

The Civilizing Process and The History of Sexuality: Comparing Norbert Elias and Michel Foucault

DENNIS SMITH

Aston University, United Kingdom

This article has three tasks.¹ The first is to demonstrate that a high degree of overlap in argument and method exists between two major works by thinkers who are usually regarded as being fundamentally opposed in their approaches to understanding society. The two works are Norbert Elias's *The Civilizing Process* and Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*, especially the second and third volumes entitled, respectively, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*.² The second task is to identify some key modifications in Foucault's treatment of history, power, and knowledge that occurred between his earlier work, for example *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish*,³ and his later work, especially *The History of Sexuality*. The third objective is to set out a research agenda that confronts some of the main issues arising from a consideration of some important remaining differences between Elias and Foucault.⁴

Convergence between Foucault and Elias

The intellectual approaches to understanding society taken by Michel Foucault and Norbert Elias do not seem at first sight to have much in common.⁵ Adherents of Elias are likely to have very serious reservations about a work such as *Discipline and Punish*, which assumes a sharp historical break between two regimes of political and social control, treats "truth" as an expression of practices of power, and sees the modern self as the prisoner of a docile body, the artefact of a Panoptic technology operating through the carceral network of a disciplinary society.

What could be more at odds than this with Elias's view that individualization [the process of becoming, and learning, who we are as particular

people] and the acquisition of a “we-image” [the process of becoming, and learning, who we are as group members] occur within dynamic social networks or figurations such as families, occupational groups, and nations? Elias argues that these figurations contain complex and shifting power balances among interdependent actors such as husbands/wives, subjects/rulers, and so on, and that figurations of this kind take shape and are transformed in the course of social processes such as state-formation, class-formation, nation-formation, and the civilizing process with a distinctive structure that becomes visible over long periods of time.⁶

Elias’s theory of the civilizing process with its emphasis on the inculcation of self-restraint, shame, and repugnance was profoundly influenced by Freudian psychology.⁷ By contrast, in the opening chapters of *The History of Sexuality. Volume I: an Introduction*, Foucault lays into the Freudian “repressive hypothesis” with gusto, arguing it is misleading to give a central place to the exercise of psychological controls over the expression of libidinous impulses when trying to explain the workings of modern society.⁸ In spite of this unpromising background, there is a remarkable degree of intellectual convergence between the second and third volumes of Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality*, entitled, respectively, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, and Elias’s *The Civilizing Process*, works separated by over four decades. *The Civilizing Process*, Elias’s first major published work, appeared in 1939.⁹ *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, which were Foucault’s last major published books, appeared in 1984, the year of his death.¹⁰

It is helpful to begin with a very brief summary of these two works. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias looks at “unintended and unplanned” changes in “the structure of Western society” and in “the standard of behaviour and the psychical makeup of Western peoples.”¹¹ He argues that over time controlled, peaceful, and refined forms of interpersonal behavior developed, in the form of *courtoisie* at the courts of feudal lords and, later, as *civilité* in the courts of absolutist rulers. The warrior class was increasingly pacified. Its members had to adopt increasingly high standards of self-restraint in respect of natural functions and bodily behavior. As Elias puts it, with the “monopolization of physical violence at the point of intersection of a multitude of social interconnections, the whole apparatus which shapes the individual, the modes of operation of the social demands and prohibitions which mould his social makeup, and above all the kinds of fear that play a part [were] decisively changed.”¹²

In the first volume of his trilogy on sexuality, Foucault outlines the central place of sexuality in the controlling discourses of modern society. He emphasizes the capacity of these invasive discourses to shape, constrict, and distort human impulses and the sense of self. However, his second and third volumes, *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, contain evidence that within the scope given by their power situation and knowledge many citizens of ancient Greece and Rome were able to live relatively satisfying lives according to an ethos based on rational self-mastery and the pursuit of pleasure without ill-health. In this context, Foucault concentrates on three areas: care and enjoyment of the body, with special regard to sex, diet, and medical treatment; relations between husbands and wives; and relations between adult males and young boys. As part of his argument, he tries to explain why wives became more powerful and sexual relations more restrained and austere between the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D.

These two works by Elias and Foucault are both concerned with how perceptions of selfhood and society along with standards of behavior with respect to bodily functions and the management of human feelings have been transformed in the course of Western history. Foucault's account relates mainly to Greek and Roman society between the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D., although he makes occasional references back to Homeric times and has substantial comments on the medieval and modern periods in European history. Elias's argument is mainly focused on Europe between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries A.D. while making many references to the centuries preceding and following. In these two works Foucault and Elias, through a kind of unwitting collaboration, provide a critical analysis of Western social development and mores from the pre-Socratic to the post-Kantian eras.

Socrates and Kant are key figures for Foucault and Elias respectively, predecessors to be both greatly admired and heavily criticized. The two philosophers stand at the ends of a long Western tradition of philosophy and science that sought to discover the underlying principles of life and nature and subject them to control with the aid of a coherent intellectual system. According to Nietzsche, this approach was based on "a profound illusion," that is, "the imperturbable belief that, with the clue of logic, thinking can reach to the innermost depths of being" (*Birth of Tragedy*, 53). Foucault is deeply influenced by the Nietzschean and Heideggerian aspiration of sweeping aside the meta-

physics of Socrates and Plato so as to achieve a much more direct experience of the “depths of being.”¹³ He shares Heidegger’s interest in pre-Socratic thinkers such as Heraclitus whose works, supposedly, expressed a more primal or authentic experience of being.¹⁴

Elias is also hostile to the metaphysical tradition from Socrates to Kant but believes Heideggerian existentialism fails to make a decisive break with that tradition in a key respect. It continues to adhere to the model of *homo clausus*, the idea that each human being is an “enclosed” individual, a self-contained consciousness. Elias proposes an alternative model of *homini aperti*, the idea that individuals and groups acquire their multiple identities (with respect to, for example, their individual persona, their gender, kin-group, occupation, religion, ethnicity, nation, and so on) through the experience of participating in complex social networks or “figurations” shaped by long-term social processes. As has already been noted, in Elias’s view, identity formation is a shared social experience, shaped by social and historical location. Elias wants to make his own approach to sociology a central feature of modern post-Kantian thinking.¹⁵

In fact, Foucault and Elias both undermine the model of *homo clausus*. In works such as *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that the modern self is shaped from “outside” by the penetrating, disciplining force of discursive practices. However, unlike Elias, Foucault does not believe it is feasible for modern citizens to achieve a high degree of relative autonomy in exercising rational choice. In his view, the only proper responses to “disciplinary society,” once its nature is understood, are either direct political attack upon its structures or radical action to subvert the consciousness of self it imposes upon us. This action includes the pursuit of limit-experiences through various forms of experimentation with the bodily senses. Foucault was engaged in just such a program of personal experimentation while working on *The History of Sexuality* from the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s.¹⁶

Foucault spent some eight or nine years exploring a Greco-Roman culture that was also very interested in the limits bounding the experience of bodily pleasure. However, the Greco-Roman context differed from the one experienced by Foucault in his daily life in two respects: first, in Greece and Rome the pursuit of bodily pleasure by adult citizens was generally regarded as a natural and proper activity, not in itself shameful; and, second, the “limits” of interest to Greek and Roman citizens were the boundaries beyond which you could not go

without damaging your health, showing bad judgment, or losing control to an unacceptable degree. The idea was to maximize pleasure within these limits. In other words, pleasure and control could be combined within the everyday social world by exercising good judgment in the light of relevant knowledge about the body, diet, medicine, and so on. This made a fascinating contrast with the modern world, as understood by Foucault, for here, in his view, both pleasure and insight could be gained by transgressing limits, by deliberately going beyond the frontiers that led to high physical, psychological, or social risk.¹⁷

In *The History of Sexuality* and *The Civilizing Process*, respectively, Foucault and Elias make use of contemporary works giving advice on how to behave in relation to yourself and others, how to manage your body and your feelings, and how to do the best for yourself in potentially risky or troublesome situations. For example, in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, Foucault cites writings such as Hippocrates's *Regimen in Health*, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Demosthenes's *Erotic Essay*, Artemidorus's *Interpretation of Dreams*, and Plutarch's *Dialogue on Love*. In *The History of Manners*, the first volume of *The Civilizing Process*, Elias turns to works such as Erasmus's *De civilitate morum puerilium*, Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo*, and La Salle's *Les Règles de la bienséance et de la civilité chrétienne*.¹⁸

The advice books cited by both Elias and Foucault give guidance about how one *should behave* as human beings within particular situations. They help one decide what to do or not to do. The "should" is prudential and practical, a guide to getting through life in such a way as to ensure survival, maximize success, and avoid physical, psychological, and social penalties. In classical Greece and Rome, the "use of pleasure" and "care of the self" were not just, or even mainly, a matter of sexual practices. Concern with sexual behavior was integral to life but not central, being closely interwoven with medicine, dietetics, economics (in its original sense of household management), politics, and the interpretation of dreams.

In Greek and Roman eyes, how competently you managed your bodily passions and your own household was an indication of how skillfully you were likely to behave as a public figure on the political or military stage. Similarly, in the French court as studied by Elias, it was accepted that good table manners, proper conduct toward the opposite sex and, more generally, skill in conversation and etiquette were more likely to

advance than retard a courtier's political career. Elias and Foucault both deal with areas of human conduct in which the management of natural functions [for example, sex, eating, drinking, excretion] overlaps with the strategic or tactical pursuit of survival and advantage in respect of health, marriage, friendship, politics, and so on.¹⁹

The practices involved in care, or watchful management, of the self had not only political but also ontological implications. In other words, they were closely bound up with not only how people got on in the world but also how they understood themselves. Foucault and Elias are both deeply interested in the links between how we "manage" or "cope with" our bodily urges and how we conceptualize the "self," its substance, capacities, and obligations. Foucault's ultimate goal is a history or "genealogy" of the "desiring" subject. To illustrate his approach, in the early pages of *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault quotes Socrates' first speech in Plato's *Phaedrus* where the philosopher condemns the love of elder men for "soft boys ... all made up with rouge and decked out in ornaments."²⁰ Rather than take such a remark at face value, Foucault explores how this moral attitude was tied to a specific "axis of experience" and "cluster of concrete relationships" that changed in a specific direction over time. He concludes that Socrates' remarks were one aspect of "a thematic complex ... of sexual austerity" present "very early in the moral thought of antiquity," which strengthened significantly in the course of six centuries.²¹

While Foucault begins with Socrates, Elias begins with Kant. A major stimulus for *The Civilizing Process* was Elias's own critical response to the moral critique of French "civilization" carried out in the late eighteenth century by "the middle-class German intelligentsia." Elias quotes Kant's opinion: "Cultivated to a high degree by art and science, we are civilized to a point where we are overburdened with all sorts of social propriety and decency. ... The idea of morality is a part of culture. But the application of the idea, which results only in the similitude of morality in the love of honour and its outward decency, amounts only to civilizing."²² Like Foucault, rather than taking such a remark at face value, Elias explores how particular experiences within specific figurations appearing in the course of the civilizing process led to the appearance of *civilité* among the French court nobility and *Kultur* among the German bourgeoisie of whom Kant was one of the "spokesmen."²³ To be more precise, Elias argues that members of the German bourgeoisie were largely excluded from "good society" in the provincial courts of the aristocracy. This contributed to "a very special

kind of bourgeois self-image, a turning away from everything to do with the administration of power monopolies, ... a cultivation of inwardness, and the elevation of spiritual and cultural achievements to a special place in the table of values.”²⁴ Elias believes these attitudes strengthened the hold of the *homo clausus* image, especially in German thought, making the self problematic in a way that obscured the true character of people and the societies to which they belong.

Foucault and Elias apply the same methodology at this point. They both dig beneath attitudes toward “proper” social behavior. Elias explores German bourgeois attitudes toward “outward decency” in a way that explains how a specific national class acquired a particular ontology and a distinctive ethical code. Compare Foucault’s analysis of Greco-Roman attitudes toward “proper” behavior in the specific area of sexual relations. Foucault also shows that beneath the practical question of “how *should* one behave?” there are deeper questions of ontology, such as “what is one’s ethical substance?” and profound concerns about the objects of ethical behavior.²⁵

There are other close parallels between the intellectual strategies of Foucault and Elias. Foucault points out that as the Empire became more centralized and bureaucratic this changed the life conditions of Roman citizens and led to alterations in behavioral standards. Elias explains shifting behavioral standards in medieval and modern Europe in terms of the changing situation of the secular upper class in Europe, as feudal society was pacified and a strong royal authority took shape. It is obviously important to recognize major differences between the sequences of historical change analyzed by the two writers. For example, it is evident that in the period studied by Foucault the state apparatus in Rome did not achieve a power monopoly within the Empire that was as stable and centralized as that achieved, within a smaller territory, by the state in absolutist France. However, there are four major similarities between the analyses provided by Elias and Foucault. First, they both argue that the degree of centralization and the complexity of networks of interdependence increased greatly over time in both cases. Second, they each argue that over several generations the group on which they focus – Roman citizens and medieval knights, respectively – underwent a considerable reduction in their relative autonomy and the simplicity of their life condition. Third, they each show that the social functions that had previously accompanied the elevated status of the group that concerns them were gradually removed. Citizens and knights retained their status but were no longer free to govern or fight

for themselves. Fourth, the analyses of Foucault and Elias show that in each case the response was twofold: to elaborate the external indications of social status, and to become deeply preoccupied with the nature of the self.

According to Elias, the court aristocrat, no longer a feudal warrior, is driven by a “compulsive desire for social prestige.” He is also supremely self-aware. To quote La Bruyère, the courtier is “master of his gestures, of his eyes and his expression; he is deep, impenetrable.”²⁶ Compare La Bruyère’s words with Foucault’s description of the standards and preoccupations of the propertied Roman establishment in the first two centuries A.D.: “On the one hand there is an accentuation of everything that allows the individual to define his identity in accordance with his status and with the elements that manifest it in the most visible way. One seeks to make oneself as adequate as possible to one’s own status by means of a set of signs and marks pertaining to physical bearing, clothing and accommodations, gestures of generosity and munificence, spending behaviour and so on.... But at the opposite extreme one finds the attitude that consists of forming and recognizing oneself as the subject of one’s own actions ... through a relation ... [that] is fulfilled in the sovereignty that one exercises over oneself.”²⁷

In imperial Rome, political activity was a vocation deliberately chosen only by a minority. Those who took part needed the ability to take responsibility for their own rational judgments, navigate a safe passage through “the complex and shifting interplay of relations of command and subordination,”²⁸ keep a clear distinction between the public face and a well-governed inner self, and play the game of avoiding making enemies unnecessarily in the highly unstable conjunctures of imperial politics. Foucault often quotes Seneca, especially on the need for rationality, sensitivity to others, and realistic goals. The sentiment of Seneca on these matters are very similar to those of the Due de Saint-Simon, whose memoirs give Elias insights into life at the absolutist French court.²⁹

Elias and Foucault both link changes in standards of behavior in the historical periods they study to five other characteristics of figurational dynamics or personality. These are: the density and complexity of interdependence chains; the strengths of centralizing tendencies; the level of anxiety or fear; the strength of the desire to avoid specific bodily functions or activities [“the threshold of repugnance” in Elias’s analysis,³⁰ the degree of “austerity” in Foucault’s]; and contemporary ideas

about the nature of the self. It is at this point that disagreements between the intellectual strategies of Foucault and Elias begin to emerge.

Foucault's discussion of changing perceptions of the self in Roman times diverges in a significant respect from Elias's analysis of the development of the civilized personality in early modern Europe. Each can be taken in turn. Elias argues that life in court society encouraged the personality structure to develop self-control in two respects. One is conscious self-monitoring and self-regulation combined with close observation and careful interpretation of the behavior, feelings, and intentions of your associates, rivals, and competitors. Strong emotions are subordinated to rational calculation. The other aspect of self-control is "an automatism, a self-compulsion that [one] cannot resist." This "automatic, blindly functioning apparatus of self-control" develops early in life. It builds "a wall of deeprooted fears" around each one of us. The first aspect of self-control takes the form of foresight, "psychologization," and rationalization. The second produces shame, repugnance, and embarrassment. These feelings stem from growing sensitivity to the nuances of our own and others' behavior. The pressures of surviving within highly interdependent social networks lead us to treat ourselves and others as a "danger zone." We feel constant anxiety about being vulnerable to others' behavior. We suffer unrelenting tension between our inner drives and the drive-control functions making us behave "properly."³¹

This tension between drives and drive-control function causes modern "civilized" human beings to see "the individual [as] ... something separate 'inside' while 'society' and other people are 'external' and 'alien.'"³² This is the origin of the tendency for each particular person to think of himself or herself as *homo clausus*, separated by an almost impregnable barrier from whatever is "outside." One consequence of this habit of thought is tremendous doubt about the "reality" of our perceptions of the world outside. Another is the inclination to see ourselves as completely free, unique, and sovereign "individuals" and to deny the fact, obvious to Elias, that we are profoundly shaped by the societies or, more precisely, the "figurations" into which we are born.

Compare Foucault. In his analysis, in classical Greece, it was taken for granted that rational self-mastery on the part of adult male citizens "implied a close connection between the superiority that one exercised over oneself, the authority one exercised in the context of the house-

hold, and the power one exercised in the field of an agonistic society.”³³ However, six centuries later two major changes had occurred: reciprocity and equality had advanced in the household;³⁴ and local urban politics, the traditional sphere of the citizen, had become part of a “far more extensive and complex field of power relations.”³⁵ This had two effects: first, increased anxiety about the vulnerability of human beings within an increasingly complex, ambiguous, and unpredictable social world; and second, disruption of the old taken-for-granted pattern of mutual reinforcement between the adult male’s command of himself, his command of his household, and his active participation in the control of public business.

An important difference between Elias and Foucault is that according to Foucault’s analysis, the origin of Roman citizens’ anxiety about whether they were doing the right thing was cognitive, not affectual. The disruption of traditional expectations made the self as an ethical project problematic, causing the citizen to stop, think, and worry. Increased anxiety was not, in Foucault’s analysis, caused by the appearance within the psyche of a “wall of deep-rooted fears.” In fact, he argues during the six-hundred years between the fourth century B.C. and the second century A.D., sex continued to be experienced as an enjoyable activity – natural, necessary, and strenuous – which had some unfortunate side effects: specifically, it disrupted the male’s relationship with himself and exhausted his physical strength. Throughout this period dynamite continued, so to speak, to be recognized as dynamite but as life became more complex, turbulent, and uncertain greater attention had to be paid to how this substance was stored, guarded, and used. Rational care was the guiding principle, not irrational fear.

What changed was the complexity of the figurations within which sexual pleasure and its side effects had to be managed. Increased strategic awareness was needed to keep oneself safe but this certainly did not mean that the sexual drive became experienced as intrinsically “repugnant.” What it did mean was that sexuality had to be treated with greater care and increased awareness of the prudence of abstinence or moderation when circumstances dictated. As Foucault puts it: “Sexual pleasure as an ethical substance continues to be governed by relations of force – the force against which one must struggle and over which the subject is expected to establish his domination. But in this game of violence, excess, rebellion and combat, the accent is placed more and more readily on the weakness of the individual, on his frailty, on his need to flee, to escape, to protect and shelter himself.”³⁶

Sexuality continued to be consciously perceived as a quasi-natural force whose capacity to disrupt rationality was recognized and treated with great respect.³⁷ This attitude did not change significantly.³⁸ What did change over time was people's perception of the rules it was prudent to follow in their public and private behavior. Specifically, there was increased insistence on the need to take personal responsibility for choices, and greater awareness of the impermanence of personal arrangements [jobs, appointments, friendships and so on] and the shifting character of social networks.

Crucially, Foucault argues that the major shift toward perceiving sexuality itself as repugnant and evil coincided with the spread of Christianity, which encouraged a further and even more radical redefinition of the self as an ethical project. A new ontology produced a new way of experiencing the self, a new relationship to inner drives. Christians were preoccupied with sinfulness. They learned to fear their own flesh as a source of temptation leading to evil and punishment.³⁹ They subjected themselves "to a general law that is at the same time the will of a personal god."⁴⁰ Ethical fulfillment could only be achieved by deciphering your soul, purifying your desires, and renouncing earthly satisfactions. A new regime of confession, penitence, and hatred of the flesh was inaugurated. This was part of a long-term process that could be traced over several centuries.⁴¹

The analysis so far has shown that in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* Foucault converged significantly with Elias's approach in *The Civilizing Process* but that important differences remained between them. The next two tasks, carried out in the following section of this article are: to summarize briefly the main changes in Foucault's approach as compared with his position in *Discipline and Punish*; and, equally briefly, to identify a research agenda flowing from the desirability of exploring the implications of the similarities and differences between Elias and Foucault.

Foucault's changing approach

Between the mid 1970s and the early 1980s Foucault moved in three directions, intellectually. First, he explored, and implicitly recommended, a way of inculcating knowledge that was very different from the one described in *Discipline and Power* and the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*. Second, he developed a different way of treating

power. Third, he revised his approach to the analysis of historical change, although he still referred to it as “genealogy.”⁴²

On the first point, Foucault encountered in classical Greece and Rome a form of knowledge transmission by scholars and “experts” that was an attractive alternative to the oppressive discursive practices of modernity that shaped and blinkered the self. In *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*, he explored the content of “texts written for the purpose of offering rules, opinions and advice on how to behave as one should.” These texts were “designed to be read, learned, reflected upon, and tested out.” They were “functional devices that would enable individuals to question their own conduct, to watch over and give shape to it, and to shape themselves as ethical subjects.”⁴³ The key phrase is “shape themselves.” Embedded in the texts was the assumption that individuals would incorporate the opinions and advice they offered within a larger dialogue, not only internal to the individual consciousness but also among friends and fellow citizens, a dialogue informed by the lessons of success and failure in confronting the challenges of daily life.

The dialogue and practical experience of citizens in the ancient world, enjoyed under conditions of equality,⁴⁴ filled the space later occupied by the strait-jacket of modern discursive and non-discursive practices. In fact, the Greek and Roman texts encountered in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self* allow us to see Foucault’s own earlier writings in a fresh light. The point is that the quotations from Foucault that have just been given are equally applicable to his own texts. The difference is that while the ancient writers were operating in a social order attuned to their practices, Foucault is working against the grain of society, trying to disrupt our habitual assumptions. Books such as *Madness and Civilization* and *Discipline and Punish* work by stimulating a new and radical awareness of the way we experience ourselves, about the nature of the self. They encourage us to question and re-evaluate the way we conduct ourselves.⁴⁵ By their existence they challenge the practices of the modern scientific-legal complex.

Turning to the second point, in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault had been preoccupied by the different strategies of domination and resistance in play during the pre-modern and modern epochs. As is well known, he contrasted a pre-modern style of domination, crystallized in the act of public execution, with a modern style, summed up in Bentham’s Panopticon. In Foucault’s view, the modern “carceral city”

was held in place by “a multiple network of diverse elements – walls, spaces, institutions, rules, discourse.” These offered a terrain for acts of localized resistance, a terrain on which Foucault could already hear “the distant roar of battle.”⁴⁶ In *The Care of the Self*, Foucault’s approach was different in three ways. Compared to his earlier work, he was more detached, displayed more sensitivity to the complexity of interdependence within human relationships, and paid more attention to the subtleties of historical change within complex chains or networks of human interdependence.

As an example of his changed approach, take Foucault’s argument that by the second century B.C. the Roman empire had become vast, discontinuous, flexible, and differentiated: “It was a space in which the centres of power were multiple; in which the activities, the tensions, the conflicts were numerous; in which they developed in several directions; and in which the equilibria were obtained through a variety of transactions.”⁴⁷ The “small society of landowners”⁴⁸ who were self-governing citizens and, when necessary, citizen-soldiers had passed away. As a result, “the agonistic game by which one sought to manifest and ensure one’s superiority over others ... had to be integrated into a far more extensive and complex field of power relations.”⁴⁹ In describing the situation of Roman citizens in the first and second centuries A.D. he writes: “Rather than imagining a reduction or cessation of political activities through the effects of a centralized imperialism, one should think in terms of the organization of a complex space. Much vaster, much more discontinuous, much less closed than must have been the case for the small city-states, it was also more flexible, more differentiated, less rigidly hierarchized than would be the authoritarian and bureaucratic Empire that people would attempt to organize after the great crisis of the third century.”⁵⁰ Foucault’s sensitivity in such passages to the complexity of power balances within complex and dynamically changing figurations places him very much closer to Elias than in his earlier work.

With respect to the third point, in *The History of Sexuality* Foucault quietly abandons his previous mode of historical analysis (for example, in *The Order of Things*), which imposed sharp and absolute breaks between epochs. Instead, his analysis pays more attention to elements of continuity in long-term historical change. Specifically, he traces a phased transition in the West societies from “‘ethics-oriented’ moralities” to “‘code-oriented’ moralities.” Four phases can be identified in his analysis. In the first phase, ethics-oriented moralities based on

rational self-mastery predominated whose focus was *askesis*, in other words, training for self-mastery. During a second phase, ethics-oriented moralities became more austere. The third phase saw the rise of code-oriented moralities under the influence of Christianity during the medieval era. These moralities have a “quasi-judicial form,” which emphasized the strict observance of precisely defined rules of behavior.⁵¹ Initially, code-oriented moralities took shape in monastic settings. Later, their application was extended to include the whole of the Christian laity. Confession and penitence were the key practices. They provoked a deep and wide-ranging preoccupation with sexual thought, feeling, and behavior. In the fourth phase, modern science and the secular professions, backed by the centralizing bureaucratic state, took over from the Church. They employed discourse about sexuality as the chief medium of their will to knowledge and will to power, especially in the spheres of pedagogy, medicine, and demography.

This discussion of code-oriented and ethics-oriented moralities shows that, despite their similarities, important differences exist between the approaches of Elias and Foucault. A number of theoretical and empirical questions are raised by these differences. First, there is the question of the relationships between the religious and military functions and their relative significance in shaping medieval and early modern thought, feeling, and practice. As we see here, Elias concentrates on the warriors, Foucault on the priests. To elaborate a little, Elias follows the strand that leads from the warrior fighting for his life to the figuration linking monarch and courtiers, while Foucault points toward the intertwining strand that leads from the monk fighting for his soul to the figuration linking priest and communicants.⁵² What were the contributions made by each set of transformations to the civilizing process, especially the inculcation of self-control, rationalization, psychologization, and the accompanying feelings of shame and repugnance in respect of bodily functions? Further research might explore in more detail the specific social contexts in which the medieval and early modern manners books studied by Elias were actually used and the intentions that were expressed in their use.

Take, for example, a key text cited by Elias: Erasmus’s *De civilitate*. This work was written in the early sixteenth century for the young Prince Henry of Burgundy. Elias insists that its precepts are general and “not . . . intended for a particular class.” However, two points are worth making. First, Elias identifies court society as a primary site where civility and civilized behavior took shape and argues that “Cler-

ical circles, above all, become popularizers of the courtly customs.”⁵³ Second, Erasmus was an Augustinian monk, a leading figure in clerical circles, and a frequenter of court society.⁵⁴ So the question arises: to what extent does the emphasis on reserved, tactful, and disciplined behavior in early modern Europe express the complex adaptations of the old feudal aristocracy to the pressures and opportunities of court life, and to what extent does it express the moral imperatives of Christianity in the era of the Reformation?⁵⁵

A second area to explore is the nexus of relationships among affect, rationality, discourse, and self-control. Foucault sees modern discursive practices as intrusively penetrating the mind and body so as to impose disciplines of thought and behavior in the name of rationality and science, stifling at birth a wide range of spontaneous impulses and imposing a narrow, conformist, and highly constricted version of the self. Foucault’s approach is to search for ways of bursting out of this straitjacket, so as to allow affect to find full expression, to impinge freely upon our consciousness, allowing us to know the world and ourselves in a much richer way. By contrast, Elias assumes it is the exercise of self-control over affects and drives that makes clear perception, rational analysis, and deliberate action possible. In his view, language and discursive practices serve two functions. On the one hand, they provide a means of controlling the self and others through the deployment of symbolic forms, for example in the guise of courtly etiquette or scientific method, both of which provide ways of subjecting potentially unpredictable events to a regime of control and predictability. On the other hand, discourse provides the observer (for example, the social psychologist or sociologist) with evidence about the personality and state of mind of the speaker, and about the *habitus* and we-image inculcated within the groups to which the speaker belongs.⁵⁶

On this matter, there are three major differences between Foucault and Elias. First, Foucault treats discursive practices as an alien imposition upon human beings, shaping consciousness, whereas Elias treats a group’s discourse as a product of its shared experiences, a reflection of those experiences rather than something that creates them.⁵⁷ Second, as we have seen, Foucault has a more positive orientation toward the affectual dimension of human existence than does Elias. Third, Elias has greater confidence than Foucault about the feasibility of modern citizens being able to exercise a relatively high degree of clear-sighted control over their own lives.

This last point leads towards another major area of difference between the two thinkers. According to Foucault, the French Revolutionary period inaugurated a regime of centralized scientific-legal domination whereas, in Elias's view, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries there have been strong tendencies toward functional democratization and the equalization of relations between established and outsider groups.⁵⁸ Elias's ambition, stated clearly in works such as *The Society of Individuals* and *What is Sociology*, is to contribute to the task of making the insights of science, whether in the form of "historical ... social psychology" or Eliasian sociology, available to ordinary people.⁵⁹ Elias wants to empower his fellow citizens by making science available to them, in this way clearing their minds of fear and fantasy. Foucault also wants to empower them but by subverting the claims of science and allowing them to experience sharply and, perhaps, for the first time the promptings of their inner passions, the source of the very fear and fantasy abhorred by Elias.⁶⁰

A research agenda

Empirical and theoretical inquiries are both stimulated by this debate. To conclude this article, two lines of enquiry may be briefly mentioned. One major focus of interest is the mutual influence of the intertwining processes of professionalization and democratization within modern societies. To what extent, for example, are the interests and wishes of "ordinary citizens" articulated and served in the practices of science, the state, and the professions? How are these issues affected by, for example, the rising level of education within the population, the exploration of strategies of "empowerment" and "teamwork" within the occupational sphere, the breakdown of deference in the post-colonial era, the increasing assertiveness of previously subordinate groups (including women and ethnic minorities), the widespread privatization of public assets and services, the growing influence of "devolved" regional polities "below" the old nation-state, and the development of supranational structures such as the European Community "above" it?

Turning to a second area of enquiry, the complex interplay among affect, rationality, discourse, and forms of control may be explored by widening the implicit debate between Elias and Foucault to encompass other bodies of literature including, for example, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School. Writers such as Fromm and Marcuse shared Elias's interest in Freud but were, like Foucault, more pessimistic

about the potentiality for human emancipation under modern conditions.⁶¹ Another valuable resource in this widened debate would be the work of Richard Sennett who admired Elias and also worked closely with Foucault.⁶² It would also be useful to explore the potential contribution of innovative researchers such as Silvan Tomkins whose work on affect theory and script theory suggests promising insights into the dynamics of pride and shame within the personality and in social life, important themes in Elias's work also. Donald Nathanson, a prominent psychiatrist who has continued Tomkins's work, makes explicit links between the contributions of Tomkins and Elias.⁶³

In the work of Elias and Foucault, theoretical enquiry leads directly to empirical research. Both Elias and Foucault were considerable historians who spent long periods of time in the archives. For Foucault, concepts were not an end in themselves but, instead, tools with which to conduct practical explorations of the social world, past and present. For his part, Elias used to encourage followers to conduct empirical work rather than spend much time musing over the details of theory. However, when empirical work is being carried out, it is useful to be aware of what is at stake, theoretically, to have a clear idea of the difference each empirical finding will make when placed on one side or the other of the balance produced by the ongoing theoretical argument. This article seeks to make clear what is at stake in a comparison between Elias and Foucault.⁶⁴

Notes

1. An earlier version of the argument was presented at the Norbert Elias Centenary Conference at Bielefeld, Germany in June 1997. At this conference Arpad Szakolcai (European University Institute, Florence) informed me that his own research shows that in the last few years of his life Foucault became acquainted with Elias's work. See A. Szakolcai, "Thinking beyond the East-West divide: Foucault, Patocka, and the care of the self," *Social Research*, 61/2 (1994), and Szakolcai, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault. Parallel Life-Works*, (London: Routledge, 1998).
2. Elias, *The Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Vol I: An Introduction* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979), Foucault, *The Use of Pleasure* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), Foucault, *The Care of the Self* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984).
3. Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977).
4. For some initial evidence of the plausibility of a comparison between Elias and Foucault, see their discussions of Velasquez's *Las Meninas*: in Elias, *Involvement and Detachment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), lii–lxviii, and Foucault, *The Order of Things* (London: Tavistock/Routledge, 1974). Both use the painting to illustrate a

movement away from the “subject.” Also, both Elias and Foucault attach significance to the increasing focus in modernity on the eye as the medium of surveillance, control, and appreciation. Elias: “Just as nature now becomes, far more than earlier, a source of pleasure mediated by the eye, people too become a source of visual pleasure or, conversely, of visually aroused displeasure, of different degrees of repugnance. The direct fear inspired in men by men has diminished, and the inner fear mediated through the eye and through the superego is rising proportionately,” *The Civilizing Process*, 497; Foucault: “The residence of truth in the dark centre of things is linked, paradoxically, to ... [the] sovereign power of the empirical gaze that turns their darkness into light,” *The Birth of the Clinic*, xiii.

5. For some earlier discussions of Elias, see D. Smith, “Norbert Elias – established or outsider?” *Sociological Review* (1984): 367–389, and *The Rise of Historical Sociology* (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), 42–54, 157–174.
6. See, for example, Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991). For an Eliasian critique of Foucault’s analysis in *Discipline and Punish*, see P. Spierenburg, *The Spectacle of Suffering. Executions and the Evolution of Repression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
7. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias notes, with qualifications, “how much this study owes to the discoveries of Sigmund Freud and the psychoanalytical school,” 249. Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and its Discontents* (New York: Dover Publications, 1994) was first published in 1930.
8. Foucault, *History of Sexuality. Volume One*, 10–13.
9. Elias prepared the book subsequently published as *The Court Society* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), as his *Habilitation* thesis in 1933.
10. A further volume, *Confessions of the Flesh*, has not been published. See *Use of Pleasure*, 12.
11. xv.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995), 53.
14. “And is it accidental that in one of the fragments of Heraclitus ... the phenomenon of truth in the sense of uncoveredness (unhiddenness) ... shows through?” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1963), 262.
15. See, for example, Elias, *What is Sociology?* (London: Hutchinson, 1978), 125–133.
16. See, for example, James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), chapter eight.
17. Interestingly, the terms “discourse” and “discursive practice” are practically impossible to find in *The Use of Pleasure* and *The Care of the Self*. Foucault gave these terms a negative loading in his previous work (e.g., *Discipline and Punish*). Was he reluctant to use the same language in describing forms of self-control with which he was quite sympathetic? References to “discourse” are plentiful in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, which dealt with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
18. See, for example, *Use of Pleasure*, 109, 152, 204, *Care of Self*, 4, 193, *Civilizing Process*, 43, 61, 76.
19. Foucault writes: “It would be interesting ... to trace the long history of the connections between alimentary ethics and sexual ethics...; one would need to discover how, over a long period of time, the play of alimentary prescriptions became uncoupled from that of sexual morals. ... In any case, in the reflection of the Greeks in the classical period, it does seem that the moral problematization of food, drink and sexual activity was carried out in a rather similar manner” (*Use of Pleasure*, 51; see also *Care of Self*, 141).

20. *Ibid.*, 6, 19.
21. *Ibid.*, 21–23.
22. *Ibid.*, 7.
23. *Ibid.*
24. *Ibid.*, 512.
25. *Use of Pleasure*, 26–27.
26. *Civilizing Process*, 473, 476.
27. *Care of Self*, 85.
28. *Ibid.*, 9.
29. See, for example, *Care of Self*, 12, 39, 51, 85–86, 103, 148, 167, 178 (Seneca), and *Civilizing Process*, 417–418, 478–479, 483, 535, 538, 540 (on Saint-Simon). See also *Court Society*, *passim*.
30. On “shame and repugnance,” see *Civilizing Process*, 492–498.
31. *Ibid.*, also 445–446.
32. Elias, *The Society of Individuals* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991).
33. *Care of Self*, 94.
34. Like Elias, Foucault relates these changes to shifts within marriage and the structure of the Roman Empire. He agrees with Elias that marriage became a concern of public law and that most upper-class husbands were unlikely to be active in affairs of state. Like their wives, they were “effectively excluded from this sphere,” Elias, “The changing balance of power between the sexes – a process-sociological study: the example of the ancient Roman state,” *Theory, Culture and Society* (1987): 304.
35. *Care of Self*, 95.
36. *Ibid.*, 67.
37. Elias himself notes that human beings in the classical era recognized the power of passion. In a study of the Greek city states of the fifth century B.C. he comments that expressions of “very high passionateness,” for example in the sphere of violence, elicited feelings of wonder combined with “compassion” for those who suffered as a result. See Elias, “The genesis of sport as a sociological problem,” in N. Elias and E. Dunning, *Quest for Excitement. Sport and Leisure in the Civilizing Process* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 145–147.
38. This aspect of Foucault’s analysis differs from the equivalent part of the argument in *The Civilizing Process* where Elias suggests that sexual drives were over time increasingly regarded as repugnant and shameful in themselves.
39. The Christian moral code seems to play a part in Foucault’s analysis that is equivalent to the image of *homo clausus* in Elias’s account. Both are treated as burdens upon human beings that inhibit their fuller self-realization. See, for example, Foucault *History of Sexuality. Volume One*, 159, Elias, *Society of Individuals*, 56, *Civilizing Process*, 445.
40. *Care of Self*, 239. There is insufficient space to explore the parallels and overlaps with Weber but for relevant discussions see Szkolczai, *Max Weber and Michel Foucault*, and David Owen, *Maturity and Modernity. Nietzsche, Weber, Foucault and the Ambivalence of Reason* (London: Routledge, 1994).
41. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias notes that the “increased inwardness and rationalisation” of Protestantism – the “change in religious feeling to which sociology has paid most attention hitherto is obviously closely connected to certain changes in the situation and structure of the middle classes” while the “corresponding change in Catholicism” (e.g., the foundation of the Jesuits) seems to be “in closer touch with the absolutist central organs, in a manner favoured by the hierarchical and centralist structure of the Catholic Church” (494). Elias’s reference to the attention paid by

sociologists to Protestantism may refer in part to Max Weber's collected essays on the sociology of religion, which were published in 1920 just after Weber's death. This collection included *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1976, originally published in 1904–1905). During the 1930s, Elias was operating within an intellectual field in which the memory of Max Weber was powerful. At Heidelberg, Elias has attended the *soirées* conducted by Weber's widow and he was, for a while, a *Habilitation* candidate under the sponsorship of Weber's brother, Alfred. See Elias, *Reflections on a Life* (Cambridge: Polity, 1994), 96–99. For Weber's comments on the Church's influence over the petty-bourgeoisie, the part played by the Humanists in "the transformation of a feudal and clerical education into a courtly culture based on the largesse of patrons," the early Church's rigorous adherence to a "soberly practical rationalism," which "set the tone of a dogmatic and ethical systematisation of the faith," and the Church's deep antipathy to sexuality, see Weber, *Economy and Society* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1968), 462–463, 513, 554–555, and 60–66 respectively. In *The Civilizing Process*, Elias makes very few direct references to Weber. See xv, 526 (a critique of Weber on "ideal types"), 529, and 533. There are more references to Weber in *The Court Society*, e.g., 37–38, 41–42, 63, 85, 110, and 121–122.

42. A genealogical approach to historical analysis assumes that events and forces collide with each other through time in a haphazard and unpredictable fashion leading sometimes to conflict, sometimes to fusion. The historian adopting this approach has to give careful attention to precise individual details on the grounds that this is all there is to be discovered. It would be misleading to look for heuristic or explanatory guidance in terms of some notion of broader encompassing social processes. Foucault adapted the idea of "genealogy" from Nietzsche. See, especially, Foucault, "Nietzsche, genealogy, history," in Paul Rabinow, editor, *The Foucault Reader* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), 76–100. In practice, Foucault does seem to be working with some idea of "process" in the second and third volumes of *The History of Sexuality*, although it is not theorized. For example, he writes that "In the slow development of the art of living under the theme of the care of the self, the first two centuries of the imperial epoch can be seen as the summit of a curve" (*Care of Self*, 451) and, elsewhere, that "The setting up of the Christian model of marriage [was] . . . a slow, belated and difficult occurrence . . . in the course of the Middle Ages" (*Use of Pleasure*, 221).
43. *Use of Pleasure*, 12–13.
44. As Foucault explicitly recognizes, this was equality among adult male citizens, not between males and females or between citizens and slaves. See, for example, *ibid.*, 47.
45. Elias was engaged on a parallel mission through his work for the Group Analytic Society. He undertook group therapy sessions, applying the analysis developed in *The Society of Individuals*. See *Reflections on a Life*, 63–64.
46. *Discipline and Punish*, 308.
47. *Care of Self*, 82–83.
48. *Use of Pleasure*, 152.
49. *Care of Self*, 95.
50. *Ibid.*, 82.
51. *Use of Pleasure*, 29–30. Foucault takes the Socratic term *askesis* from the work of Plato where it refers to the rigorous training of the body and soul needed to produce self-mastery and self-awareness. *Askesis* is a form of knowledge that "was not reducible to the mere awareness of a principle." Foucault found that moral con-

ceptions in Greek and Greco-Roman antiquity were much more oriented toward practices of the self and the question of *askesis* than toward codification of conduct and the strict definition of what is permitted and what is forbidden (*Use of Pleasure*, 29–30, 72).

52. Elias is quite aware that in medieval Europe, as in the early days of Rome, “Besides fighting potential it was only the possession of magical power that formed a similarly important source of social power – the priestly function hence stood alongside the warrior function” (Elias, “Changing balance of power between the sexes,” 294). In Rome, as Elias points out, the leading warrior and clan exercised the function of the priest. In medieval Europe, the functions of warrior and priest became more clearly differentiated. The issue of who would have the upper hand was in dispute for a long time.
53. See *The Civilizing Process*, 59, 61, 83, 451.
54. Elias locates Erasmus’s work in “the phase in which the old, feudal knights nobility was still in decline, while the new aristocracy was still in the process of formation.” He argues that “This situation gave, among others, the representatives of a small, secular-bourgeois intellectual class, the humanist, and thus Erasmus, not only an opportunity to rise in social station, to gain renown and authority, but also a possibility of candour and detachment that was not present to the same degree either before or afterward. This chance of distancing themselves, which permitted individual representatives of the intellectual class to identify totally and unconditionally with none of the social groups of their world – though, of course, they stood closer to one of them, that of the princes and of the courts, than to the others – also finds expression in *De civilitate morum puerilium*” (*The Civilizing Process*, 58–59). The background influence of Mannheim seems evident in this passage.
55. One relevant source of evidence is the work of Dilwyn Knox who has examined school curricula, timetables, and similar documents from the period. On this basis, Knox is able to paint a picture of *De Civilitate* being used as a strictly enforced manual of pedagogical discipline, imposed through strict monitoring by inspectors, teachers, and prefects. This is a world of pious obedience, mental restraint, and bodily conformity that reminds us of Foucault’s carceral society, with its Christian origins, rather than Elias’s court with its turbulent warrior past. Much more work needs to be done in respect to the issue to which Elias devoted a mere two pages in the section of *The Civilizing Process* entitled “A brief survey of the societies to which the texts were addressed,” 81–83. See, for example, Knox, “Disciplina: the monastic and clerical origins of European civility” in J. Monfasani and R. G. Musto, editors, *Renaissance Society and Culture. Essays in Honor of Eugene F. Rice, Jr.* (New York: Italica Press), 1991, 107–135.
56. Foucault agrees with this last point but sees “the observer” as the guard in the tower at the center of the Panopticon.
57. See, for example, *Court Society*, 240–241.
58. Compare Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1936), 35–38.
59. *Society of Individuals*, vii–x; *What is Sociology?* 50–70, *Civilizing Process*, 484.
60. For the views of someone sympathetic to Elias’s perspective but aware of Foucault’s critique, it is worth considering Pierre Bourdieu, who argues that “The most advanced fields are the site of . . . an alchemy whereby scientific *libido dominandi* is forcibly transformed into *libido sciendi*. This is the rationale behind my resistance to a soft consensus which, in my eyes, is the worst possible situation. If nothing else, let us have conflicts!” (interview with Bourdieu in P. Bourdieu and L. Wacquant, *An*

Invitation to Reflexive Sociology (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), 62–215, 178. See Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic, History of Sexuality. Volume One*, Elias, “Problems of involvement and detachment,” *British Journal of Sociology* (1956): 226–252, *What is Sociology?*, “The sociology of knowledge: new perspectives,” *Sociology* (1971): 149–168. 355–370, “The sciences: towards a theory” in R. Whitley, editor, *Social Processes of Scientific Development* (London: Routledge, 1974), “Scientific establishments” in N. Elias, H. Martins, and R. Whitley, editors, *Scientific Establishments and Hierarchies* (London: Reidel, 1982), *Involvement and Detachment* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987, introduction and Part 1), *Society of Individuals*.

61. See, for example, Eric Fromm, *The Fear of Freedom* (London: Routledge, 1942) and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). For Foucault on the Frankfurt School, see Foucault, Remarks on *Marx* (New York: Semiotext[e], 1991), 115–129.
62. See, for example, Sennett, *The Fall of Public Man* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977) and *Flesh and Stone* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994).
63. Nathanson’s development of Tomkins’s approach is presented in *Shame and Pride. Affect, Sex and the Birth of the Self* (New York: Norton, 1992). On Elias, see 437–448.
64. For a contrasting perspective, see Robert van Krieken, “The organisation of the soul: Elias and Foucault on discipline and the self,” *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* (1990): 353–371.