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A THROWBACK TO VIOLENCE?

Outline for a process-sociological approach to “terror” and “terrorism”

Dominique Linhardt & Cédric Moreau de Bellaing

Introduction

Norbert Elias has repeatedly asserted that fear of danger should be regarded as a regular thread in human history. Thereby, variations in history relate to changes in the ways members of human societies strive to cope with the dangers they face and the fears they instill in them. In this respect, Elias holds the view that social development has been marked by significant advances in knowledge and thus in the control of calamities affecting human beings. This would explain the relationship of more advanced societies towards nature: the resigned acceptance distinctive of less developed societies has gradually given way to an intention and a capacity to manage natural phenomena and the scourges associated with them. By contrast, he observes, the dangers arising from social organization itself have not yet brought about a comparable level of insight and mastery: in the face of the cruelties that nations, groups, and individuals still inflict on each other, human societies have scarcely got beyond the stage of fatalism (Elias 1985). Contrary to what some critics of his theory of the civilizing process have implied, Elias was perfectly clear-sighted on this matter: far from any coarse self-celebration of a dominating West to which his work has occasionally been assimilated (e.g. Duerr 1988), he felt that “our descendants, if humanity can survive the violence of our age, might consider us as late barbarians” (Elias 1989, 536–37).

With these few words, Elias is picking up two essential tenets of his theory of the civilizing process. Firstly, he reminds us that since the civilizing process has neither beginning nor end, any progress made by humankind is always doomed to accommodate the ills it has not yet overcome. That is why every social type perceives the one immediately preceding it as the last representative of the barbaric times, and will be seen in the same manner by the one who succeeds it. This general observation also applies to us who are living in societies that, as Elias points out a few lines above in the same text, tend to overvalue the benefits of a “modernity” that we like to identify with. In picturing the distant horizon of the “possible development of humankind” (Elias 1989, 536), Elias draws attention to the fact that there is no reason to think that the civilizational stage we have reached protects us from the destructive potential that we continue to cultivate in the way we behave towards each other.

But Elias does not stick to that first teaching. Assuming that we may not “survive the violence of *our age*”, he secondly suggests that our situation could, in some way, even be more

desperate than in the past, for if the societies that preceded ours did not bring about the self-destruction of humanity, this risk now constitutes a reality we cannot avoid confronting.¹ This observation of a threat of destruction that increases while the civilizing process moves forward cannot be adequately understood by attributing violence exclusively to what the civilizing process has not yet been able to perform and secure at a given moment. Some part of the violence of the present cannot be reduced to it; this part is constitutive of a type of violence that can be described as regressive in the specific sense that it fixes itself on the civilizing process, is formed from it and in reaction to it and, as such, proceeds from it as much as it opposes it. This is the very idea behind the notion of “breakdown of civilization” put into play by Elias in his *Studies on the Germans* (Elias 1996). Insofar as some level of civilization has to be in order for it to collapse, this type of violence involves more than a simple reversal: it requires a *negation*, the nature of which needs to be elucidated.

Commentators of Elias’s work have, of course, not failed to notice this point, so that the possibility of the coexistence, the synchronicity of progressive and regressive trends within evolving social figurations, is now widely recognized, even if the interpretations and explanations given to it may differ (Burkitt 1996; Dépelteau 2017; Dunning and Mennell 1998; Krieken 1999; Swaan 2001). The following outline is in keeping with these considerations. In this regard, it is aimed at two objectives. The first is to pinpoint the social mechanisms that foster the occurrence of these regressive forms of violence. The second is to provide a basis for the hypothesis that the latter are most distinctively expressed through the experience of “terror” and “terrorism” that societies have been witnessing since the nineteenth and, at an accelerating pace, the twentieth centuries. These notions are not to be understood in the narrow sense that prevails in common parlance. As a preliminary definition, we suggest adopting the one given by Michael Walzer. Under the term “terrorism”, the latter groups together forms of violence that have the characteristic of “resembling” acts of war, but infringe and subvert its “political code” as it has been enforced in the course of modernity and methodized in the laws of war (Walzer 1977, 197–206). In this sense, the notions of “terror” and “terrorism” refer to a wide range of acts of violence, perpetrated by both state and non-state actors, that, in sum, give the conflicts of the twentieth century their distinctive shape, particularly in terms of the dramatic increase in civilian casualties.² They include the

1. Elias has pointed to the risk of a nuclear holocaust in this regard. With the end of the Cold War, the imminence of this threat may now seem to have diminished. It should nevertheless be recalled that the nuclear disarmament and non-proliferation programs conducted over the past forty years have not prevented the persistence of atomic arsenals that are more than sufficient to eradicate all life on earth several times over. Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume that Elias, if he had had to deal with the changes that have taken place since the end of the 1980s, would have been interested in the threat arising from the ecological crisis and would certainly have refrained from interpreting global warming or the extinction of the Holocene as mere steps backwards, as if humanity were once again the object of the fury of a nature that is external to it. It is rather more likely, conversely, that he would have taken full measure of the anthropogenic nature of a transformation which, in its causes as well as in its possible consequences, including the threat of extreme violence of which it could become the issue, not only affects humanity, but concerns it for the first time in history as an integral part of life processes that run through, encompass and overflow it.

2. This does not mean that these violent conflicts and the actors who engage in them should be assimilated, that the crime of the Nazis against the Jews would be of similar magnitude and significance to acts of torture

indiscriminate use of bombs and bombings, practices of abduction and deportation, of rape and torture, the perpetration of pogroms and mass killings, the setting up of concentration and extermination camps—to mention but some elements of the nefarious set of techniques that states and, to some extent, other violence entrepreneurs who seek to catch up with them, put at the service of strategies of hatred that feed the *skandalon* of extreme violence as the modern world has seen it and still sees it today.

Primary and secondary barbarism

In a footnote at the beginning of the *Studies on the Germans* (Elias 1996, 444–45), Elias points out the difference between the “genocide in the 1930s and 1940s” and “acts of mass destruction” in a more distant past that, without being “identical to those of the National Socialists”, are “nevertheless similar in certain respects” and correspond to “what we now call genocide”—the example given by Elias being the siege of Melos and the subsequent massacre perpetrated by the Athenians in 416 and 415 BC.³ According to him, the difference lies essentially in the fact that, in the first case, the treatment inflicted on the Melians was perceived as “normal”, whereas in the second, the “standards of human behaviour” that had developed over the centuries in Europe made the crimes committed by the National Socialists to “appear abhorrent, and [...] regarded with spontaneous feelings of horror”. The nuance introduced by Elias suggests the need to discern two analytically distinct drivers of violence: the first obviously refers to a “pre-civilizational” pattern, which the civilizing process, by pushing sensitivity and conduct towards greater temperance, has precisely the result of reducing; the second, on the other hand, denotes a “post-civilizational” pattern, in that it corresponds to a form of violence that the historically acquired disgust for brutality fails to repress. The first resort to violence would thus correspond to what might be called “primary barbarism”, in the sense that it belongs to the context out of which the process of civilization is likely to emerge and on which it exerts its transformative effects, while the second appears to be correlated with what might, by contrast, be called “secondary barbarism”, since it necessarily takes on a transgressive aspect to the ideal of non-violence that the process of civilization has already begun to shape.

It would be misleading, however, to understand these oppositions in absolute terms. Elias has always urged for a gradualist approach to long-term social change. The Athenian city, little more than a decade after the end of Pericles’s reign, does not constitute a civilizational zero-point, and it is probably just for this reason that Elias took the example of the Melos massacre, as it lets him bring out all the more clearly the distinctness of the breakdown of civilization during the “Second Thirty Years’ War”. Hence, the notions of primary and secondary

during the Algerian war or abuses committed by Daech. We do simply suggest that, in at least one respect, these acts of violence show a comparable social mechanism. It is this mechanism that we intend to highlight here; but not to ignore the important differences that in addition distinguish and singularize the acts of violence under consideration.

3. After six months of siege, in view of the Melians’ obstinate refusal to submit to its power, Athens executed men of the age of bearing arms and enslaved women, children and the elderly. The island was later colonized by Athens (Tritle 2000, 119–23).

barbarism also have only relative and comparative relevance. It is when looking at different socio-historical contexts that they may be helpful in shedding light on differences in degree. Some situations would appear as characterized by the relative prevalence of primary barbarism over secondary barbarism—corresponding, in the example given by Elias, to the Athenian case; in others, a shift in this distribution would be observed—as, Elias implies, it is the case for Nazi Germany. The hypothesis that one may venture to formulate is the following: the more extreme violence appears in a context that is more advanced in the civilizing process, the more likely it is to be perceived as “abnormal”, and the more intense and exorbitant is the effort of those who are led to suppress the feelings of horror that it inspires—foremost the perpetrators, but also possible supporters, occasional witnesses and potential victims when they fail to realize the threat.

One consequence of this line of analysis is that it forces us to reconsider what has been discussed in the literature over the last three decades under the term “decivilizing processes”. It is well known that this notion, introduced by Elias himself and then developed in his wake by some of the most eminent representatives of figurational sociology, has had the aim of showing that the theory of the civilizing process in no way implies adherence to an evolutionary vision of history, that it is not based on a teleology of moral progress and does not ascribe in this regard to Western modernity any superiority over other times and cultures. In view of these premises, the dark fate that Germany and, with it, all of Europe and part of the world experienced in the first half of the twentieth century, without constituting the sole point of fixation, has come to the fore. The reason is obvious: the issue at stake was to make the most spectacular experience of civilizational involution, which had struck at the historical and geographical heart of the developed world, describable and explainable with the *same* conceptual instruments as the civilizational breakthrough that had characterized the preceding centuries. It would be difficult to dispute that the publication of the *Studies on the Germans*, “at the end of a long life”, took on a certain urgency in this respect. But it is also noticeable that in the book Elias uses the terms “decivilization” and “decivilizing process” rather parsimoniously, and that in any case he does not provide any explicit theory of it.

Building on his work, others have aimed at completing this task. Applying a principle of inverted symmetry to the concept of the civilizing process, decivilizing processes have been defined, in the words of Stephen Mennell, as “what happens when civilizing processes go into reverse” (Mennell 1990, 205). Taking up a terminology already present in Elias—“reverse”, “*rückwärts*” (Elias 1986, 46; Festenberg and Schreiber 1988, 183)—, this meaning has lastingly shaped the common understanding of the idea of decivilizing processes. Its intuitive nature makes it difficult to dispute. Yet it does not spell out the sense of the “reversal” at issue. To state, as Jonathan Fletcher does, that “the term ‘reversal’ thus refers to a collapse or gradual erosion of specific social standards which were previously dominant within particular individuals and among particular groups or societies” (Fletcher 1995, 290), also fails to suffice. Two interpretations are indeed possible. Either this normative collapse or erosion constitutes a *throwback*, leading to the reinstatement of attitudes and sensitivities similar to those that prevailed earlier in the process of civilization. Or else the phenomenon of decivilization is in fact characterized by a negative deviation from the norms and sensitivities that the civilizing

process has established, giving rise to behaviours that, in the light of these norms and sensitivities, are marked by degradation. However, the norms and sensitivities that have passed away are not replaced by those that have meanwhile come into being, but coexist with them in a palingenetic mode, anachronistically inserted into the present, thus creating an irreducible tension within and among subjects, providing, in this interpretation, the very criterion of decivilizing processes. From this perspective, this concept would correspond to the resurgence of a less civilized past within—and not in place of—a more civilized present and would appear, as such, less as a throwback than as a *regression* in a sense close to that psychoanalysis has given to the term, in which a move backward only appears as such in the light of the discrepancy with the “normal” level of development.⁴

The question is not purely speculative. It is concretely to know whether the siege of Lisbon, the Battle of Bouvines, or the Black Death Persecutions show experiences of violence analogous to those of the Second Battle of Ypres, the Kristallnacht, or the siege of Leningrad. To answer this question affirmatively is to reject the hypothesis of secondary barbarism and to assume the throwback hypothesis. But this stance will then have to explain how it comes that in the heart of the twentieth century, within tightly integrated and differentiated societies that require a high level of self-control, individuals and groups regain the ability to vent their aggressive impulses as “freely”, “directly” and “openly” (Elias 2000, 168) as members of societies at an earlier stage of the civilizing process. We intend to explore the alternative hypothesis, that of regression, by considering that twentieth century-like extreme violence has to be understood by considering that it occurs *in spite* of a social context in which attitudes and sensitivities are, “normally”, more “subdued, moderate and calculated”, in which “social taboos are built much more deeply into the fabric of our drive-economy” and in which, therefore, “belligerence or cruelty appears to be contradictory” (Elias 2000, 168–169)—which, it should be noted, is not to say impossible and not even improbable.

Noogenetically driven violence

This hypothesis is supported by another aspect that becomes manifest when looking at the sociogenetic dimension of civilizing and decivilizing processes. It is known that Elias conjectured a covariance of changes in the individual drive-economy and long-term morphological transformations in social organization. In *The Civilizing Process*, he has shown that the psychogenetically observable increase in “the social constraint towards self-constraint” (Elias 2000, 365 et seq.) is bound to the sociogenetic construction of a socio-political order based on the existence of states which, in the territory they control, enforce their rule through the progressively exclusive appropriation of institutionally regulated means of coercion. Throughout this interwoven transformation, the reluctance to use and tolerate violence in

4. Regression is definitely a thorny issue in psychoanalytic studies and there does not seem to exist any commonly accepted definition of the term. But whatever their divergences, the various approaches to the phenomenon all assume that the concept of regression refers to an internal breakdown within an ongoing psychological development and not to a change of the direction of that development. For first consideration, Blum (1994).

society therefore grows as the monopolization of the means of violence by the state authorities advances. The view that decivilizing processes are civilizing processes “going into reverse” would then mean that the increase in violent behavior is related to a decrease in the degree of monopolization of violence.

Table 1: Civilizing and decivilizing processes under the throwback hypothesis.

		CIVILIZING PROCESSES	DECIVILIZING PROCESSES
<i>Psychogenesis</i>	Social constraint towards self-constraint	↗	↘
<i>Sociogenesis</i>	State’s monopolization of violence	↗	↘

It is indisputable that Elias interprets the “brutalization” of German society, especially in the context of the upheavals in the Weimar Republic, from this perspective (Dunning and Mennell 1998, 349–51). However, one wonders whether this apparent weakening of the state’s monopoly is accurately described on the sort of assumption that the situation in Germany in the 1920s tended towards the restoration of a figuration formally equivalent to that of feudal societies, with their structurally powerless political organization and monarchies incapable of keeping the territorial lords in line. Yet Elias gives us a hint as to what is specific to the Weimar situation:

“In considering the history of the Weimar Republic, I do not think enough attention has been given to the breakdown of the state’s monopoly of violence. And one can see very clearly why it was breaking down: because the *Reichswehr*, that is, the army, was itself firmly in the hand of the right. It was not a neutral instrument of the state, but an instrument of the right.” (Elias 1994, 43)

This remark suggests that the observed demonopolization does not lie in the weakening of the state caused by greater competition, but in the development which, due to “the expansion of military models in parts of the German middle class” (Elias 1996, 15), has led to state power being put at the service of particular social groups and subordinated to their political struggle against other social groups. In this view, *Freikorps* or, later, SA violence appears not so much as a challenge to the state’s monopoly of violence; rather, it leads to a situation where the latter aligns with the former, up until the National Socialist leadership, once in office, normalizes the situation—this is the significance of the Night of the Long Knives—, while continuing and dramatically intensifying the brutalization of society from then on, this time with the full possession of the state’s means of violence. The argument has the advantage of preventing the error of assimilating civilization to the mere existence of the State (Delmotte and Majastre 2017). But if state formation does not provide the yardstick for civilizing processes, since it can either foster the pacification of human coexistence or use its power for the worst

butcheries, then this means that addressing the sole level of violence monopolization does not offer the right criterion to grasp what is at issue when it comes to the “breakdown of civilization”.

It needs to be remembered that, in the tradition of classical sociology, Elias approaches social development at its most fundamental level using the concepts of differentiation and integration. It is the joint process of deepening social differentiation and increasing scales of integration that he refers to as “lengthening chains of interdependence”. According to him, the socio-political outcome of this process are advances in “functional democratization”, of which the state and institutional democracy are at most only effects. Cas Wouters has repeatedly called attention to the importance of this notion, which Elias has belatedly articulated, but which was implicated from the outset by the theory of the civilizing process (Wouters 2019, 120–21). Now, if it is true that the civilizing process, as Wouters explains, is related to increasing functional democratization, then decivilizing processes and the brutalization of social relations that they entail should be considered in the light of a lowering of such democratization. This is just what Mennell is doing when, in addressing the decivilizing processes in America, he finds that “there are very powerful forces of functional de-democratisation at work” (quoted by Wouters 2019, 129). Similarly, Eric Dunning, using different terminology, refers to “unintended side effects of integration conflicts and disintegration processes, including defunctionalisation” (quoted by Wouters 2019, 131). Wouters’s reaction underscores his disbelief at these assertions (Wouters 2019, 128–32). Two separate questions do indeed arise. The first is to know under what conditions, in the history of humankind, the possibility of a regression in functional democratization is given. The second is whether such a reversal can explain the outbreaks of extreme violence that the world has experienced over the last two centuries.

To address these two concerns, it is useful to refer to an aspect relating to the theory of functional integration that Elias has discussed in several parts of his work. He basically discerns two types of integration. The first corresponds to “simpler structures whose component part-units one level lower are not yet linked by a division of functions”, whereas the second concerns “more complex structures whose component part-units one level lower are linked by a division of functions” (Elias 1987, 127). This difference has a consequence that Elias says is “of far-reaching significance” (Elias 1987, 130). In the first integration type, “synthesis is reversible” (Elias 1987, 127); in the second, on the other hand, we have “irreversibly organized units with more and more specialized part-units and more and more tiers of integration centres”. In the latter case, “irreversible disintegration is what we call ‘death’” (Elias 1987, 130). Put back into an approach to long-term social processes, the difference thus suggests that the more functionally integrated a social entity is, the greater the risk that, in the event of a crisis, it will not simply be dismantled, but will suffer the equivalent of an annihilation that encompasses all its components. Hence, the assumption that functional democratization, as a marker of a high level of functional integration, may regress *stepwise* appears precarious. From this point of view, Mennell is right in his attempt to identify situations in the history of human societies that correspond to processes of decivilization, when he points out the ideal-typical character of “structural collapse” (Mennell 1990, 218),

like the one that occurred during the fall of the Roman Empire or the end of the Mayan civilization. For, in such case, consistent with the throwback hypothesis, the collapse does indeed amount to a step backwards on the differentiation-integration scale and, by the same token, to the beginning of a further differentiation-integration process.

Conversely, it seems more uncertain whether the contexts and dynamics of violence characteristic of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—wars of colonization, world wars, wars of national liberation, international terrorism and their attendant massacres—might realistically be connected to a decrease in the degree of differentiation-integration and thus to a relative setback of functional democratization, which, despite the violent convulsions, arguably tended to progress overall during the same period.⁵ Against this background, the proposition that extreme violence in the last centuries is not only compatible with, but possibly determined by, the pursuit of functional democratization looks comparatively less far-fetched. One recognizes here, this time under the socio-genetic viewpoint, the paradoxical nature of the regression hypothesis.

Table 2: Civilizing and decivilizing processes under the regression hypothesis (1).

		CIVILIZING PROCESSES	DECIVILIZING PROCESSES
<i>Psychogenesis</i>	Social constraint towards self-constraint	↗	↘
<i>Sociogenesis</i>	Functional democratization	↗	↗

This paradox needs to be explained. To do so, we must clarify the effects functional democratization has on the shaping of social relations. Elias puts us on the track when he points out that functional democratization leads to a growing ambivalence in social relations:

“As social functions and interests become increasingly complex and contradictory, we find more and more frequently in the behavior and feelings of people a peculiar split, a co-existence of positive and negative elements, a mixture of muted affection and muted dislike in varying proportions and nuances.” (Elias 2000, 319)

How can we account for this ambivalence? Let us first notice this: as functional democratization progresses, the way individuals and groups mutually identify each other increasingly adjusts to the differentiation of roles and functions that define the position of individuals and groups in the division of labor. This emerging pattern of mutual identification

5. This observation is in line with Émile Durkheim’s view that the “social division of labour” cannot be reversed within ordinary social development (Durkheim 2013). From this point of view, Eric Dunning’s criticism that this position is “utopian” (Dunning 1986, 219) is itself questionable. For the impossibility of a regression from organic solidarity to mechanical solidarity does not exclude that the former take pathological forms.

comes into tension with the previous pattern, based on naturalized social hierarchies. The gradual transition from *Ständegesellschaft* to “class society” reflects this shift. This has two consequences. First, feelings of superiority and inferiority become problematic (Wouters 1999). Whereas, for instance, the superiority of the nobleman and the inferiority of the peasant were taken for granted under the Old Regime, the inequality between the boss and the worker, who have nothing to distinguish between them except their function in the relations of production, is no longer obvious. Similar developments can be observed for other types of social relationships, such as those between men and women or between colonizers and colonized—generally speaking, between “established» and “outsiders” (Elias and Scotson 2008). Second, this relative loosening of the absoluteness of social hierarchies has had the effect of placing competition and conflict between social groups on the ground of defining the common good and thus of ideologies. For any sociologist trained in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century, the conception of modern societies as characterized by a strengthening of ideological expressions of social antagonism was self-evident. This is especially true for Elias, who had joined Karl Mannheim in the mid-1920s in Heidelberg before following him in 1930 to the University of Frankfurt to become his assistant.

In this respect, it would be surprising if Elias were not marked by the lecture Mannheim gave on his arrival at the Johann Wolfgang Goethe University.⁶ In this course, Mannheim tackles head-on the rise of Nazism as a proper *civilizational* problem, and he does so from the perspective of an analysis of ideologies. But, in continuity with what he has argued for in *Ideology and Utopia* (Mannheim 1995), Mannheim’s approach is based on a strong, a “total” conception of ideology: he conceives of ideological facts as expressions of social reflexivity, as the movement by which social experience is re-grasped by consciousness in the course of its actual realization. Accordingly, ideology does not just refer to reality, but works within it; it digs, within reality, a distancing gap with reality. It is therefore related to what Elias would later call “reality congruence”, as far as *social reality* is concerned. And it has its source precisely in what Elias describes as the growing ambivalence of social life.⁷ Yet, in the context of deepening functional democratization, this reflexivity is increasingly demanding. It needs to remain in constant motion to be able to keep pace with the process of differentiation-integration. But advancing functional democratization also increases the risk of failure. As complexity raises, the progress of reflexivity may interrupt, and give rise to regressive ideological phenomena that denote a desire to re-simplify the world. It is this phenomenon of reverting “distancing” that Mannheim calls “reprimitivization”, and he sees in this form of regression the origin of fanatical beliefs, those on behalf of which the extreme violence that he saw emerging in Germany in the 1920s was perpetrated.

It is striking that Elias, in the *Studies on the Germans*, when he discusses the genesis of violence argues that there is no need to go any further than to take ideological radicalization seriously, in a manner that cannot help but show an affinity with Mannheim’s concept of “reprimitivization”. When he comes to the rise of the middle class under the Wilhelminian

6. A transcript of this course has been edited (Mannheim 2000).

7. It is noteworthy that Mannheim identifies in this reflexivity the very origins of the “sociological attitude”. To appreciate the extent to which this understanding of sociology has been taken up by Elias, see Elias (1984).

Reich, he observes that “as an ideal, the concept of ‘progress’ lost status and prestige among the middle-class intelligentsia of the countries where middle-class groups joined or replaced aristocratic groups as the ruling groups of their countries” (Elias 1996, 135). Further, he notes that “[the aristocratic code] [...] lost the character of a tradition-bound and correspondingly little reflected upon pattern of behaviour, and became expressed in an explicitly formulated doctrine hardened by reflection” (Elias 1996, 180). He shows that these transformations were of central importance in the development of Nazi ideology. Elaborating on the Solomon Group, he writes that its members “wrapped themselves up in their dream as in a warm and protective cloak” and, “when the grim reality finally dawned on them”, “[t]hey busied themselves with destroying a world which denied them meaningfulness” (Elias 1996, 196). In this line of reasoning, his explanation of the barbarism of the Nazis becomes foreseeable:

“The question why the Nazi leadership decided at the beginning of the war to exterminate all the Jews under their dominion has an answer which is simple and ready to hand. [...] [T]he decision to implement the ‘Final Solution of the Jewish problem’ [...] was simply a question of the fulfilment of a deeply rooted belief that had been central for the National Socialist movement from the beginning.” (Elias 1996, 310)

The whole of Elias’s analysis has no prospect other than to determine how transformations in the power balance between groups and classes have resulted in the production of an ideological radicalization which ultimately led to the escalation of violence. The conclusion to be drawn theoretically from this observation is that taking into account the mutual conditioning of psychogenesis and sociogenesis is insufficient. “Decivilizing spurts” can only be explained if we consider another aspect: that of the development of social reflexivity. That is precisely the aspect Elias has mostly focused on in his work on the sociology of knowledge. In this work, Elias deals with the transformation of the collective “means of orientation” from the same long-term perspective as with progress in self-control. He insists on the fact that progress in the relatively autonomous sphere of thinking can be described in two correlated aspects: an increase in the sense of realities and an increase in the efforts for detachment required by the growing complexity of social life, and which translates in particular into greater capacities for abstraction. Elias does not name this aspect of social processes anywhere. But it corresponds quite exactly to the concept of *noogenesis* coined by Teilhard de Chardin (Teilhard de Chardin 1959). And we see how this genesis of the means of orientation is indeed likely to freeze and be reversed when, under specific social conditions, the progress of distancing and reality-congruence tends to slacken. The sources of the “breakdown of civilization” might thus be sought in the contradiction between a social world that continues to advance in functional democratization and the failures of social reflexivity—the belief in “myths”.

Table 3: Civilizing and decivilizing processes under the regression hypothesis (2).

		CIVILIZING PROCESSES	DECIVILIZING PROCESSES
<i>Psychogenesis</i>	Social constraint towards self-constraint	↗	↘
<i>Sociogenesis</i>	Functional democratization	↗	↗
<i>Noogenesis</i>	Distancing social reflexivity	↗	↘

Reassessing “terror” and “terrorism”

It is now possible to return to the question of long-term transformations of violence. Considering what Elias has shown regarding the process of civilization between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries, one might have expected that the following centuries would have been characterized by a continuous, though perhaps still conflicting, deepening of the psychogenetic and sociogenetic processes underlying this pacification, that is to say, of an increase in intolerance to violence and the monopolization of that same violence by political institutions always aiming at a higher degree of integration, the whole being determined by ongoing functional democratization. But this is not what happened. Or more precisely, it happened, but it did not happen alone. The period that began with the nineteenth century was marked by increasing “contradictions”, to use Elias’s terminology, in the civilizing process, that the notion of the decivilizing process sought to make intelligible. This paradoxical development can be phrased as follows. On the one hand, the process of the state’s monopolization of violence has continued, so much so that it has gradually drawn a division between what is, externally, a matter of war and what is, internally, a matter of crime. In the course of this century, maximum differentiation has thus been made between the military and police and criminal justice institutions. On the other hand, however, the same century has also seen the rise of a type of violent conflict that does not fit into this division. This is the case, for example, of the wars of colonization or terrorist attacks in which the distinction between states of peace and states of war and the characterization of criminal violence and warlike violence seem to have been rendered meaningless. And this paradox has been continuously reinforced and intensified in the course of the twentieth century (Linhardt and Moreau de Bellaing 2013).

However, in light of what has been discussed in the previous sections, this paradox fades away. There are indeed two concomitant social trends, one of continuing monopolization of violence and increasing self-constraint, and one of persisting and even intensifying violent conflicts that put this monopolization and intolerance to the test. The paradox resolves when considering that the latter are conflicts that “react” to the civilizing process, and that therefore

civilizing and decivilizing processes are *internally* related. During the nineteenth century, the weakening of statutory forms of social differentiation and integration accelerated as social classes and national societies—jointly—emerged in the context of continuously increasing differentiation and integration. This transformation has led to a reinforcement of the monopolization of the means of violence and, correlatively, of intolerance to violence, but has also resulted in forms of social conflict that are prone to ideological radicalization precisely because they take shape within – and in response to – social and political configurations requiring an increasing degree of distancing.

Yet, this is what specifies what we refer to as noogenetically driven violence, whether it is operated by a state machinery with massive terrorizing power or by small clandestine groups seeking to compensate for the weakness of their resources with the intended destabilizing effects of terrorism on the social organization. One of the distinguishing markers for this type of violence is that it is beyond the categories of violence as they stabilized in the nineteenth century. Indeed, it seems difficult for observers to place violent acts such as those committed by the Kouachi brothers in Paris in January 2015, when they entered *Charlie Hebdo's* office with weapons of war in their hands, into the carefully distinguished categories of war and crime. Some have described these killings as acts of war; others have argued that they should not be regarded as anything other than horrific crimes; still others have pointed to the radical ideological motivation of the killers. What the attack clearly shows is that the terrorist act is peculiar to lend itself to interpretation from three distinct registers, that of war, crime, and ideological commitment, without ever being able to be definitively drawn back to one of the three. Similarly, when, in July 1995, units of the army of the Bosnian Serb Republic entered Srebrenica and massacred more than eight thousand civilians in the space of a few days, right next to four hundred Dutch soldiers who had been charged by the United Nations with protecting the town, it is difficult to consider these acts to be acts of war within the meaning of the international conventions on which the law of armed conflict was founded.

What is true for these two examples is true for many contemporary conflict situations, in any case, for those characterized by some kind of terror and terrorism. They indeed constitute a test of the state's monopolization of violence; they point out to a relapse of self-control and dramatically breach the social norms of legitimate violence; and they are ideology-oriented insofar as the radicalization they derive from is based on political or religious motives. The latter aspect, however, needs to be specified. A misinterpretation of the above would be to consider that terrorist violence is only defined by this ideological component. What is characteristic of the type of ideological radicalization at work in terrorist violence is the kind of noogenetic regression that can be seen there. Terrorist violence – again, in the extensive sense that Michael Walzer gives to the concept – emerges when a social tendency towards what Mannheim called “reprimitivization” opposes the degree of complexity induced by *continuing* lengthening of the chains of interdependence and progressing functional democratization. This can only be understood if one relates the crises in social reflexivity to the gap between the continuation of functional democratization and the failings in the political expectations it produces.

Therefore, secondary barbarism is not just about ideologically motivated acts of violence, or, specifically, it is necessary to understand the phrase “ideologically motivated” in relation to the prevailing social norms that the ideological motivation leads to breaking. Moreover, not all acts of violence that are ideologically motivated can be assimilated. The fact that they all can bring about regressive violence, i.e. violence that reacts to the process of civilization, does not mean that they are morally equivalent. The work of differentiating these forms of violence by taking into account the variability of their social determinants only begins once they have been re-inscribed in this “paradoxicalized” genealogy of the civilizing process. It is also at this point that the political question of the transformation of forms of commitment must be asked, since different ideologies do not have the same propensity to give rise to radicalization (Karsenti 2018). Describing these phenomena of ideological radicalization—of noogenetic regression—then presupposes, from the perspective opened up by Elias, an analysis of the social processes that lead in certain social groups to express feelings of superiority, to convert them into political objectives and, possibly, to seek to achieve them through violence.

What is clear is that the specificity of this violence is imperfectly understood when it is interpreted as if it had not yet been subjected to the process of civilization. Its outbreak is not a sign of a mere relapse; on the contrary, it indicates the reactive nature of this violence to the civilizing process and thus its eminently paradoxical form. A hypothesis can therefore be put forward to guide the pursuit of a socio-processual approach to these forms of violence related to secondary barbarism: the more civilized social relations are, the more violence is likely to be supported by ideology, and the more violence is likely to take the form of “terror” and “terrorism”. This does not mean that further atrocious violence necessarily lies ahead; it does mean, however, that transformations in violence need to be seen in this light if we are to have any chance of coping with it. This is the necessary condition to meet Elias’s hopes for the role social sciences could have in modern societies. As he puts it:

“One [cannot] know in advance whether or not the menace which human groups on many levels constitute for each other is still too great for them to be able to bear, and to act upon, an overall picture of themselves which is less coloured by wishes and fears and more consistently formed in cross-fertilization with dispassionate observation of details. And yet how else can one break the hold of the vicious circle in which high affectivity of ideas and low ability to control dangers coming from people to people reinforce our work?” (Elias 1987, 34).

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