

# Norbert Elias, Catherine Deneuve and Gender Equality

*by Florence Delmotte*

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**Since the Weinstein affair, there has been a great deal of debate over men's sexual urges. The sociology of Norbert Elias has proven to be a precious resource to help understand this historic moment and move beyond the media's opposition between the "freedom to pester" and the moral duty to "rat out your pig".**

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In October 2017, the "Weinstein" affair erupted. The producer, a key figure in the Hollywood movie industry, was accused of sexual harassment by numerous female actors. Immediately afterwards, thousands of women stated that they too had suffered violence at the hands of men. Using social networks and the #MeToo and French equivalent #balancetonporc ("rat out your pig") hashtags, the movement encouraging women to speak out took on considerable scope. On 9th January 2018, an open letter published in *Le Monde* and signed by 100 women, including Catherine Deneuve, put the cat among the pigeons. The signatories defended men's "freedom to pester" as a condition of sexual freedom, condemning the return to a moral order based, like the institution of marriage, on explicit consent. Others criticised the return of an unprecedented form of censorship of artistic productions. Those who had criticised the #MeToo and #balancetonporc movements were then, to varying degrees, accused of trying to silence a cry that had at last been heard, and of playing into the hands of male domination.

To our knowledge, the sociology of Norbert Elias (b. Wrocław 1897, d. Amsterdam 1990) has not yet been used to clarify such recent events and controversies. Nevertheless, it allows us to reset the coordinates of the debate by linking—without confusing—the two questions of the development of inequality between men and women, and what Elias called the "civilising process" of manners. The latter expression denotes a gradual, widespread refinement of behaviours based on a certain repression of feelings and impulses, particularly

those that are aggressive. First imposed by particular social conditions, this control becomes internalised and then unconscious. Whether or not one externalises or suppresses one's own violence thus depends on what one permits oneself according to the position one occupies in a social figuration that remains characterised by more or less unequal relations of mutual dependence between individuals and the groups they form. Elias thus insisted on the centrality of power relations and the need to provide historical context, since it is clear that relations between groups evolve. Finally, he indicated that the "controlled decontrolling of controls"—to which sexual liberation and its expression are related—presupposes a high degree of self-control and restraint. From this perspective, as much as it is "progress" (towards greater equality) rather than a regression (towards a repressive moral order), the #MeToo movement and its aftermath revealed the fragile nature of normative codes that still need to be reasserted.

## **The Civilising Process and Gender Equality**

In his best-known work,<sup>1</sup> Elias devoted himself to studying the transformation of "manners" and the rules of good behaviour since the late Middle Ages in Europe. His book also gives central importance to shifts in the balance(s) of power(s) between social groups. In addition, Elias linked these two aspects together, not by following a causalistic pattern, nor in the framework of a particularly "optimistic" theory, but rather by examining the way in which the instinctual and affective life of individuals depends on political and social institutions and influences them in return.

In the long term, public and private behaviours have evolved towards a lower threshold of "disgust" and "embarrassment" and towards greater "reserve" and "modesty". These shifts pertain to a less visible movement: the development of powerful forms of self-control that have become less and less conscious. In other words, a transformation of the individual's "emotional economy" due to a growing interdependence between human groups, itself caused by the differentiation of social functions. In the second volume of *The Civilizing Process* (published in English as *State Formation and Civilization*), Elias established a more precise connection between the civilising of manners on the one hand and, on the other hand, the creation of the state and the monopolisation of legitimate violence over greater and more populous territories which became relatively pacified internally. While the use of weapons was essential to a knight's survival, the recourse to physical violence was excluded from the form of competition in which courtiers engaged:

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<sup>1</sup> Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 3*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2012 (*Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* [1939]). .

The means of struggle had been refined or sublimated. The restraints of the affects imposed on individuals by their dependence on the monopoly ruler had increased. (*On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 308)

In other words, the warrior in pre-state society did not want to be a "violent" man but was forced into it. Men and women of the court had no choice but to be less "violent".

The author saw civilisation as an unplanned process of the interconnected—but not necessarily synchronous—evolution of mental structures and social structures. In the long term, this process led towards a decrease in power differentials, including between the sexes and the generations. Likewise, the increase in functional interdependences could explain the spread of behavioural models that were considered civilised, initially a characteristic of the elites, towards the lower social strata (*On the Process of Civilisation*, pp. 418 ff.).

In comparison with those focusing on aggression, the passages of *The Civilising Process* that relate to sexuality may prove disappointing. In the first volume, *Changes in the Behaviour of the Secular Upper Classes in the West*, the chapter entitled "Changes in attitudes towards the relations between men and women" concerns gender relations more generally. Specialists have highlighted that another work devoted to the transformations of those relations had been planned to complement his 1939 book. For Elias, relations between men and women were even "a lifelong favourite subject",<sup>2</sup> for he considered the 20th century to have revolutionised the issue. Even so, it was primarily his followers who explored that avenue, focusing first on domestic violence.<sup>3</sup> The anecdotal evidence confirms that the materials and notes accumulated by Elias on the transformations of male-female relations were in fact lost, thrown away by an over-zealous housekeeper in the late 1960s.

In the 1980s, Elias resumed *in extremis* his work on the subject. Published in 1986 in an issue of the *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie* devoted to gender studies, "The Changing Balance of Power Between the Sexes"<sup>4</sup> focused on the development of conjugal rights within marriage at the end of the Roman Republic.

## A Detour Via Marriage in Rome

Elias' idea was not that the transformation of a society towards greater equality between men and women would find its ultimate origin in a specific period of history. If Elias showed an interest in Antiquity, it was certainly not to defend the theory of a linear evolution

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<sup>2</sup> Dominique Linhardt, "La généalogie d'un texte", in Norbert Elias, "Les transformations de la balance des pouvoirs entre les sexes" (trad.), *Politix*, vol. 13, n° 51, 2000, pp. 48-49.

<sup>3</sup> Bram Van Stolk, Cas Wouters, *Vrouwen in tweestrijd. Tussen thuis en tehuis*, Deventer, Van Loghum Slaterus, 1985.

<sup>4</sup> Norbert Elias, "The Changing Balance of Power between the Sexes –A Process-Sociological Study: The Example of the Ancient Roman State", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 4 (1987), pp. 287-316.

leading from the absolute submission of women to their complete liberation. On the contrary, rather than a return to Rome, his detour via Rome revealed the distance promoted by his sociology, the limitations of its relevance, the merits of its impertinence, the caution and free tone used by the author.

Elias begins by recounting a memory of an Indian couple he used to encounter in the streets of London. Even when the couple was deep in conversation, the wife would walk several steps behind her husband. Elias saw this as a symbol of what "has been termed 'harmonious inequality'" (p. 287) and compares it with the "terrifying custom" (p. 288) practised by certain casts which dictated that a wife had to follow her husband into death. In contrast, the code that characterised the middle and upper classes in Europe was highly ambiguous. On the one hand, women continued to be subjected to male domination, while on the other hand, "good behaviour [demanded] instead that men should publicly treat women in a way usually accorded to socially superior and more powerful persons" (p. 289). According to Elias, this ambiguous code, which prevailed until at least the 19th century, was an indication of a power differential that was considerably lower than in the case of Indian wives and Chinese foot-bound women; rather, it was a sign that European women were "already" able to defend themselves, but that this had not always been the case.

In his usual style, Elias presents the problem in a disenchanted way that is highly inspiring. The interesting aspect is not the origins of inequality between men and women, as if equality were the norm (historically, this is not the case at all), but rather the social conditions that enabled gender relations to shift towards a lessening of inequality. In the later stages of the Republic, he identifies a "surprising" development towards relative equality between the sexes within marriage. Even though this custom later disappeared with the invasions and the rise of the Christian church, it nonetheless left traces, which also requires an explanation in itself.

Before this development, and often afterwards, marriage resembled the acquisition of a woman by purchase (as with the Germanic *kaup*), or a kidnapping, as evidenced by the abduction of the Sabine women. For a long time, a married woman in Rome was the property of her husband, as were their children. If she was beaten, she had nowhere to turn. Returning to one of his key ideas from *The Civilising Process*, Elias explained this extreme state of female inferiority by the fact that, in pre-state Roman society, "muscle and fighting power had a social function of the highest order" (p. 293). The result of this was that women typically held the position of "outsiders", held at a distance by the "established", i.e. upper class men. Up until the middle and even the end of the 2nd century BC, women quite simply had no autonomous existence. They were not given a name. They were forbidden to have possessions, to request divorce, even to drink wine. Until they married, they remained under their father's tutelage, or that of another male relative. His authority then passed fully to the woman's husband. However, later historical texts give evidence of the option to conclude another form of marriage, one that did not include transfer—from the father to the husband—of tutelage over the woman (p. 295).

That transformation was neither deliberate nor easy. The question of women's status in Roman society indeed deeply divided men, who were less occupied by war after the final victory over Carthage. It was initially the customs, not the laws, that reflected a profound shift in society: girls began to participate in their brothers' education and turned away from household chores that were the *matrona's* responsibility. Next, and most importantly, a married woman could own possessions and, even though girls were still given arranged marriages, divorce—which had always been an easy, informal procedure for men—became so for women, too. They were also free to choose their second husband, and their lovers. On the subject of Catullus' love for Claudia—or rather a young poet besotted with a married woman of socially superior rank—Elias evokes courtly love which, already in Rome, helped to expand the "range of emotions" (p. 300), as evidenced by Roman music and poetry, and led to a "higher level of self-discipline" in male-female relations.

This form of emancipation also reinforced the distance between the sexes: married women "often identified themselves far more closely with their lineage than with that of their husbands", (p. 301) forming a network of their own, with distinct rules. Finally, Elias cites Appian of Alexandria, who recounted a pivotal incident in the Roman civil wars during the 1st century BC, when a group of noblewomen led by Hortensia, the daughter of a famous orator, publicly rebelled against the triumvirs Octavian, Lepidus and Mark Anthony. They dissented against the dictators' decision to take away all their property as a way of punishing their fathers and husbands, even though the women, unlike the men, were not even on the proscription list. In other words, the "outsiders" were no longer willing to accept the image of themselves imposed by the "established". Although the account of the incident, written two centuries later, is partly fictitious, the story speaks volumes about the independence these women had achieved, and its limitations, since the economic and moral emancipation of Roman noblewomen did not extend as far as politics.

## **The State and the Law, Social Conditions of Emancipation**

Elias goes on to examine "the reasons for this development of a less uneven balance of power between the sexes in Rome". An initial explanation offered by the author highlights the growth of the city into a virtual empire. The senatorial class was no longer made up of peasant warriors; instead, it became "a class of aristocratic holders of high military and civil offices owning immense estates" (p. 304). In a nutshell, the male aristocracy had become rich enough to relinquish their right over a married woman and her property. Here, Elias puts forward an additional theory to the one that prevails in other texts, and which highlights the importance of the rupture in the balance of power. While it is only logical that peace and prosperity reduced the need to worry about survival, and therefore led to the refinement of civilisation, they were not usually solely responsible for the lessening of inequalities. In the case of

advanced industrial societies, Elias posits that their "functional" and "institutional" democratisation, at the turn of the 20th century, resulted firstly from the fact that workers came to represent a social force that demanded they be conceded a position that was previously denied to them.<sup>5</sup> The model associated with the Thirty Glorious Years was outlined during dark times, after the Great Depression in the United States and in the context of the Second World War, when leaders could no longer do without the support of the masses, or of women.

A second, more traditional explanation makes reference to the theories of *The Civilising Process* and the role of the state. Elias stresses the importance, in the pacified Roman Republic, of the stability of administrations capable of enforcing laws and judicial decisions, ensuring the security of goods and people, and protecting wives from their husbands (p. 307).

Although legal equality in marriage did not mean equality in other areas, it did, quite simply, enable women to become individuals—hence the depictions of independent, self-assured women that vanished with the invasions, the erosion of the monopoly of violence and the return to power of the strongmen. Customs relating to the holding of property for women and free consent in marriage were nonetheless incorporated into Roman law, overriding the legal provisions in force in many contemporary societies. The Christian emperors then had to work hard to unravel what had been achieved and strengthen the constraints that impeded divorce. They never made a pure and simple return to the state that had preceded the advances made under the Republic. One reason for this was that both Roman and canon law had kept a record of it, helping—like Sophocles' *Antigone*, Catullus' *Claudia* and Appian of Alexandria's *Hortensia*—to write in dotted lines the history of the transformations of the female condition.

## Values and Norms, Nature and Culture

Elias seemed more interested in manners, affects and sensibilities than values. He also wrote more willingly about "codes" than norms (at least in the legal sense). In his text on marriage in Rome, he dedicated an important note to the concept of "norm", although its primary aim was to re-establish the term according to its practical, process-oriented meaning. What the sociologist did suggest, however, was that the incorporation of what we call values into morals and habitus—whether it be respect for life, one's right over one's body, or equality between men and women, each of which has its own socio-historical context—did not take place *first* through laws and institutions, but rather *also* through them, albeit gradually and even provisionally. While Elias certainly did not confuse values with norms, he did not study

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<sup>5</sup> Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology? The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 5*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2006, pp. 61 ff.

them individually because he was afraid that they would become reified. For the same reason, he could not agree on the idea of their complete heterogeneity or a boundary between them. To expand on a proposal made by Olivier Roy with regard to combating violence against women, while it may be true that "the state produces norms but not values"<sup>6</sup>, the state *can* specifically help to shape tomorrow's values by producing new norms on violence today, including by using the threat of criminal punishment. Whether or not the education system should in fact be responsible for this is a whole other, political, matter.

In Elias, this almost absolute social constructivism was supported by the systematic criticism of ways of thinking based on antithetical categories such as nature and culture, individual and society, structures and history—all rigid oppositions that he considered unrealistic. It was highly unlikely, therefore, that his critique would spare the male-female categories. He reminded us that these notions are socially constructed and historically variable. At the same time, Elias is one of the sociologists of his time who was most interested in the body and the physiological characteristics of human beings. He believed that the independence of sociology from psychology and biology could only be relative, because "men together" (and women) who are of interest to the former are also individuals (although and because they live together) and that those men and women have a body. Even so, copulating, giving birth, living and dying are learned experiences for humans, and it would be an understatement to say that Elias rejected explanations based on the naturalness of the instincts.

As a result, the sociology of Norbert Elias also forces the deconstruction of explanations based on culture, to echo a division used in efforts to understand the origin of violence against women. Basically, saying that someone is an abuser because he is a man or because he is an Arab (as occurred after the sexual assaults that took place in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015-6) is to make the same mistake, because it reduces individuals to immutable essences or entities rather than to the historical conditions of their social existence. In both cases, this would be identifying the wrong cause.

## **The Delicate Matter of Progress**

The misunderstanding regarding norms damaged the public reception of Elias' analyses.<sup>7</sup> Talking of civilisation in 1939 opened the door to criticism. Despite insisting right at the start of *The Civilising Process* that the terms "civilised" and "uncivilised" could not be opposed like good and bad, his theory was continually censured as being an ethnocentric

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<sup>6</sup> Olivier Roy, "La nature a remplacé la culture comme origine de la violence", *Le Monde*, 9 January 2018.

<sup>7</sup> See Nathalie Heinich, "De quelques malentendus concernant la pensée d'Elias", *Tumultes*, n°15, octobre 2000, pp. 161-176; see also Stephen Mennell, *Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 1992, pp. 227-250.

theory of progress that was overly optimistic. Elias nonetheless emphasised the reversible nature of the processes he had brought to light, and their dark side. The repression of impulses certainly exists in any society, but at a certain point, the displacement of conflicts to within the individual, which he considered an "internal struggle", worried him. More precisely, in the 1930s he identified several possible bifurcations.

The civilising process cannot, in fact, be reduced to the quantitative progress and reinforcement of self-constraints. Elias used the example of the bathing suit at the beach to show that a "relative degree of freedom" and "relaxation"—the fact of being able to undress on a beach for instance—corresponds to a higher level of civilisation than having to protect one's privacy at all costs:

"But this change, and with it the whole spread of sports for men and women, presupposes a very high standard of drive control. Only in a society in which a high degree of restraint is taken for granted, and in which women are, like men, absolutely sure that each individual is curbed by self-control and a strict code of etiquette, can *bathing and sporting customs having this relative degree of freedom develop.*" (*On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 182)

However, this was by no means the only direction in which the process could develop. This was the cause of the sociologist's concern:

[W]e also find in our own time the precursors of a shift towards the cultivation of new and stricter constraints. In a number of societies there are attempts to establish a social regulation and managements of the emotions far stronger and more conscious than the standard prevalent hitherto, a pattern of moulding that imposes renunciations and transformation of drives on individuals with vast consequences for human life which are scarcely foreseeable as yet. (*On the Process of Civilisation*, p. 182)

Elias clarified:

"Like many other drives, sexuality is confined more and more exclusively, not only for women but for men as well, to a particular enclave, in socially legitimized marriage." (p. 183)

## **From Gainsbourg to Maggie Nelson, Censorship and Self-Censorship**

It is not easy to update a message delivered in the 1930s. Whether we like it or not, the "Deneuve" letter raises the question of regression in relation to a form of moral and expressional freedom that would have prevailed for a time. A brief look back by means of a digressive example—which touches on an issue far more unquestionable than adultery, and subject to criminal prosecution—may prove enlightening, at least to clarify how certain aspects of the civilising process should be understood according to Elias. The subject appears in Serge Gainsbourg's song "Lemon Incest", released in 1984 and sung as a duet with his 13-

year-old daughter, Charlotte. "*L'amour que nous ne ferons jamais ensemble*" ("The love we'll never make together") was deliberately shocking, playing a splendid, dangerous game with the norm while respecting and reiterating it. This is a fine illustration of the "controlled relaxation of constraint" and of the sublimation of that relaxation and constraint.

Twenty years after his death, Gainsbourg is considered a genius; all is forgiven. However, it seems unlikely that anyone would dare sing something similar today. The reason for this is no doubt the numerous incidents and lawsuits—the effect of which is, in itself, an indication of a heightened sensitivity to child abuse—that have served as a reminder that norms and constraints are not respected by everyone. The growing awareness, following the Dutroux paedophilia case in Belgium, of the fact that violence towards children and their sexual exploitation may not be increasing but nevertheless remains present in a society that is considered civilised, undeniably calls for greater reservation when referring to incest and paedophilia. It is hard to see this restraint as a sign of regression towards puritanism.

Clearly, there is greater intolerance today than in the past when it comes to the treatment of certain subjects. Laughing at Auschwitz (and even writing these words, after re-reading the sketch of comedian Pierre Desproges)<sup>8</sup> or singing the poetry of "*peines infanticides*" ("infanticide sorrows") as Gainsbourg did<sup>9</sup> is now difficult to imagine, as if those who tried their hand at it had overestimated the civilised nature of their era, and we had become more lucid. Rather than a return to censorship, an increase in self-censorship<sup>10</sup> is the proof of this. Such an increase also underlines the socially situated nature of the "controlled relaxations" of the 1970s and 1980s, which initially concerned the elites. In contrast, the #MeToo movement, although it originated in Hollywood, has enabled women from "rougher" areas to speak up, even though it is far less easy for them to be free than Catherine Deneuve (which does not mean they are less free).

The current climate is not as threatening for freedom of expression as some would claim. To give an example, in January 2018, critics welcomed the publication by Seuil of the French translation of *The Argonauts*, a work of non-fiction by the American poet and essayist Maggie Nelson. The book begins with a declaration of love by the author for her husband, in which she crudely recounts a sex scene depicting her with her "face smashed against the cement floor". The fact that Maggie's Harry was born a woman does little to change the story. Of course, it is not a popular novel, but, unlike Gainsbourg's songs and Desproges' sketches, the desire to provoke seems absent. In any event, it is good that Maggie Nelson was able to write and publish her book, and that it contains no justification for sexual violence against women.

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<sup>8</sup> Pierre Desproges, *Textes de scène*, Paris, Seuil, 1988.

<sup>9</sup> Serge Gainsbourg, "Ballade de Johnny Jane" (*Je t'aime moi non plus*, 1976, France, 83 minutes).

<sup>10</sup> Nathalie Heinich cited by Faustine Vincent ("*#metoo: assiste-t-on à un retour de la censure dans l'art ?*", *Le Monde*, 3 February 2018).

## A Civilisation in the Making

We shall not answer the question of whether, since the Weinstein affair, we are witnessing a decisive breakthrough for the liberation of women and gender equality, or a return to an overly repressive moral order. On the other hand, the rebalancing of behavioural restraint in favour of external constraints—through the law, the press, or social networks—does merit attention, as does the divided nature of the positions taken. Compared to paedophile violence, violence against women does not seem to infringe any commonly accepted ban. As Elias would say, civilisation has not finished with this issue. Indeed, it is even in its infancy. At best, it is in the making.

On this subject, Cas Wouters wrote the following:

In 2017, continued in 2018, the wave of protest by the #MeToo movement against virtually all degrees of sexual intimidation effectively broke the regime of silence that dominated these practices. It broke a major stronghold of this regime: internalised shame resulting from shaming the victims, and pressured the social codes dominating these experiences to allow for deeper and stronger feelings of anger, indignation and injustice.

No longer are these feelings almost automatically silenced by feelings of shame, but now shame is increasingly silenced by them.<sup>12</sup>

There is certainly a pre- and a post-Weinstein. However, the proposition should almost be understood in the literal sense. Beyond the famous person involved, the #MeToo movement was neither necessary nor fortuitous. It resulted from an evolution in the balance of power between the sexes and a parallel evolution in behaviour and sensitivities. Both have made violence against women more intolerable and expressible. That is worth remembering, because there is no reason to believe that the changes being wrought by #MeToo and #balancetonporc are established. While it may indeed be a Eliasian lesson that assumes rather well its share of normativity, it consists in reiterating the fact that those characteristics of our societies considered as progress are historically and socially conditioned. According to Elias, ignoring that fact can significantly undermine that very progress. At the end of the day, the message is clear: we are not as civilised as we think, and we should not forget where we come from.

### Further Reading:

- Michael Dunning, Cas Wouters (eds), *Civilisation and Informalisation: Connecting Long-Term Social and Psychic Processes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

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<sup>12</sup> Cas Wouters, "Informalization and Emancipation of Lust and Love: Integration of Sexualisation and Eroticisation Since the 1880s", in Michael Dunning, Cas Wouters (eds), *Civilisation and Informalisation: Connecting Long-Term Social and Psychic Processes*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019, pp. 76-77.

- Norbert Elias, *On the Process of Civilisation. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 3*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2012.
- Norbert Elias, "The Changing Balance of Power between the Sexes –A Process-Sociological Study: The Example of the Ancient Roman State", *Theory, Culture and Society*, Vol. 4 (1987), pp. 287-316, also published in *Essays III. The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 16*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, pp. 240-265.
- Norbert Elias, *What is Sociology? The Collected Works of Norbert Elias Volume 5*, Dublin, University College Dublin Press, 2006.
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