

The Philosophical Journal of Conflict and Violence
Vol. II, Issue 2/2018
© The Authors 2018
Available online at <http://trivent-publishing.eu/>



BOOK REVIEW:

Savoia Landini, Tatiana & Dépelteau, François (eds.). *Norbert Elias & Violence*.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 232 pp.

By Fred Guyette
Erskine College and Seminary, USA



The PJCv Journal is published by Trivent Publishing.

This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>)

Savoia Landini, Tatiana & Dépelteau, François (eds.).
Norbert Elias & Violence.
New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017. 232 pp.

Tatiana Savoia Landini's introductory essay "War, Hope and Fear: Writings on Violence at the End of a Long Life," (13–31) offers an excellent overview of the life and work of sociologist Norbert Elias (1897–1990). Elias served as a telegraph operator on Germany's Eastern Front in World War I. After the war he became friends with Zionists such as Leo Strauss and Gershom Scholem, and he studied sociology with Karl Mannheim. In 1933 Elias fled from Germany to Paris, where he turned his hand to making toys for children. As Germany grew more bellicose, Elias emigrated again, this time to England. He lost several family members in the Holocaust. Having been a witness to so much violence and upheaval, Elias wrote about the moral ambiguity of becoming civilized in his book, *The Civilizing Process*.

A thought-experiment can help us imagine what a "de-civilizing" process would look like. This is what Irem Özgören Kınlı proposes in "Figurational Analysis of Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf*" (33–54). Haneke's film is set in a post-apocalyptic future. After the world suffers an unspecified disaster, a mother and father leave Paris with their two children, hoping to find shelter in their country home. But their cottage has been taken over by strangers. Soon their provisions run out. Their neighbors turn them away. Finally, we see them huddled together at a train station, surrounded by an anonymous crowd, desperately waiting to see if a train might come and take them to a safer place where the norms of civilization have not yet broken down.

According to Florence Delmotte and Christophe Majastre's "Violence and *Civilité*: The Ambivalences of the State" (55–80), the state's monopoly on violence is a morally ambiguous historical development (56). It means that citizens can rely on a certain level of peace as they go about their business, without being afraid of their neighbors. It cannot be said that violence has disappeared, however. Rather, it has been displaced, pushed to areas of conflict outside the official boundaries of the nation. Elias' description of a political order that is enforced by a government *within* the borders of the state, while anarchy reigns *between* rival states, owes much to the realism of Thomas Hobbes and *The Leviathan* (64). However, there is also the possibility that the mask of civility will fall away and that the state's monopoly on violence can be used to "eliminate" a group of its own citizens who would have very little hope of defending themselves (71).

While we tend to regard "civilized" people as better than barbarians, some civilized people have been responsible for truly barbaric acts against their fellow human beings. Alexis de Tocqueville's "Essay on Algeria" (1843) argued that the advantages of a Christian civilization and "our arts, our, our ideas, our power" would be clear to the "half-civilized" Arabs of North Africa once they had been subdued by force (110). In 1879, most people in Europe would have considered King Leopold II of Belgium to be a civilized person, but his colonial practices ruined the lives of many people in The Congo (108). These ironies are prominent in François Dépelteau's essay, "Elias's Civilizing Process and Janus-Faced Modernity" (81–116).

"Civilisation and Violence at the Periphery of Capitalism: Notes for Rethinking the Brazilian Civilizing Process" by Juliano de Souza and Wanderley Marchi (117–137) probes the gulf that separates the rich and the poor in Brazil. Slavery was not abolished in Brazil until 1888, and by that time four million slaves had been imported from Africa. Their

liberated descendants flocked to the outskirts of large cities, where they built unlicensed homes, and eventually these became *favelas*, sprawling neighborhoods where literacy rates are low and violence is rampant. Today, one third of Brazil's people have very little hope of enjoying the benefits of Brazil's civilization. Something they do have, however, is a macho attitude toward sports, which Souza and Marchi understand in light of Elias' *The Quest for Excitement* (1986). "By gathering in groups and by being socialized in this 'spirit of belonging', marginalized young people find the courage to express their anger through destructive behaviours directed against the physical structures of the urban space, fans of rival teams, the established and their world, and against their own peers and whoever dares to cross their path" (135).

If Thomas Jefferson thought that reason would ensure a more peaceful way of life in the United States, he would be baffled by the American scene today. That is how Kyle Letteny frames the discussion in "Self-Inflicted Wound: On the Paradoxical Dimensions of American Violence" (139–157). Mass shootings in Charleston, Orlando, and Las Vegas certainly defy rational analysis. The war in Iraq was ostensibly undertaken to remove a strong-man from power. All that has happened since in the Middle East, including the dashed hopes of The Arab Spring, ought to have convinced Americans about the value of restraint in foreign affairs, but they seem determined now to be led by a strong-man of their own.

How many times have disconsolate and exhausted warriors been brought to the negotiating table with the help of intervention from abroad? That is the launching point for Gëzim Visoka's essay, "Norbert Elias and State Building After Violent Conflict" (161–182). The guiding idea behind human rights law is to develop a rule-based international order, one that might resolve inter-state issues through dialogue and predictable processes. Then a Kantian light is supposed to dispel the shadows of aggression and violence feared by Hobbes. However, "global civilizing processes are far from changing attitudes towards violence, far from monopolizing and controlling the use of violence, far from developing self-restraining political collectivities, and far from breaking ethno-nationalist identity and insider-outsider dualisms" (165). Elias believed that hopeful developments in civil society are more likely to emerge from *local* actors at the micro and meso levels. Can religious communities be part of that process? Elias was more convinced that religion stokes the fires of conflict. It would probably take a modern day Erasmus to argue the other side of the question—that faith might be able to shape the common good in positive ways.

After The Wars of Religion in France, The Edict of Nantes sought to impose a policy of *oubliance*—forgetting, not bringing up old episodes of violence in public discourse. But it was a policy doomed to failure. Why do we think it is important to *remember* violent events? Marta Bucholc explores this question in "The Figurational Approach and Commemorating Violence in Central and Eastern Europe" (183–203). Invading armies have marched back and forth across Central Europe for many years. The victors have proclaimed their stories through statues, monuments, plaques, and museums, while the vanquished were consigned to silence (196). But memories of injustice continue to be passed down in families and small gatherings, where they help shape a group's identity. When new political alliances are formed, the "forgotten ones" are allowed to speak again. The meaning of what they suffered comes back into public discourse, where it may be contested or lead to official apologies for past atrocities. These are good indications that these memories are not just about the past, but also about the kind of future that will emerge (197).

Since the September 11 attacks, Americans have often said that Islam is the main obstacle to the spread of democracy in the Middle East, an argument that fits with what Samuel Huntington said about the "clash of civilizations." Few people seem to remember that Iran had its own experience with democracy, as described by Behrouz Alikhani in "Parliamentary Form of Government, Habitus and Violence: The Case of Iran (1906–

1925)” (205–226). In *The Court Society*, Elias observes that in pre-democratic tribal societies, you are either a friend or an enemy, and disagreements are often settled through blood feuds. But for democracy to work, legislators have to be committed to dialogue and compromise (210). In 1906, the people overthrew a corrupt monarch and established a parliament. However, many members of Iran’s parliament resorted to the old patterns of violence whenever political debate did not go their way. After a few years of political chaos, the economy broke down and Russia threatened to invade Iran to restore order. It was at that point that a strongman emerged, Reza Khan, who led a coup against the struggling democratic government of Iran. One of his descendants became The Shah of Iran, who was ousted in 1979 and replaced by the Muslim theocracy that rules Iran today. From the perspective of Elias’ sociology, the people of Iran had not developed the habitus required to sustain a democracy, which is why they turned instead to authoritarian governments. How strong is contemporary popular protest against Iran’s theocracy? On that question, the jury is still out.

Overall, an exciting collection of essays that shows the applicability of Elias’ sociology to a broad range of issues involving violence and the search for peace.

Fred Guyette
Erskine College and Seminary
USA