

# Chapter 6

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## **Exercise 1**

The two passages below are both concerned with Norbert Elias's theory of the civilizing process. Orchestrate a discussion between John McGuire and John Pratt that is careful to note each of their research contexts.

In Passage 1, John McGuire, a social historian, is talking about capital punishment and analyzing episodes in the history of capital punishment in Australia. Everyday experience might lead us to expect that he will focus on the debate over whether there should be capital punishment at all, but his focus is actually on the staging of the act itself. He refers to Michel Foucault's famous and compelling account (translated into English as *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* in 1979) of the transformation of public execution—grisly tortures performed before large audiences of citizens—into the much less public techniques of punishment carried on in modern prisons. But McGuire also says that Foucault's interpretation of the history of state-sponsored punishment is now competing with another interpretation: Norbert Elias's theory of the “civilizing process.”

### **PASSAGE 1**

The decision to conceal the execution ritual from public scrutiny has attracted little scholarly attention from historians of capital punishment in Australia [...] The body of English-speaking work that has been produced on the subject has mainly concentrated upon the end of the spectacle in America and England.<sup>1</sup> Among this work, there is evidence of a trend to de-emphasize what David Garland has described as Foucault's “power perspective,”<sup>2</sup> in which the symbolic act of execution is interpreted as having fulfilled a decisive political function in reasserting the power of sovereign over subject until its dramatic replacement in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by a new disciplinary technology of power—the prison. In its place has emerged a greater attention to the role of cultural factors in determining the movement away from public punishments.<sup>3</sup> Louis Masur's work in particular has emphasized that transforming sensibilities towards violence in American society provided the impetus for the concealment of the offensive and brutalising

spectacle of the public execution.<sup>4</sup> The motivation for this culturalist approach has stemmed from the work of the sociologist, Norbert Elias, whose attention to the influence of psychological sensibilities on the process of historical change has inspired scholars in a variety of fields, including the study of punishment.<sup>5</sup> While Elias's work has provoked a number of criticisms,<sup>6</sup> the concept of the "civilizing process" is a useful explanatory tool when applied to the history of capital punishment. In explaining the course of European history from the Middle Ages to the early twentieth century, Elias emphasized the interaction between processes of state formation, on the one hand, and psychological and behavioral transformations in the individual, on the other. As the state gradually began to monopolise the use of physical force and its administrative apparatus became increasingly centralised, there was an accompanying transformation in the individual towards self-restraint or self-discipline—in short, a "civilizing process" was apparent ("civilizing" being understood here not to refer to a society being civilised in an absolute sense but, rather, to the process by which a society gradually becomes more civilised over time).

One must be cautious in applying a theory that was developed to explain a specific historical circumstance to another quite distinct situation, yet it remains to be seen how applicable Elias's theory is to areas other than western Europe. Indeed, for any analysis of the European "civilizing process" to be complete, the colonial settler states that comprised its margins should be taken into account.

### Notes

- 1 See especially: Randall McGowen, "Civilizing Punishment: The End of the Public Execution in England," *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 33, no. 3, 1994, pp. 257–82; David D. Cooper, *The Lesson of the Scaffold: The Public Execution Controversy in Victorian England*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1974, and in his article "Public Executions in Victorian England: A Reform Adrift," in William B. Thesing [...]
- 2 David Garland, *Punishment and Modern Society: A Study in Social Theory*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990, p. 131.
- 3 See especially: Masur, *op. cit.*; Pieter Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering: Executions and the Evolution of Repression: From a Preindustrial*

*Metropolis to the European Experience*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1984; and Garland, *op. cit.*, especially chaps 9 and 10.

- 4 Masur, *op. cit.*, especially pp. 103–10.
- 5 Elias's theoretical contribution is best outlined in *The Civilizing Process, vol. 1: The History of Manners* (1939), Blackwell, Oxford, 1983 [...]
- 6 See for example [...]

John McGuire 1998 "Judicial violence and the 'civilizing process': Race and transition from public to private executions in Colonial Australia." *Australian Historical Studies* 111: 187-209, 188-90.

In the next passage, John Pratt offers further commentary on Elias's theory of the civilizing process—in another research context, which is referred to at the end of the passage.

## PASSAGE 2

### *The civilizing process*

What is it, though, that is meant by the term civilized? It carries with it common-sensical notions about values and practices which, in general, differentiate Western societies which are thought to make up the civilized world, from those other social formations which do not. Here, though, I am using it as a theoretical construct in the manner of Elias ([1939] (1994)). For him, "civilizing" was one element in a triad of controls whereby individuals exercised self-control (the other two being control of natural events and control of social forces). The intensity of this self-control at any given time in a particular society could thus be seen as an indicator of its stage of development (Elias 1970). Importantly, then, "civilizing" in the Eliasian sense did not mean "progress" nor did it invoke value judgment. Instead, it was the contingent outcome of long-term socio-cultural and psychic change from the Middle Ages onwards, that brought with it two major consequences. First, the modern state itself gradually began to assume much more centralized authority and control over the lives of its citizens, to the point where it came to have a monopoly regarding the use of force and the imposition of legal sanctions to address disputes. Second, citizens in modern societies came to internalize restraints, controls and inhibitions on their conduct, as their values and actions came to be framed around increased sensibility to the suffering of others and the privatization of disturbing events (Garland 1990). In

these respects, while Elias himself used changing attitudes to bodily functions and to violence to demonstrate these claims, it also seems clear that the development of punishment in modern society follows this route and provides a helpful demonstration of the Elias thesis. One of the most important consequences of the gradual spread of these sentiments was, as Pieter Spierenburg (1984) has illustrated, a decline and tempering of corporal and capital punishments over this period—to the point where, at the onset of modernity, the public performance of such punishments had all but disappeared and their administration in private was increasingly subject to regulations and “scientific” scrutiny. As I want to show in relation to English prison development, these trends have since continued. In the course of the development of much of modern society punishment became “a rather shameful societal activity, undertaken by specialists and professionals in enclaves (such as prison and reformatories) which are, by and large, removed from the sight of the public” (Garland 1990:224).

John Pratt 1999 “Norbert Elias and the civilized prison.” *British Journal of Sociology* 50 (2): 271-96, 272-73.