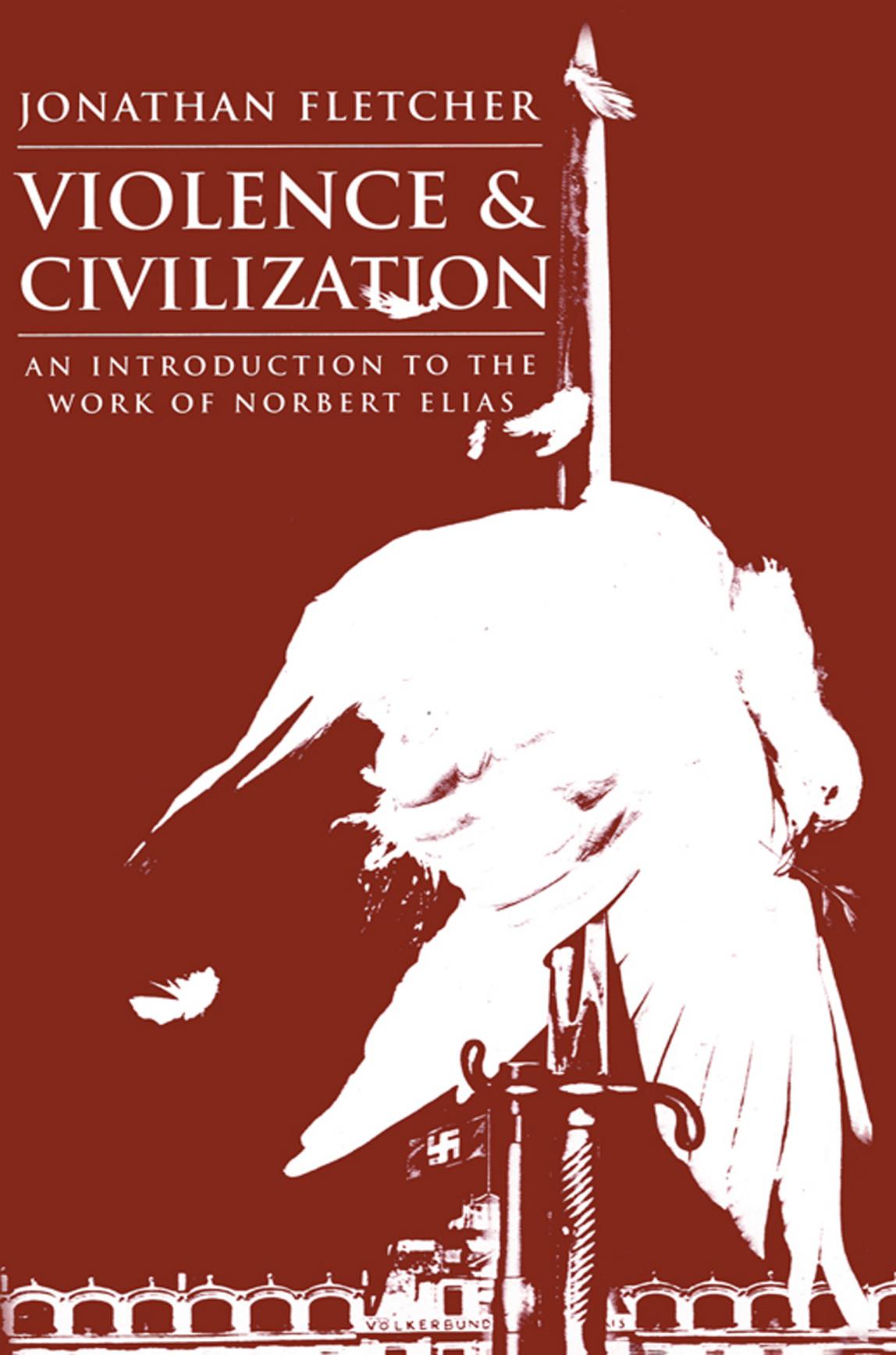


JONATHAN FLETCHER

VIOLENCE &
CIVILIZATION

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE
WORK OF NORBERT ELIAS



Violence
AND
Civilization

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AND
Civilization

*An Introduction to the Work of
Norbert Elias*

Jonathan Fletcher

Polity Press

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First published in 1997 by Polity Press
in association with Blackwell Publishers Ltd.

Reprinted 2005

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Polity Press
65 Bridge Street
Cambridge CB2 1UR, UK

Polity Press
350 Main Street
Malden, MA 02148, USA

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ISBN 0-7456-1434-5
ISBN 0-7456-1879-0 (pbk)

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library and the Library of Congress.

Typeset in 10½ on 12 pt Palatino
by Ace Filmsetting Ltd, Frome, Somerset
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Marston Book Services Limited, Oxford

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

For further information on Polity, visit our website: www.polity.co.uk

For my friends and teachers,
Pete, Eric, Stephen, Helmut, Joop and Cas.

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Acknowledgements

Above all, I would like to thank my mother, Margaret Gwilym, and my father, John Fletcher, from whom I have learnt the most.

Several people read all or parts of this book through its various stages of production. I owe a great debt to John Thompson, who supervised the project as a PhD thesis. His advice, support, criticism and encouragement proved invaluable. I am also particularly grateful to Eric Dunning, Tony Giddens, Joop Goudsblom, Johan Heilbron, Helmut Kuzmics and Stephen Mennell.

Special thanks go to Cas Wouters for his constant encouragement, enduring friendship and detailed commentary on my work. His enthusiasm for civilized conversation over involved and sometimes decivilizing topics is a rare treasure.

In Cambridge I was able to share ideas with many people of exceptional talent, among them, my friends Graeme Gilloch, Adrian Gregory, Montse Guibernau, Roxanne Hakim, Patrick McGinn, Denis McManus, Dominic O'Brien and Nick Pilgrim. My debt to Lisa Driver Davidson is incalculable. I cannot underestimate how important her companionship and support have been for me.

Without my Dutch friends in Amsterdam this book would probably have been completed sooner. Their welcome distraction, as they often made me realize, proved to be a necessity. They helped me feel at home in an unfamiliar country and with

a language that deserves its reputation as the 'Chinese of the West'. In particular, I would like to mention Reneé IJbema and Ellen Griffioen for their acceptance, faith and enduring support; Annemarie Waterhout, for her boundless warmth and understanding; Florian Linck, simply because she's wonderful; Louran van Keulen, the tallest person I know, for his support and gentle encouragement with my 'prille' Nederlands; Hank(erchief) Roland Poot, for unforgettable memories of the Zeedijk; Jan Ott, for the gezelligheid of Café de Kletskep; and Peter Mader, for overseeing the neighbourhood. Hartelijk bedankt. Jullie hebben mij enorm geholpen.

I would also like to thank those who have provided the funding which has allowed me to complete this project. In particular, I would like to thank Syl Hughes, trustee to the estate of Thelma George, without whose financial planning and personal generosity I would not have been able to start this book as a PhD in Cambridge.

From King's College, Cambridge I received a two-year Research Studentship, as well as financial assistance for one month's research at the University of Graz, Austria, and funding to attend conferences on Elias in the Netherlands, Austria and Germany. Rob Wallach, financial tutor at King's, extended his generous understanding throughout my period in Cambridge.

The German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) funded four months' research at the University of Bochum, Germany.

I am also grateful to the Leverhulme Trust, from whom I received a two-year Study Abroad Studentship which enabled me to complete this book in Amsterdam.

Finally, I would like to thank the students and staff at the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research. It was gratifying to work among such a committed and talented group of social scientists.

The author and publisher are grateful for permission to quote copyright material from the following work:

Norbert Elias, *The Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Edited by Michael Schröter and translated by Eric Dunning and Stephen Menel. Polity Press, Cambridge, 1996.

CHAPTER ONE

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.¹

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.² 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,³ 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).⁴ 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