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Is Norbert Elias Right With His Assumption of the Increasing Peacefulness of People in Recent History?

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Abstract

The article discusses the fastness of Elias' theory of violence according to it violence has decreased in history not only due to the increasing power of state and police but also due to advanced psychology and civilization of people. It is shown that Elias was right but could not prove of his theory, thus being liable to attacks of primitive sociologies such as that of the rational choice type or situation theory. It is also shown that nobody among Elias' disciples or critics truly realized the weakness entrenched in Elias' theory. Accordingly, the article shows both the empirical weakness of Elias' theory and the possibilities to verify it by using other material and data.

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In this lecture, I deal with the phenomenon of violence, especially physical violence, in history. The focus is on the question of why physical violence in pre-modern societies was more pronounced in purely quantitative terms than in modern societies. There are always social scientists who believe they can deny this by pointing to the world wars, the Holocaust and other phenomena. However, every social scientist familiar with quantitative data knows or should know that the phenomenon of physical violence has actually been on the decline throughout history, especially in recent centuries and generations.

In the entire pre-modern world, around 1/3 of people died at the hands of their own kind, but in Europe and North America, despite the wars, only 1% of people died during the entire 20th century, and after 1945 only 1 per thousand. Accordingly, the ratio between the industrial modernity of, say, the year 2000 on the one hand and the Stone Age, antiquity and the Middle Ages added together on the other would be 1 in 333 on a statistical average. The few tribal societies that survived into the 20th century, for example in Australia, Papua New Guinea, or the Amazon basin, still had death rates of 20 or 30% of the population.

In his bestseller *The better angels of our nature*, Steven Pinker has compiled extensive figures, taking into account all regions of the world and eras, which Pinker believes put beyond doubt that physical violence should be seen as a continuously decreasing factor in history. The figures presented by Pinker show that in pre-state societies, an average of

500 out of every 100,000 people are murdered each year. Even the early states of antiquity reduce these figures considerably, to around 100 murders per year, calculated per 100,000 people.

Pinker claims that he considers Norbert Elias' theory of civilization to be the only social science theory capable of explaining this reduction in violence. I will therefore briefly present the explanatory model developed by Elias. According to Elias, historical development is the result of an interplay of sociogenetic and psychogenetic processes. Sociogenesis refers, among other things, to the evolution of state functions, including the increased presence of the judiciary and police. Psychogenesis refers to the development of people from primitive, childlike, passionate and aggressive types to civilized, adult and more peaceful types - the latter variants have only become established in recent centuries.

As a result, medieval societies are characterized by both weak state institutions and a primitive type of person. This results in a double effect. Institutions that can socialize high levels of civilization and peacefulness among people are too weakly developed. People remain at a primitive and childlike level and are therefore more prone to violence and passion. In this way, Elias combines social theory, socialization theory and developmental psychology.

The other effect, however, is more socio-structural. The weakness of the state offers more scope for violent action in order to assert one's own interests. Furthermore, people are forced to rely more on their own violent actions. They have to defend themselves to a greater extent, as a state that could protect them is insufficiently developed. Elias therefore explains the higher rates of violence in the Middle Ages both sociogenetically and psychogenetically.

The increased development of state functions in the course of the modern era and modernity, on the other hand, restricts the possibilities for exercising violence. People can no longer exercise violence at their own discretion, as the modern state controls and punishes them more than before. Furthermore, they no longer have to defend themselves against violent attacks, as the state now protects them more effectively.

However, Elias is not content with such a purely institutionalist explanation. He claims that modern society socializes people to be more civilized and peaceful. Sociogenetic influences have an effect on psychogenesis and raise people to a higher level of psychological development, which causes people to become less violent. As you can see, Elias explains the decline in violence in a similarly complex way, i.e. also through the interplay of psychogenesis and sociogenesis.

However, the question arises as to whether Elias has succeeded in proving his theory. Could it not be that even if Elias is right with his theory, he still cannot prove it? Is it not also possible to explain the history of violence with simpler and more economical means?

Interestingly, even Elias' critics such as Hans-Peter Duerr have not noticed the tautological character of Elias' explanatory model. Elias sees connections between the high propensity for violence in the Middle Ages and a primitive psyche as well as between the modern reduction of violence and a civilized psyche. However, his method is based on an interpretative attribution, on an interpolation of alleged psychological factors into the historical material. The problem here is that - even according to Elias himself - the different frequencies of violence could also be explained without psychogenesis. After all, Elias himself claims that there are correlations between a weak state and a high level of violence on the one hand and

between a strong state and a reduction in violence on the other. If this is the case - and this connection is very plausible - then the high propensity for violence in the Middle Ages cannot be presented without further ado as empirical evidence for the existence of a primitive psyche and the modern reduction in violence as empirical evidence for the development of a civilized psyche.

A theory based purely on utility theory and social structure could prove the psychogenetic theory of civilization to be both superfluous and unproven. It could claim that people always act in the same way, rationally and purposefully, and that there are no measurable differences in developmental psychology. Accordingly, the greater violence of the Middle Ages simply resulted from the absence or weakness of the state and police. This is because stubborn and rational people take advantage of the opportunities that present themselves when no one, including the state, prevents them from doing so. Furthermore, they are forced to help themselves violently if they are not protected by the state. Complementarily, the stronger modern state prevents the private exercise of violence. It restricts aggressive acts of violence and at the same time makes self-defense based on violence superfluous. Since many sociologists today know of no other explanations than those based on social structure and utility theory, they tend not only to be satisfied with these types of explanations, but also to be certain that this refutes the civilization theory/developmental psychology type of explanation per se. Utility theory, situational logic and institutionalism often dominate the thinking of those who do not consider themselves to be adherents of these constructs.

However, things are far more complicated. The lack of evidence for Elias' theory by no means automatically means the strength of evidence for utility theory and situation logic. In the following, I will show that an analysis of the social structure of violent behavior based on utility theory is wrong and that Elias was right if he could not prove his theory even with the facts he presented. To this end, it is necessary to provide examples of acts of violence that have a direct origin in the primitive psyche and which therefore cannot be explained in terms of social structure and utility theory. The Roman arena games are one of several examples that fall precisely into this category. They consist of deadly duels, animal baiting and criminal executions, which are often carried out in the most gruesome manner. However, these three elements can also be found in other pre-modern societies in America, Asia, Africa and Europe. They do not have their origins in socio-structural conditions and functions. The arena games were played for their entertainment value. The people enjoyed the cruel performances and demanded their performance. The primitive psyche is therefore the sole cause of their existence. There is no nation today in which it would be possible to hold these games because they are incongruent with the psychological stage and the moral standards that characterize the thinking and psyche of today's nations. The games no longer fall within the scope of acceptance of modern societies. The arena games alone prove that the social, moral and emotional thinking and feelings of pre-modern cultures were anchored in more primitive strata. Only peoples who are on a simpler psychological level than those who structure contemporary nations are capable of playing the games.

This sheds light on how the brutal-sadistic corporal punishment law of the pre-modern world should be viewed. Primitive peoples as well as ancient and medieval civilizations used corporal punishment and brutal executions in a similar way to punish delinquents, often for minor offenses, in the most severe way. This criminal law has been successively abolished in Europe since 1700. It contradicts the moral standards of today's modern nations in the extreme. The archaic criminal law likewise does not result from socio-structural conditions and institutional requirements, but solely from the primitive stage

of development.

Steven Pinker explains that the decline in violence against children and women is also a result of the civilization process. The development of animal welfare since the Age of Enlightenment should be seen in a similar light. Of course, these considerations also shed light on the phenomenon of cannibalism, which was widespread in archaic cultures, on the culture of dueling, on slavery and lawlessness and on the phenomenon of human sacrifice. These phenomena have disappeared in modern societies, as they are incongruent with the scope of acceptance of the higher levels of psychological development.

The phenomena of violence that are directly linked to psychogenetic stages and that cannot be explained in terms of social structure prove that Elias and Pinker were correct in their central assumptions. In this way, it can be proven retrospectively that the connection between different frequencies of violence and social structures described by Elias is in fact not only caused by socio-structural-situational logic, but must also be explained by the interplay of sociogenesis and psychogenesis. The theory of civilization can therefore actually be verified retrospectively with regard to these fundamental questions.

Footnotes

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