Chapter Eight
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The Civilizing Process and the Construction of the
Bourgeois Self:
Music Chambers in Wilhelmine Germany

Elias claims that the personal realm played an integral role in a ‘civilizing process’ that transformed society as a whole. Focussing on visual representations of the spiritual heart of the bourgeois home in a formative moment - the Wilhelmine music chamber - this essay argues that bourgeois selfhood was not only about controlling affective behaviour, but also about encouraging it. In the civilizing process, the dichotomy between rationality and libido, between self-control and self-indulgence, should not be understood as two separate phases of a historical meta-process of development. Rather, both aspects were reconfigured anew in different historical settings, and always in relation to one another.

The nineteenth century was the golden age of private life, a time when the vocabulary and reality of private life took shape. Privacy as an idea was elaborated with great sophistication. [...] The private, once of little or no negative significance, had been re-valued to the point where it now stood as a synonym for happiness. [...] In the long run, the [French] Revolution sharpened the distinction between the public and private spheres, emphasised family values, and led to differentiation of sexual roles by setting up a contrast between political men and domestic women.1

The rhetorical separation of the political and the private spheres has been the subject of much critique in cultural history. Few scholars have accepted the notion of the private as an a-political realm; some, such as Richard Sennett, have gone as far as to claim that in modern times, the private had become a substitute for the political.2 Foucauldians regard private spaces as constitutive of modern subjectivity and, hence, liberal citizenship. Certainly, Norbert Elias’s claim that the personal realm played an integral role in a ‘civilizing process’ that transformed society as a whole is widely accepted today. How exactly this was accomplished remains a much more contested question. Elias himself saw the process primarily in psychoanalytical

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terms. Relying heavily on Freudian terminology, Elias equates civilization with the control of affective drives by means of a super-ego. Like more recent poststructuralist thinkers, Elias sees the end product in critical, even pessimistic terms. The modern condition, while claiming to liberate the individual, in fact imprisons him (even more so: her) all the more thoroughly. For the internalised prison walls of the mind are much more effective than external restrictions. And where political control is exercised in the mind of the citizen, its physical location moves from the public spaces of the polis to the private home, most particularly, the private home which is freed from the dictates both of social representation (the aristocratic household), and of economic necessity (the working-class household). Only the bourgeois home is dedicated exclusively to the themes highlighted by Perrot as the pivotal aspects of the nineteenth-century understanding of privacy: introspection and ‘retreat’. Thus, the bourgeois home will form the centrepiece of the analysis offered here.

Before zooming in on the material evidence, it is important to address the issue of chronology. For Elias, the civilizing process is as inevitable as the evolution of the individual from child to adult. The history of mankind can be subdivided into two phases: the pre-modern, analogous to childhood, and the modern, analogous to adulthood. Elias emphasises that the evolution of modernity is not an act of the will, but an “order sui generis, which is more compelling and stronger than the will and reason of individual people composing it”.3 In other words, civilization is not so much the brainchild of modernity as a political project, but rather a response to objective conditions brought about by socio-economic modernisation. The key for Elias lies in the increasing division of labour in modern societies, which necessitates longer chains of human interaction. These in turn require reliance on a universally accepted code of conduct to regulate interaction between strangers. Yet the paradox of Elias’s civilizing process remains Freudian at heart: it derives from the essential (and ultimately pre-historical) conflict between the ‘id’ and the ‘super-ego’. Economic development merely serves to dramatise this dichotomy of the human condition. Elias sees an analogy between pre-modern societies and childhood, where human behaviour is driven by the