



## The Civilizing Process

*Norbert Elias, Edmund F.N. Jephcott (Translator), Eric Dunning (Editor), Johan Goudsblom (Editor),  
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**The Civilizing Process** Norbert Elias , Edmund F.N. Jephcott (Translator) , Eric Dunning (Editor) , Johan Goudsblom (Editor) , Stephen Mennell (Editor)

*The Civilizing Process* stands out as Norbert Elias' greatest work, tracing the "civilizing" of manners and personality in Western Europe since the late Middle Ages by demonstrating how the formation of states and the monopolization of power within them changed Western society forever.

## The Civilizing Process Details

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## From Reader Review The Civilizing Process for online ebook

### Philippe Malzieu says

Norbert Elias, great sociologist, pure product of European culture in what it has to offer. I have read one of his most famous books many years ago "La dynamique de l'Occident". It highlighted the formation of Europe from the political organization of states. I discovered this book which is a kind of mirror of it because it takes place at the domestic level. How is organized the life at the concrete level of the individuals: sexual behavior, way of knowing how to be at the table, things to be said and not to be said... It is original, finely analyzed, often funny.

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### Tara says

This book was so cool. But that is just me. I think you would have to be a real history geek to enjoy it, but there is this whole section on medieval manners books that is hilarious. Norbert is trying to demonstrate the shift in consciousness that occurred as people lived in more complex societies, rather than in isolated feudal estates. His point is that behavior that we currently take for granted—manners, civility—had to be learned over time. The books he quotes were written for adults trying to make it in complicated court societies. So there is a lot of advice about, not slurping from the spoon if you are sharing it, how to share a bed with someone who is a higher rank than you, don't put the bone back on the platter after you have gnawed on it, don't use your sleeve to blow your nose, and my favorite—don't greet people if they are urinating or defecating.

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### Frederick says

Fascinating social history that gives a different perspective on the past. It makes one realize how we read modern sensibilities back into everything from the Bible to the American Revolution. We definitely think differently today but it is clear that Western society cannot sustain this aberration of manners and civility that began just a short time ago and is in the process of ending.

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### Devin Creed says

Fascinating thesis, laborious writing.

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### Ed says

Using etiquette books from the sixteenth through the nineteenth centuries, Elias fashioned a theory of the evolution of our emotional lives and our notions of our self that is provocative and profound. Since he tried to explain many of the things that interested Foucault, I was happy to learn that the journal Foucault Studies had a special issue earlier this year comparing Elias' ideas with those of Foucault. It might have changed my life if I had read this book thirty years ago when I first noticed it. For now it certainly changes my

perspective on my study of the history of emotions.

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### **Airo says**

It's actually quite mind-opening. The stunning grand perspective of Elias on combining the psychological study and culture study to explain how the civilization evolve turned out not to be empty and weak which possibly common problem of "thinking big", but rather rich and sharp.

I really like how he expands the topic on the conflict of civilization and culture under different culture discourse, and how such differences distinguish the core and appearance of social struggles in different countries historically, eg. 17-18th century France and Germany. And eventually expand the synchronical study at the beginning to a more grand picture of Civilization process from small trivia daily-life routine and etiquette to more bigger-picture social changes--all the way combining with the interaction with the evolving change and the importance of human mind and emotion, to explain his theory diachronically.

Elias is a true master of approaching social study and his theories in a diachronical way--and in fact more than that--rather than keeping it in a single small point, he concentrates his focus not just how things works but how individuals psychologically interact with. Anyone who interest in social study and psychoanalysis, his works will be very very inspiring!

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### **Miloš says**

divan bu?kuriš.

"Kada se radi o pojedin?evom pristanku da ?e u odre?enoj društvenoj formi živeti s drugima, kao i o opravdanju ?injenice da pojedinac, npr., živi unutar države, ili da je vezan za druge ljude kao gra?anin, ?inovnik, radnik ili seljak, a ne više kao vitez, sveštenik, kmet ili nomad-sto?ar - treba re?i da su ovaj pristanak i ovo opravdanje naknadni. **Pojedinac tu nema mnogo izbora.** On se ra?a u odre?enom poretku s posebnim institucijama. Njega uslovljavaju da se manje ili više prilagodi. ?ak i ako smatra da ove insitutcije nisu posebno dobre niti korisne, on ne može jednostavno povu?i svoj pristanak i isko?iti iz postoje?eg porekta. Može pokušati da se povu?e kao avanturista, skitnica ili umetnik i pisac, kona?no, može pobe?i na pusto ostrvo, ali i kao begunac od porekta on je zapravo njegov proizvod. Neodobravanje ovog porekta i bekstvo od njega isto je tako jasan znak da je ?ovek tim poretkom uslovljen kao i kada ga ceni i opravdava".

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### **Elizabeth says**

The Civilizing Process (Hardcover)  
by Norbert Elias

ILL

This book is recommended by "Do Muslim Women Need Saving?"|17574515

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## **Kinga says**

It definitely influenced me on how I think about cultures. It provides a useful way to approach and address problems within a community/culture.

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## **Bill says**

The methodology is extremely effective and well-outlined. Good for its subject matter and conclusions, but also its methods. This book was quite an experience to read and was very influential in my intellectual development.

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## **M. Ritchey says**

It is hard to explain this amazing book. Elias begins by explaining the difference between French and German cultures, tracing centuries of social/political/economic changes to come to some wild (in a good way) conclusions about "how come the French ended up like this and the Germans ended up like this?" Even though his parents died in the Holocaust, he's not German-bashing. His conclusions are so interesting and well-researched, tracing the rise of continental philosophy, the fall of aristocracy, what it means for a nation to be unified under one language as opposed to be split up into basically tribal areas, etc. etc. And he ends up detailing the rise of social etiquette, like "how come we eat with a fork and use a napkin?"

It's a wild ride. It's so good. Read it!

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## **Victoria says**

Very much a product of its time, this work argues for a correlation and indeed even causation between increasingly affected manners and the formation of centralized states. Part one is perfectly unreadable; part two is perfectly hilarious (if only because it borrows liberally from such masters of civil manners as Erasmus and Giovanni della Casa); part three is completely intolerable if you have an intellectual aversion to the word "feudalism" and get hives just from thinking about it; and part four summarizes the whole lot by equating civilization with Western modernity, which is a moving target perpetually defined by the fact that the West always achieves it first. In short, it is alternately boring as shit and so funny that I cried, but always dogmatic, always teleological, racist, classist and sexist, and mostly if not entirely wrong.

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## **Daniela says**

For Elias, people learn to obey a code of conduct, people are restrained and refined, and emotions are culturally constructed. He discusses sophistication of speech and our elaborate and refined use of language. He claims we have made it second nature to adopt a social milieu. Elias has a formula for the book - socio-genetic and psychogenetic (micro and macro) - consisting of three parts: 1. courtesy (middle ages, sixteenth century - time when Erasmus wrote his text) 2. civilitai (court society), and 3. civilization (19th century). As

people came into increasingly denser contact with other people there was a drive for distinction and showing attentiveness to other people. Urbanization, social density, increasing division of labor, inter-directedness, and other economic changes drove the privatization of bodily functions and affect. Elias also discusses the avoidance of shame and embarrassment. Shame implies moral lapse - a moral transgression; whereas embarrassment is a milder term, referring to seeing oneself in the eyes of others.

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### **Brad says**

Wherein one can learn that it is considered impolite in some circles to piss on the curtains.

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### **Matt says**

Simply spectacular. Must read. I don't even know where to begin besides saying "yes" to this one.

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### **Emily says**

\*The Civilizing Process\* is dense, discursive, Germanic, and in some ways pre-professional in its sociology (Elias has to argue at length, for example, for a discipline of historical psychology that is now well-established), but also fascinating and, in places, hilarious.

The first third of the book details the historical development of manners in the West (primarily France, Germany and England) through a survey of etiquette instructions from the early middle ages to the nineteenth century. This is the hilarious part, as behaviors a modern adult would not even consider (such as pissing on the tapestries in a home, or picking up a turd and offering it to another person to smell) turn out to be learned aversions from which our ancestors had to be deterred. I loved the specificity of this portion of the book; the section on attitudes toward meat-eating was especially fascinating, and I adore the coinage "threshold of repugnance," which Elias uses throughout. Reading it transformed my view of my own reactions and behavior in many everyday situations, and made me think about how things I usually consider "natural," such as feeling disgusted upon walking by a pool of vomit next to a dumpster, actually result from a complex web of socio- and psycho-historical factors.

The last two-thirds of the book were more of a slog for me, but I'm glad I read them. They address the larger historical causes and effects that lead to the outward signs of "civilization" outlined in the first section. His view of history is sometimes uncomfortably teleological (all cultures are on some point of the same continuum, and the Western countries are the farthest advanced along it), but his observations are still quite interesting, and considering the publication date (1939) he takes a very balanced view toward Freud's psychoanalytical revolution - for Elias, it's important but in need of much further refinement. He makes many points which I found myself chewing over long after having read them, and applying to other histories and works of art.

Overall, I highly recommend it, although I might skip over the majority of Part IV, which is largely a reiteration of the points that have gone before, and go straight to the last, concluding section.

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### **Bernd says**

Hervorragender soziologischer Klassiker aus den 30iger Jahren des 20. Jahrh., in dem Elias wie aus dem Vogelblick die Muster der gesellschaftlichen Zivilisationsentwicklung aufdeckt. Teilw. monotone Wiederholungen, sprachlich ungewohnt, aber verständlich. Insgesamt: sehr erhelltend.

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### **Kakanier says**

Märchenbuch. Wenn euch die Geschichte gefällt, könnt ihr's glauben. Die Wirklichkeit ist reicher als die Erzählung und der Autor hat erwiesenermaßen in zumindest einem Fall gegen sein eigenes besseres Wissen geschrieben. "Der Mythos vom Zivilisationsprozeß", geschrieben als Reaktion auf das Büchlein, von Dürr befasst sich ausführlich mit dieser Buntheit.

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### **Nils Samuels says**

Dense, academic, and sprawling in its scope, this book gets at the root impulses that people use to separate themselves from each other: manners, class, money. The time period is the Middle Ages, the basement from which we have constructed our sense of modernity. Affective restraint figures prominently in the brinkmanship of class, consciously and unconsciously. Elias's argument has altered how I see the world.

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### **Fred R says**

I read this book as filling in the gaps between Bourdieu and Gregory Clark. That is, fleshing out the connection between class-stratified aesthetics and macro-social secular shifts in behavior. Bourdieu seemed to think of aesthetics as ultimately arbitrary, serving only to signal and reinforce class distinctions, but I think if he were more rational, he could have seen how involved aesthetics (such as, for instance, the trend towards smaller knives at the dinner table) are with real social factors. Aesthetics are about display and selection for both mating and coalitional purposes. Requiring, for instance, elite aspirants to display the proper taste is one method society uses to select for the appropriate qualities in the elite. These qualities and norms then (in a rational society) trickle down, and in this way a people gradually transforms itself into what it wishes to become.

In Elias' story of medieval and early modern Europe, increased social scale leads a society to select for more rational and controlled behavior, behavior which is more suited to the massive social interdependence that characterizes a large scale society. I think Clark saw increases in scale as the result, rather than the cause, of this selective process, but maybe they would both agree that it's really a self-reinforcing spiral.

Elias is even more vague than Clark's gesture towards "cultural or genetic" factors that would embody this shift, and it's my hope that we will soon see more work filling in the gaps here, so as to develop a powerful and parsimonious model that can incorporate and account for class dynamics, economic trends, and cultural aesthetics.

In the conclusion Elias makes clear that he sees his "genealogy of morals" in Foucauldian terms (discrediting the practices of power by unearthing their origins). This is very disappointing, but shouldn't distract the reader from the book's many strengths, including an excellent comparative history of France and Germany.

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