Human Figurations, vol. 10, no. 1 (2026).
https://doi.org/10.29311/hf.v10i1.5507

Balancing on the shifting layers of civilisation[1]

Review essay on Dieter Reicher / Adrian Jitschin / Arjan Post / Behrouz Alikhani (Eds.), *Norbert Elias's African Processes of Civilisation: On the Formation of Survival Units in Ghana*. Wiesbaden: Springer VS 2022, 255 pp., paperback, €74.89

Hans-Peter Waldhoff[i]

Georg-August-Universität Göttingen

Keywords: Elias, Africa, Ghana, two-stage process of civilization, otherness, unconsciousness

---

If being caught up in one's own present-day makes the rest of the world seem more foreign than it is (Bley, 2021: 577–586), then Elias's dispassionate insight into the relationship between other times and worlds and one's own serves as a good counterbalance. He understands himself to be part of the processes he observes (van Loyen, 2012: 17). In his poem about his trip to Tangier in North Africa, he writes, striking a balance between proximity and distance to himself and others: 'How strange these people are. How strange I am. How strange we are' (Elias, 1987: 9).

These African essays focus on early processes of civilisation and state formation, but in the background lies the question of what is in danger of being lost when civilisational canons (Elias, 2022) are threatened, when civilisational discontents (Freud, 1930) seem to get out of hand and feelings of alienation tip over into the murderous. This is the fundamental question that underlay the writing of *On the Process of Civilisation* (Elias, 2012 [1939]) by a Jewish-German author during the Nazi era, and places it within the series of major intellectual responses to National Socialism.

> For the process thinker, Ghana was to take on the role of a laboratory in which a global—and therefore not very tangible—process revealed its local prerequisites and invited one to step unusually close to the test tubes. Moreover: for someone who had lost his father and mother in the Shoah, did observing civilization at pivotal moments not imply that the rupture in civilization was something that could be overcome? (van Loyen, 2012: 15–16)

---

[1] Translation of Waldhoff, 'Über die schwankenden Schichten der Zivilisation balancieren', Soziologische Revue 47(2) 2024 : 124–132.

As is fitting for a process theorist, the editors repeatedly use the travel metaphor to describe Elias's attempts to process his African experiences in a scholarly way. For him, it was a never-ending story. His collection of African art, particularly masks, accompanied him until the very end; he exhibited them, commented on them, and some lined the entrance to his apartment in Amsterdam.

From 1962 to 1964, after his retirement in England, he held a professorship – his first – at the University of Ghana in Accra. This was during an early phase of decolonisation, under the presidency of the nation's founder, Kwame Nkrumah, a key political figure of that era whose charisma resonated across the entire African continent. Observations on processes of state formation, and their relationship to processes of civilisation – just some of Elias's core themes – were made *in vivo*. About a quarter of a century later, Elias made a second attempt to write a book about his African experiences. Texts from the 1960s and 1980s form the main body of the book compiled by the editors. They deal with research problems in traditional societies, with the concept of village-states developed by Elias using the African example (Reicher, 2023: 191–192), and the general concept of 'survival units', as well as tribal formation and early state formation on a more world-historical level. Elias compares African survival units at early stages of development, from a sociological perspective on development, depending on the context, with ancient Sumer and Egypt as well as Greek, Jewish and early Roman antiquity.

To this end, Elias, to quote Thomas Mann, delves deeper and deeper into the 'well of the past' (Mann, 2011: 7). And like Thomas Mann in his novel *Joseph and His Brothers* (Mann, 2011), Elias also notes that people from earlier stages of development seem somewhat foreign to us because they allow for more fluid transitions between facts and fantasies, yet not as foreign as they are often portrayed. Mann, to whom Elias had sent the first edition of his book on civilisation in the late 1930s, not only delves here into the ancient Egyptian and Old Testament Jewish past, but also tacitly erects a monument to Judaism and humanity in opposition to the Nazi machinery of extermination.

In his book on Africa, as in his final work, *The Symbol Theory* (Elias, 2011 [1991]), Elias distinguishes reality-congruent knowledge from fantasy knowledge and, building on Auguste Comte and the three-stage model of this founder of sociology, sees a very long-term development (Reicher, 2023) towards control over excessive, reality-distorting fantasies. He distinguishes this form of toxic fantasy from creative fantasy (Elias, 2006 [1970]: 24–27), as he sees them at work in both traditional African and modern 'Western' art (p. 23).

Nowhere, however, does he articulate his central problem as clearly as in his writings on Africa

> My problem—my central problem, if I may call it that—was how to do justice to the rich, fresh, and often quite novel experience I had there and to break the deadening influence of the prevalent social type of classifications and abstractions on these experiences. (pp. 35–36)

Devereux also critiques this form of 'deadening thought' (Waldhoff, 2019) in a telling case study from his seminal work on anxiety and method, in which an ethnologist remarks that he need only excise the living elements, and his monograph will be complete (Devereux, 1968: 89). This raises a methodological question regarding subject–object relationships: How civilised can the intellectual processing of processes of civilisation or de-civilisation be made?

For Elias, it is crucial to be able to address and explain even tabooed and, from today's perspective, inhumane practices – such as human sacrifice – without resorting to either dehumanising abstract categories (p. 41) or hasty value judgements. Chinua Achebe succeeds in doing precisely this in his novel *Things Fall Apart* (Achebe, 1971). Elias points out that Achebe and other authors who write fiction often come closer to reality than social scientists (p. 38). At the same time, they do not allow themselves to be swallowed up by the worlds into which they immerse themselves, as Elias demonstrates in his sociological interpretation of Edgar Allan Poe's 'A Descent into the Maelström' in 'The Fishermen in the Maelstrom' (Elias, 2007 [1987]: 105–78). This balance of proximity and distance underlies all of Elias's book on Africa. This approach 'does not empty reality of its anxiety arousing content, but "domesticates" it, by proving that it, too, can be understood and processed by the conscious ego,' as Devereux (1968: 97) writes regarding good methodology, which resembles Bion's psychoanalytic technique of 'containing' (Waldhoff, 2009: 7–22).

To achieve this civilising of fear-inducing knowledge more sustainably, it would be helpful to incorporate the latent layers of Elias's theory of civilisation. How, for example, should the African human sacrifices mentioned by Elias – 'a standing phenomenon in traditional Ghanaian societies' (p. 46) – be compared to the industrially organised killing factories of the Western concentration camps established by the German National Socialists? This is where the different stages of development become problematic if one does not have a sound theory of regression processes. Although access to the collective unconscious, not unimportant for the analysis of regression, is never far from Elias's mind, he rarely crosses this threshold into 'the unconscious in the process of civilisation' (Erdheim, 1996). It is difficult to write about the manifest level of these essays when the latent level of this theory of civilisation – the traumatic horror of the 'breakdown of civilisation' (Elias, 2013 [1989]: 223–330) – remains hidden.

Here Ernest Gellner, an author familiar to Elias (van Loyen, 2012: 42), is useful, specifically his analysis of fascism as one of the fundamentally possible strategies for dealing with the global societal consequences of the Industrial Revolution. The

'fascist option', as a 'natural item on the agenda of European development' as well as of US and global development (Gellner, 1988: 243), is once again forcing its way onto the stage of world history, even in democratic countries, when democracies are threatened with collapse and the civilisational standards upon which they are founded are under attack (Levitsky and Ziblatt, 2018). 'But we make far too small or narrow measurements of the richness of the self when we omit the immense realm of the unconscious, this true inner Africa,' wrote Jean Paul in 1827 (Jean Paul, 1963: 1182). This realm extends far beyond the ego into the collective unconscious, as Freud demonstrated in his cultural-theoretical writings.

So while Elias only touches upon the 'inner Africa' in the sense of the individual and collective unconscious from a scientific perspective, this does not mean that he lacks other effective means of approaching foreign experiences. Thus, a developmental sociological perspective is employed throughout. Alienness is explained from the perspective of the fundamental unity of all human problems through developmentally conditioned structural differences and not, as Elias writes, through 'pseudo-metaphysical' and mystical qualifiers such as African, Western, etc. (p. 45). The sociologist as a hunter of myths (Elias, 2012 [1970]: 46–64; Benkel and Meitzler, 2023) is his antidote against a relapse into the magical-mythical stage in the sense of Auguste Comte (Elias, 2012 [1970]: 28–45). And finally: exoticising otherness is contrasted with otherness in the sense of Georg Simmel's 'chance of objectivity' offered by the foreign gaze. From Simmel's (1971) essay 'The Stranger', it can be inferred that the distinct position of the stranger is by no means merely precarious, but that it is 'a distinct structure composed of remoteness and nearness, indifference and involvement' and the opportunity for the 'objectivity of the stranger' grounded therein (Simmel, 1971: 145). This attitude transcends the old either-or conception of the foreign, which renders others more foreign than they are, aims at social exclusion and the acquisition of power, and easily escalates into violence, as it prevails worldwide, including in Ghana (Bogner, 1998).

Half-hidden behind the masks of the modern, ambivalent stranger, who represents a late phase of modernisation and civilisation (Bauman, 1991: 53–101), Elias, the collector of African masks, establishes his sociological vantage point throughout his entire body of work. Elias was one of the founders of depth-psychological group analysis, in which the social and personal unconscious intertwine in a unique way. Group transcripts from this founding phase reveal, as if under a magnifying glass, how Elias adopts the position of the stranger in an almost existential manner. Even here, however, unconscious processes remain more alien to him than to the other participants in this founding group of group analysis (Waldhoff, 2009: 191–246).

He views the court society around Louis XIV largely through the foreign gaze of the Duke of Saint-Simon, a high-ranking aristocrat and secret dissident who embodies the distance inherent in courtly relations (Elias, 2006 [1969]). The humanist Erasmus of

Rotterdam, too, was likely shaped not only by his proximity to the upper classes of the West but also by elements of his lower social origins. He is an important source for Elias's reconstruction of the Western civilising process.

The key guide for Elias's intellectual journey to Africa (p. 3) was Noa Akunor Aguae Azu, a stranger in the truest sense of the word, who struck a delicate balance between intimate closeness and detachment from the history and culture of his tribe, the Krobo, who settled in what is now Ghana after a long history of migration. Noa Azu was the son of a king. Since Elias had studied French court society from the perspective of a sociology of kingship and the nobility (Elias, 2006 [1969]), a comparison of European and African kingship and the differing histories of the nobility (Bley, 2021: 255–259) would have been interesting. Azu went with the Christian missionaries at his father's request. Elias identifies the most striking aspect of his conversion to Christianity as the fact that he had previously undergone training as a priest for one of his people's principal deities, including under the guidance of his father's sister, a priestess who lived in a cave. He had memorised his people's oral tradition as priestly secret knowledge. Later, as a Christian teacher of his people, he decided to commit a grave breach of taboo: he published their secret tradition of knowledge in book form because he wanted to preserve it from oblivion, an obviously highly ambivalent decision. At first, Elias is 'captivated by the simple strangeness of Azu's story of his people' (p. 71), before delving deeper into the structures of this history, supported by archival material and the interpretation of literary texts.

At its core, the narrative concerns the early phases of a state-formation process, the transitions from a nomadic tribe to a sedentary village-state (Reicher, 2023: 191–192) on a table mountain, and further to a small territorial state with limited self-governance under colonial rule within the British colony of the Gold Coast, which adopted the name Ghana after a successful struggle for independence (p. 66). He describes the sophisticated techniques of integrating immigrants and early processes of civilisation, particularly the skills developed by leaders to shift the balance between conflict and cooperation towards cooperation (p. 112). Elias compares this process of early African state formation, from a developmental sociological perspective, to the transformation 'of the ancient Athenians and Romans from a migrating tribal group to a settled group of hilltop villagers' (p. 66). His aim is to better understand early—and not merely Western—civilisational processes in a comparative and generalisable manner. And finally, he links this to his original motivation for developing a theory of civilisation:

> The tendency of many members of the more advanced industrial countries to treat their civilized behaviour almost as if it were given to them by nature as part of the collective charisma of a socially superior group has received, one hopes, a good jolt from Hitler and his Teutonic men, from the unexpected—and for many

> people almost unbelievable—resurgence of barbarism among members of a highly developed country. (p. 166)

His aim is to examine the conditions under which such standards can develop and be maintained. The study of African societies is one way to do this. On the other hand, it is a matter of studying social traps that repeatedly and compulsively drive people towards destructive behaviour. Above all, what drives them again and again to organised mass murder?

Freud examined a particular form of strangeness that is relevant to Elias's African research, namely the uncanny (Freud, 1919), behind which lies one's own forgotten origins, the all-too-familiar native world, and in doing so encountered the 'old, animistic conception of the universe':

> was characterized by the idea that the world was peopled with the spirits of human beings; by the subject's narcissistic overvaluation of his own mental processes; by the belief in the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic based on that belief...as well as by all the other creations with the help of which man, in the unrestricted narcissism of that stage of development, strove to fend off the manifest prohibitions of reality. (Freud, 1919: 240)

Furthermore, it seems a little uncanny 'when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced' (Freud, 1919: 244). Freud observes that 'the animistic beliefs of civilized people are in a state of having been (to a greater or lesser extent) *surmounted* [rather than repressed]' (Freud, 1919: 249), whereby the 'to a greater or lesser extent' is significant in that we can assume that this act of surmounting contributes to the 'discontents of civilization' (Freud, 1930). The omnipotence fantasies of leaders such as Hitler, Putin or Trump (Rensmann, 2021), along with their followers – all of whom embody narcissistic unease in civilisation – raise doubts about the extent to which magical thinking has been surmounted. It looks more like a spiral-shaped return of repressed magical thinking at a later and riskier stage of development.

In 'The Formation of States and Changes in Restraint' (pp. 199–212), Elias outlines a two-stage model of civilisational processes. At the outset, states are pure organisations of exploitation (p. 209). Building on this, Elias envisions a second stage: 'And what I can see in the past is this: that in fact human beings learned to act on insight and self-control and with kindness only through long periods of external constraint' (p. 210). As he puts it elsewhere:

> One could summarize the broad outline of this movement by means of a mental time-lapse and say that, over the course of millennia, with many fluctuations and setbacks in connection with state coercion aimed at pacification, humans gradually became civilized, [...] developing a more comprehensive civilizational conscience and other instances of self-control that are indispensable for the humanization of human relations and especially for empathy, compassion for

> others, and the identification with them, and that they eventually, having become civilized to this extent, turn against the oppressive rulers who were once indispensable for the civilization of humanity, and thus turn to the task of civilizing the rulers themselves to a greater degree. (Elias quoted in van Loyen, 2012: 48–49).

In a very similar vein, Ernest Gellner also distinguishes 'the establishment of authority and order, and the establishment of law-bound, accountable authority' (Gellner, 1988: 254). But why, in modern times, do powerful forces retreat to what he calls a primitive mentality (Gellner, 1988: 40)? If, to use Gellner's terms, the second stage of human history was a transition from predators to producers, why then do significant regressions occur even among those being plundered? After all, the transfer was accompanied by 'vastly improved government, growing wealth, growing knowledge and cultural enrichment, a softening of manners' (Gellner, 1988: 238–239). Why, then, are large proportions of the population, 'led by a significant segment of the intelligentsia,' rushing 'towards a re-establishment of authoritarian and ideocratic rule' (Gellner, 1988: 240), towards the 'possibly irreversible return to a new and more dangerous set of kings and priests' (Gellner, 1988: 240)? Corruption in the sense of unproductive plunder by those in power regularly goes hand in hand with 'corruption of knowledge', and new anti-Enlightenment regimes of lies with mythomaniacal traits, that is, with a relapse into a concept of truth that is oriented more towards 'compliance with a norm, rather than that of echoing an extraneous fact' (Gellner, 1988: 276) and towards social fantasies. What is threatened with destruction here is at least the second fundamental stage of state formation and civilisation described by Elias and Gellner, including the civilisation of knowledge (Waldhoff, 2009). Elias points out, however, that processes of civilisation that have been historically interrupted or destroyed have left traces, that no complete regression has occurred, and that revivals remain conceivable in the future (pp. 211–212).

The relationship between these stages or layers of modernisation and civilisation, however, is unclear. If one follows van Loyen's interpretation of Ayi Kwei Armah's (1968) novel *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, which is set in Ghana around the time of Elias's stay there, the narrator can only comprehend the rationalisation of the country 'in the guise of witchcraft' (van Loyen, 2012: 31), that is, as pure magic. Furthermore, liberation from colonial rule threatens to be consumed by corruption. A picture emerges of a specific dialectic of civilisation and enlightenment (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002 [1944]), a complex situation that demands of all those involved in this process – not only on the African continent – a delicate balancing act across the shifting layers of civilisation.

Translated by Robert van Krieken

References

Achebe C (1971) *Things Fall Apart*. London: Heinemann.

Armah AK (1968) *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Bauman Z (1991) *Modernity and Ambivalence*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Benkel T and Meitzler M (2023) *Mythenjagd: Soziologie mit Norbert Elias*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.

Bley H (2021) *Afrika: Welten und Geschichten aus dreihundert Jahren*. Berlin: De Gruyter Oldenbourg.

Bogner A (1998) Gewaltkonflikte und der Wandel sozialer Fremdheit in Nordghana. In: Münkler H (ed.) *Die Herausforderung durch das Fremde* (Interdisziplinäre Arbeitsgruppen, Forschungsberichte 5). (pp. 201–303). Akademie Verlag.

Devereux G (1968) *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*. The Hague: Mouton.

Elias N (2006 [1969]) *The Court Society*. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 2. Edited by S Mennell. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (2006 [1970]). *Was ist Soziologie?* Gesammelte Schriften, Bd. 5. Suhrkamp.

Elias N (2007 [1987]) *Involvement and Detachment*. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 8. Edited by S Quilley. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (1987). *Los der Menschen: Gedichte, Nachdichtungen*. Suhrkamp.

Elias N (2011 [1991]) *The Symbol Theory*. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 13. Edited by R Kilminster. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (2012 [1939]) *On the Process of Civilisation: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 3. Edited by S Mennell, E Dunning, J Goudsblom and R Kilminster. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (2012 [1970]) *What Is Sociology?* The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 5. Edited by A Bogner, K Liston and S Mennell. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (2013 [1989]) *Studies on the Germans: Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias, vol. 11. Edited by S Mennell and E Dunning. Dublin: University College Dublin Press.

Elias N (2022) *Sozialer Kanon, soziale Existenz und das Problem der Sinngebung: Ein soziologischer Essay*. Edited by C Egen. Wiesbaden: Springer VS.

Erdheim M (1996) Unbewußtheit im Prozeß der Zivilisation. In: Rehberg K-S (ed.) *Norbert Elias und die Menschenwissenschaften: Studien zur Entstehung und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes*. (pp. 158–171). Suhrkamp.

Freud S (1919) The uncanny. In: Strachey J (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XVII (1917–1919). London: Hogarth Press, pp. 217–256.

Freud S (1930) Civilization and its discontents. In: Strachey J (ed.) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXI (1927–1931): The Future of an Illusion, Civilization and Its Discontents, and Other Works. London: Hogarth Press, pp. 57–145.

Gellner E (1988) *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Horkheimer M and Adorno TW (2002 [1944]) *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Translated by E Jephcott. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Levitsky S and Ziblatt D (2018) *Wie Demokratien sterben: Und was wir dagegen tun können*. Munich: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt.

Mann T (2011) *Joseph und seine Brüder*. Frankfurt am Main: S Fischer.

Münkler H (ed.) (1998) *Die Herausforderung durch das Fremde* (Interdisziplinäre Arbeitsgruppen, Forschungsberichte 5). Berlin: Akademie Verlag.

Paul J (1963) Selina oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele. In: Miller N (ed.) *Sämtliche Werke*, vol. I/6. Munich: Carl Hanser.

Rehberg K-S (ed.) (1996) *Norbert Elias und die Menschenwissenschaften: Studien zur Entstehung und Wirkungsgeschichte seines Werkes*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Reicher D (2023) Zivilisationsprozesse vor dem Staat? Norbert Elias über ›staatenlose‹ Gesellschaften Afrikas und ihre Einordnung in weltgeschichtliche Entwicklungslinien. In: Benkel T and Meitzler M (eds) *Mythenjagd: Soziologie mit Norbert Elias*. (pp. 186–201). Velbrück Wissenschaft.

Rensmann L (2021) Im Schatten des Trumpismus: Autoritärer Populismus in der Regierung und die Neuformierung der radikalen Rechten in den USA. *Zeitschrift für Rechtsextremismusforschung* 1(1): 1–21.

Simmel G (1971) The stranger. In: DN Levine (ed.) *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, pp. 143–149.

Van Loyen U (2012) *Strände der Vernunft: Norbert Elias im inneren Afrika. Mit einem Vortrag von Lucien Lévy-Bruhl*. Berlin: Matthes & Seitz.

Waldhoff H-P (2009) *Verhängnisvolle Spaltungen: Versuche zur Zivilisierung wissenschaftlichen Wissens*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.

Waldhoff H-P (2019) *Eros und Thanatos: Über die Verflechtung von Lebens- und Todestrieben und ihre riskante Spaltung im Zivilisationsprozess*. Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft.

---

[i] **Hans-Peter Waldhoff** is a sociologist, social psychologist and group analyst, and außerplanmäßiger (adjunct) Professor at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, Germany, where he has worked in sport and health sociology. He studied at Göttingen, Paris, Bielefeld and Hannover, including a period at Bielefeld's Centre for Interdisciplinary Research (ZiF) while Norbert Elias was working there. He received his doctorate from Leibniz Universität Hannover and later completed habilitations in both sociology and social psychology there. He also trained as a group analyst in Zürich and as a group-analytic supervisor in Heidelberg. His work brings Eliasian civilising-process theory together with group analysis, psychoanalysis and the sociology of knowledge, and has addressed migration, strangeness and established–outsider relations, particularly in the Turkish–German case. His books include Fremde und Zivilisierung (1995), Verhängnisvolle Spaltungen (2009) and Eros und Thanatos (2nd ed., 2019). With Michael Fischer, he edited Autobiographisches und Interviews, volume 17 of Elias's Gesammelte Schriften (2005).

Email: waldhoff@ish.uni-hannover.de

Funding Declaration:
The author received no funding support in the writing of this article.

Declaration of interests:
No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.