Chapter One
Mary Fulbrook

Introduction:

The Character and Limits of the Civilizing Process

This chapter raises some key problems with Elias’s approach, focusing particularly on his notions of civilization and modernity, and on his assumptions about violence and the internalization of norms. It argues that there is relatively little exploration of space for creativity, for the role of the imagination, or a dialectical interplay between some irreducible individual core and a surrounding framework of culturally constructed perceptions. The chapter thus functions to show how the following chapters serve collectively to revise and extend Elias’s work and to present new perspectives on the development of culture and society in Germany.

In the Brunswick court of 1589, it was deemed necessary to point out that it was impolite to urinate or defecate in public spaces, but rather one’s excretory functions should be carried out in ‘appropriate’ places. In 1731, a German manual for polite behaviour suggested that if one happened to meet an acquaintance in the act of relieving himself, it was only polite to pretend not to have noticed him, and it would therefore be impolite to greet him. In the eighteenth century, people were embarrassed to talk about sex, yet talked willingly about God, death and eternity, openly indulging in weeping; by the 1920s, as the German philologist Victor Klemperer noted in his diary, while sex, nudity and venereal disease were no longer topics occasioning any embarrassment, discussion of death or religion had become effectively taboo, occasioning blushing and embarrassment. In September 1968, a West German court sentenced Karl-Heinz Pawla to an additional ten months imprisonment for having wilfully defecated as an act of defiance in court; a wholly natural act could be used – and punished – when carried out in an inappropriate context. Somewhere along the historical line, major changes had taken place in perceptions of and

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3 See the chapter by Mererid Pw Davies below.
taboos surrounding natural bodily processes; and blushing, an entirely involuntary physiological reaction causing reddening of the face, was by the twentieth century aroused by entirely different, culturally and historically variable, topics or stimuli.

These and a whole host of related changes in the links between the deepest recesses of the individual psyche, marked by changing ‘thresholds of shame and embarrassment’, and broader changes in the historical and political context, were the subject of searching historical investigation in the path-breaking work of Norbert Elias. It is the purpose of this book to explore these processes further, taking off from and debating with the ideas of Elias. The work of Norbert Elias has, over recent years, stimulated a wide range of further work and constructive critique. Much of this further discussion has remained at a relatively abstract, theoretical level, or has addressed aspects of his oeuvre in isolation. It is possible, as will soon become clear, to point up gaps, inconsistencies and problematic assumptions underlying his approach. Yet the project as a whole is one which, in its breathtaking scope and the range of questions it poses, almost cries out for extension by substantive application.

Elias explored what he considered to be the ‘civilizing process’; here, we have chosen to focus on moments of excess and transgression, moments when the culturally defined boundaries and norms of ‘civilized conduct’, the very boundaries of ‘civilization’, are both constructed and challenged. Elias’s primary focus was on Western Europe, and particularly France, often viewed as the classic case of ‘civilization’; here, we take as our primary focus the case of culture and society in Germany, often seen in terms of a pattern of aberration and a ‘special path to modernity’ (Sonderweg), a notion which we challenge. And we have chosen to approach Germanic culture and society from a variety of perspectives: exploring both ‘high culture’ – quintessential medieval, classical and modern literary texts – and broader cultural and social currents, including art, music, laughter, and table manners; exploring both the development of the language and the imagination, as well as the social and political structures and the often violent events which marked the twisting patterns of German history. Such analysis throws light on the very varied ways in which state appropriation - and on occasion, the sanctioning, fostering and unleashing - of violence affects the behaviour of those living within any given socio-political