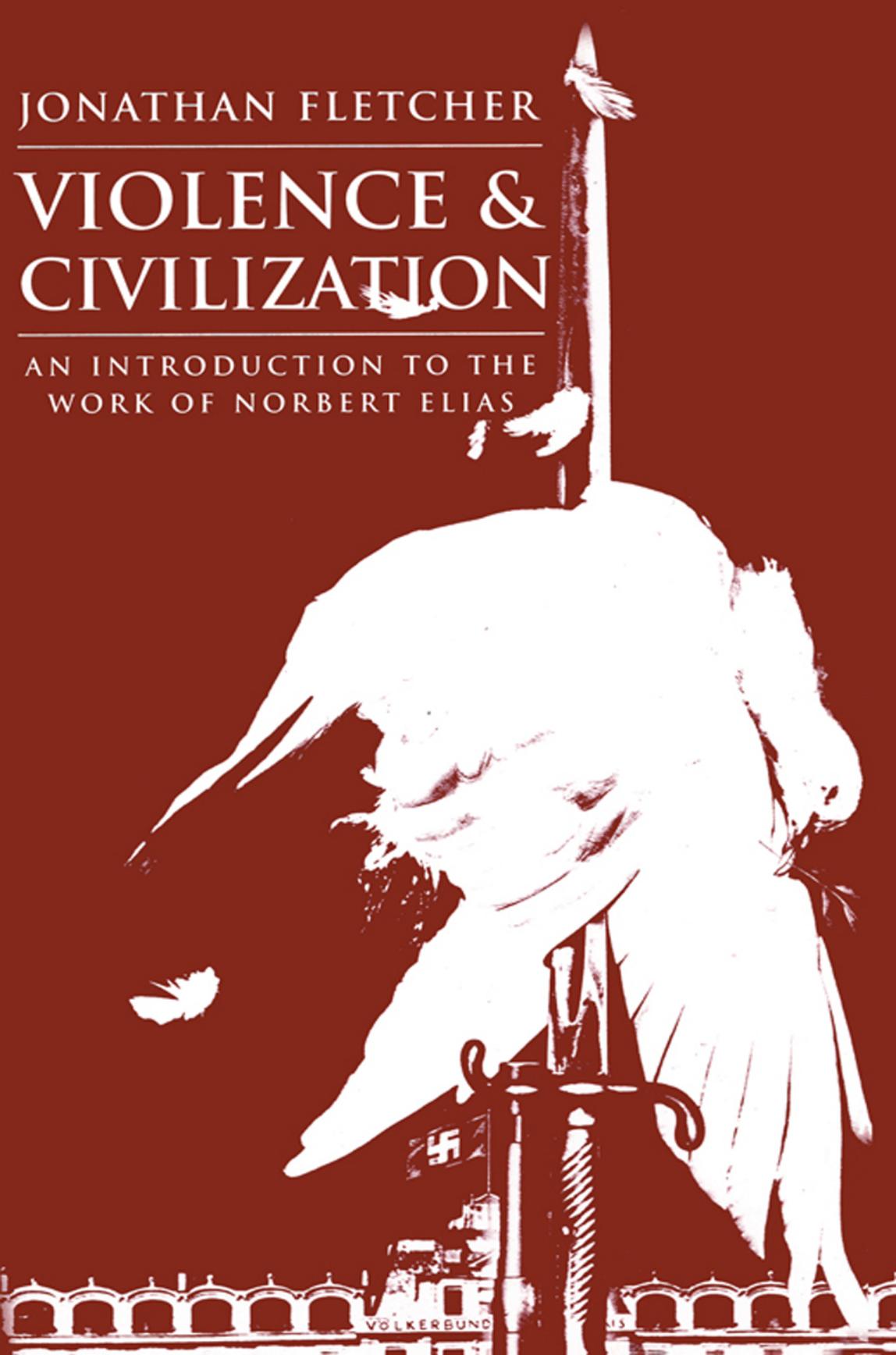


JONATHAN FLETCHER

VIOLENCE &  
CIVILIZATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE  
WORK OF NORBERT ELIAS





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*Violence*  
AND  
*Civilization*

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*Civilization*

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*An Introduction to the Work of  
Norbert Elias*

Jonathan Fletcher

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## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Introduction*

On 1 September 1939, German troops invaded Poland on the orders of Adolf Hitler. The same year saw the publication in Switzerland of a two-volume work entitled *The Civilizing Process*. Its author, Norbert Elias, was a German of Jewish descent who had already fled his homeland with the ascent of the Nazis in 1933. By 1941, Elias's parents had lost their lives under Nazi rule: his father in Breslau and his mother in the Auschwitz concentration camp, although the true character of the regime was only to emerge clearly with its defeat by Allied forces.<sup>1</sup>

The processes traced in *The Civilizing Process* seemed irrelevant to many, given events which were then overtaking continental Europe. There was simply no market for such a book, especially one written by a German Jew, and indeed, only a small number of copies were sold.<sup>2</sup> It appears that few people were willing to read a work on 'civilization' at the very time when the nations of the Western world were witnessing the eclipse of all that the term was thought to represent. In such a context it does seem surprising that Elias had completed a long-term study of state formation and the development of manners among the European secular upper classes in conjunction with the term 'civilization'. The seeming contradiction between the process identified by the book's title and the violent events of more recent European history form one of the main themes of this book.

Elias studied medicine, philosophy and later sociology at the universities of Breslau and Heidelberg, subsequently becoming Karl Mannheim's assistant at the Department of Sociology at the University of Frankfurt. After fleeing Germany and spending some time in Paris, he moved to England in 1935 and remained there until the mid 1970s, working as a guest lecturer at the London School of Economics and later as Reader in Sociology at the University of Leicester. Elias received the title of professor from the University of Ghana in the late 1960s, and for the last fifteen years of his life he lived and worked in Amsterdam, where he died on 1 August 1990, at the age of 93. With such a biography,<sup>3</sup> it is not surprising to learn that Elias was interested in developing a sociological understanding of violence and violence controls in twentieth-century European societies more generally, and of the National Socialists and the Holocaust in particular. But it was not until some twenty years after having left Germany that he wrote in any detail about events in the Third Reich.

It is no exaggeration to say that, along with other murderous episodes, two world wars and the Holocaust in Germany have shattered many of the connotations which hitherto seemed to enshroud the concept of civilization with an aura of mystique. These connotations were carried over from certain beliefs generated in the eighteenth century and earlier, accompanying the rise of industrialism, technological innovation, colonization and a belief in the inherent 'progress' associated with such developments. The events of the twentieth century have exposed many of these beliefs as delusions. A sense of caution and even despondency has resulted. In turn, this general attitude has brought forth a strong reaction against the very use of the word 'civilization'. Indeed, 'barbarization' would seem to many to be a more appropriate term with which to characterize the twentieth century so far.

As regards the work of Norbert Elias, this general reaction has often taken the form of dismissive and sometimes even tasteless commentaries (see respectively Leach 1986: 13; and Hunt 1988: 30). Others have described his theory of civilizing processes variously in terms of its simplicity (Lasch 1985: 714), evolutionism (Lenhardt 1979: 127; Giddens 1984: 241), its inability to account for the 'barbarism' of the present century (Coser 1978: 6; Buck-Morss 1978: 187-9), or even its ethnocentrism and racism (Blok in Wilterdink 1984: 290).<sup>4</sup> Some of these reactions

can only be understood in the context of the pervasive sense of disillusionment which has come to permeate Western culture. But to what extent are they an accurate assessment of Elias's perspective? Or is the strength of these responses an over-reaction?

In criticizing Elias for his use of the terms 'civilization' or 'civilizing process', many writers have overlooked the implications of his ideas for developing an understanding of 'break-downs in civilization'. The attention to violence and its controls lies at the centre of his theory, and this book seeks to clarify the insights provided by Elias's approach with respect to the notions of 'civilizing' and 'decivilizing' processes. It also includes a critical assessment of some of Elias's main ideas on violence and its controls. A considerable amount of space is given to exposition, particularly with respect to Elias's work in *The Germans*. I attempt to provide clear, accurate summaries of Elias's comments on specific themes to do with violence, civilization and decivilization, themes which are central to an understanding of the broad spectrum of Elias's writing. This book therefore serves as an introduction to his work as a whole. Needless to say, it is not a substitute for reading Elias's books and articles themselves.

Even this focus on violence and civilization, however, is a broad enough task in relation to Elias's work. Whilst seeking answers to several key questions which I pose below, I have therefore restricted the scope of this book to include only some examples Elias draws from England, providing a comparative contrast to his use of examples from Germany up until the end of the Second World War. Apart from lack of space, one important reason for not considering Elias's work on Germany after 1945 was that I wanted to understand how far his approach is relevant to an understanding of Nazism. Certainly, Elias's work on the civilizing process is far from being the product of blind naivety to the world at the time of the book's production in the 1930s. But the extent to which it was in fact *inspired* by a pressing need to develop a more detached understanding of social processes including the rise of Nazism and the 'barbarization' of the twentieth century has remained obscured, particularly in the Anglo-American world, for a variety of reasons. Among others, these reasons include Elias's idiosyncratic pattern with respect to the publication of his work; the intrinsic complexity of the