

# Reflections on Critical Theory and Process Sociology

Written by Andrew Linklater

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ANDREW LINKLATER, JAN 24 2020

I am grateful to Bryant Sculos for his stimulating thoughts whilst reviewing *Violence and Civilization in the Western States-Systems* which were published in E-International Relations. The review raises important points about the relationship between Frankfurt School critical theory and the process-sociological approach that informs the argument of the book. I take the opportunity in this article to highlight elements of process sociology that are still little known in the study of international relations. As Jocelyne Cesari (2019) has noted, it is indeed peculiar that Norbert Elias's process-sociological writings have been largely ignored in the field. In responding to Sculos's essay, I develop that point by focusing on core Eliasian arguments about social-scientific inquiry that may be of particular interest to students of critical international relations theory. The discussion is in four parts. It begins with a brief summary of the aims of *Violence and Civilization* and then considers three areas that are central to Sculos's review. They are the relationship between critical theory and process sociology; the relationship between the argument of *Violence and Civilization* and the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'; and the balance of power between civilizing and decivilizing processes in contemporary world politics.

### Core Aims of *Violence and Civilization*

The central objective of the book was to develop preliminary arguments about the impact of the idea of civilization on the most recent phase in the history of the Western states-systems. Early chapters discussed several concepts in the Graeco-Roman and in the medieval and early modern periods that embodied support for restraints on violence or, in Elias's language, for 'taming the warriors'. Later chapters analysed the development of discourses of civilization that became especially prominent in French court circles in the late eighteenth century. Those chapters focused on their role in the justification of imperialism and slavery but also in the condemnation of colonial cruelties. They included reflections on how those narratives underpinned the humanitarian laws of war from around the middle of the nineteenth century and on how conceptions of civilization shaped the liberal human rights culture.

In the spirit of process sociology, *Violence and Civilization* aimed for a relatively-detached analysis of how ideas of civilization have shaped the dominant understandings of violence in the recent period. It identified important directions of change in the relations between the former European powers and the non-European colonies, in the struggles between the great powers, and in the relations between state structures and citizens. Those trends were not described as completed or irreversible. They were not connected with triumphalist claims about the uniquely progressivist achievements of self-defining civilized peoples or about the magnificence of the West. The final chapter which discussed those three trends stressed the additional role of 'organised irresponsibility' or the increasing importance of social and economic processes that lock marginal groups into unequal or exploitative arrangements. The same bourgeois civilizing process that drove efforts to restrain the use of force in world politics also released traditional controls on economic behaviour and on market competition.

*Violence and Civilization* attempted to explain those overall trends by extending earlier attempts to forge connections between process sociology and the English School analysis of international society (Linklater 2011). Comparisons were made between different phases in the history of the Western states-systems. There was no enthusiasm for using ethical criteria to evaluate the achievements and deficiencies of the modern society of states. Such a project runs against the ethos of process sociology and it was alien to foundational works in the English School perspective. That might appear to place process sociology at odds with critical social theory but that is far from the case, as the

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following section shows.

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Sculos notes that *Violence and Civilization* contains several references to critical theory, a position I have supported over many years. He proceeds to ask 'what makes this book a contribution to Critical Theory' and 'what is the ethical argument presented in the book? He comments on the 'somewhat detached intellectual voice' that may be 'troubling for some readers' including 'those who, not unjustifiably, expect such horrific examples of barbarism, in the name of civilization, to be treated much more harshly and emotively than Linklater's intellectualism allows'. He asks 'where Linklater leaves us on emancipation', and adds that silence on that matter is a 'problem' for assessing the book's contribution.

In short, drawing on Frankfurt School inquiry, Sculos criticizes the absence of a morally-charged analysis. There are rough parallels with post-colonial criticisms of *Violence and Civilization* in the Forum on the book which was published in the *Review of International Studies* in 2017. The absence of moral condemnation of Western civilization and the history of colonialism, racism and slavery was highlighted there. The lack of such engagement might suggest that a process-sociological investigation of civilization is manifestly 'not on our side' (Linklater 2019). In fact, the opposite is the case. Sculos does not endorse the postcolonial critique *Violence and Civilization* but doubts that the volume contributes to the critical tradition as developed by Kant, Marx and the Frankfurt School. The argument of this paper is that process sociology takes forward core elements of that tradition.

The tone of detachment to which Sculos refers does indeed reflect key differences between critical theory and process sociology. The principal contrast is evident in Elias's express commitment to explaining as opposed to passing moral judgment on social processes – to engaging in a 'detour of detachment' in the attempt to understand more about uncontrolled social processes that have dominated human societies (Kilminster 2011, 2014). But detachment was not an end itself. It was defended in the belief that a deeper understanding of such processes may enable societies to take initiatives that do not simply add to the history of failed and often destructive interventions to improve human conditions. A critical or 'secular humanist' orientation to social and political practices runs through process-sociology inquiry. Moreover, support for global planning is evident in several places in Elias's writings but they do not contain a defence of the socialist internationalism that Sculos supports or indeed advocacy of any other normative vision.

Elias adopted a position of sociological detachment on the grounds that human beings knew very little about themselves and their social arrangements – much less than they realized or might be prepared to admit. They had made only limited progress in constructing effective frameworks of analysis. There had been only small advances in constructing the key concepts that would enable people to understand more about the complex interdependencies between social and psychological processes. Not the least of the problems was the practice of analysing supposedly static conditions rather than ever-changing long-term processes (see *Violence and Civilization*, pp.189-90). For Eliasians, social scientists face enormous challenges in constructing conceptual frameworks that guide sophisticated large-scale research projects. From that standpoint, socialist internationalism belongs to a series of failed interventions that were undertaken with very limited comprehension of social processes and their tendencies to spiral out of control. The challenge is to understand more about those processes with the aim of exercising greater control over them. On that argument, the faith in socialist internationalism represents a failure to recognise the scale of the challenge confronting those with critical or humanist orientations.

The argument for greater detachment in the social sciences clashes then with the greater moral involvement of different strands of critical theory. The latter offer the emotional satisfaction of taking an ethical standpoint on social and political structures and relations but that contributes very little to an emancipatory social science. Admittedly, process sociologists have been highly critical of the morally-involved discourse of Frankfurt School theory. Some have described the 'two tracks' of sociology which developed at the University of Frankfurt in the 1930s and they have argued that the approach taken by Mannheim and Elias surpassed the more celebrated critical perspective that was developed by Horkheimer and Adorno (Kilminster 2014). Suffice it to add that recent discussions in process sociology have stressed the links and parallels between the two standpoints. Attention has been drawn to the critical

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or emancipatory themes that ran through Elias's ostensibly more detached mode of inquiry (Linklater 2019). But it is important not to underestimate the differences between the 'two tracks' of sociology. The one to which Mannheim and Elias belonged affirmed the primacy of the sociology of knowledge over the critique of social arrangements anchored in some conception of philosophical ethics. The basic point was that critical positions do not stand outside but reflect larger social processes. It was essential to undertake a relatively-detached inquiry into their particular social location or connection with sectional interests that raised questions about their validity, universality or objectivity.

Elias undertook the analysis of 'the civilizing process' – the process in which Europeans came to think of themselves as uniquely civilized and superior to other peoples – in that spirit. The thesis was that if human societies knew more about such processes they might eventually make advances in understanding how to co-exist more amicably than in the past. Sculos laments the absence in *Violence and Civilization* of an ethical critique of modern forms of slavery or sweatshops but moral condemnation, important as it is, does not go far enough. It is important to ask how far such critical standpoints reflect and shed light on movements within the larger civilizing process that Elias set out to explain (Linklater 2017). Critique does not belong to a world of Kantian transcendentals. It is possible because of social processes which have to be explained in sociological terms. From that perspective, critique without accompanying sociological investigations that highlight the distorting role of sectional interests and provincial viewpoints may already contain the seeds of its own destructiveness. That is one of the reasons why process sociologists have argued that more detached sociological inquiry transcends the relatively-unchallenging moral critique of social processes by promoting a deeper understanding of how people can reduce the tyranny of uncontrolled social processes.

## The 'Dialectic of Enlightenment'

Sculos argues that *Violence and Civilization* sets out, albeit unintentionally, an 'immanent Critical-Theoretical critique of the dialectic of enlightenment' that Horkheimer and Adorno advanced. Sculos draws on their renowned pessimism to counter what he regards as exaggerated or misleading claims about 'multiple enlightenments'. He notes the concern in the later chapters of the book that the Enlightenment is often reduced to one overall dynamic that symbolizes the major shortcomings of Western civilization. It is ventured that Horkheimer and Adorno's 'likely response' to that standpoint might concede that there have been multiple enlightenments but emphasise the deeper reality that 'only one version produced the horrors of European colonialism; only one version developed industrial capitalism and its techno-scientific apparatuses, and only one version of the Enlightenment led to the absolutely organized, rationalized depravity of the Holocaust'.

Complex issues arise about the relationship between critical-theoretical and process-sociological interpretations of the Enlightenment. Earlier points about the relationship between greater knowledge of the social world and the possibility of collective projects that reduce rather than intensify the tyranny of uncontrolled process demonstrate that process sociology falls squarely within the Enlightenment traditions. The link is further revealed by the explicit universalism that runs through many of Elias's writings – by the conviction that the challenge is to improve the prospects for human societies or humanity as whole rather than the possibilities of peoples organised into separate nation-states or other particularistic associations (see Linklater 2019). But exponents of process sociology would reject the concepts and argumentation that Sculos imputes to Horkheimer and Adorno. The familiar refrain is such that terminology subtracts from, rather than adds to, the fund of human knowledge.

The idea that 'only one version' of the Enlightenment 'produced the horrors of European colonialism' is an example of the process of reification which Sculos opposes. Some may regard that observation as merely pedantic and as a distraction from the far more serious task of understanding the connections between the Enlightenment and colonial domination. However, the notion that the Enlightenment 'produced' anything at all or 'developed industrial capitalism' masquerades as the theoretically-informed empirical analysis of social processes but it is in effect 'pre-sociological' since it contains no clues as to how an explanation of the relevant dynamics might be constructed.

Similar faults are inherent in the thesis that 'only one version of the Enlightenment led to the absolutely organized, rationalized depravity of the Holocaust'. One must ask what 'led to' means in that formulation. It appears to imply the

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existence of close or inevitable links between particular Enlightenment perspectives and the Nazi genocides. But any such links have to be explained empirically rather than simply assumed to be the essential ingredients of at least one mode of Enlightenment reasoning. Not the least of the empirical challenges is to explain how exactly one version acquired dominance over the others. What were the social and political conditions that altered the balance of power between different or competing Enlightenment perspectives? To answer that question it is best not to begin with Horkheimer and Adorno's overly philosophical 'dialectic of the enlightenment' but with an investigation of the shifting relations between civilizing and decivilizing processes ((as explained in Elias (2013) and as considered in chapter nine of *Violence and Civilization* which analysed the Nazi genocides in those terms rather than with reference to vague notions of modernity or the Enlightenment)).

In many places, Elias maintained that human groups have often filled gaps in their knowledge by relying on magical-mythical or fantasy world-views. Many early societies invoked the idea of spirits or the 'spirit world' to explain such phenomena as thunder and lightning or human mortality. Self-defining civilized peoples have constructed their own fantasy standpoints under conditions of social and political crisis. Elias regarded the fantasy world of National Socialism as a relatively-recent illustration of ancient practices. By implication, reification in the social sciences also fills gaps in knowledge through myths and metaphors. Sculos's supposition that one version of the Enlightenment produced social conditions or particular patterns of change is a case in point. Elias (2012: 46-65) advanced the image of the sociologist as the 'hunter of myths', as the agent in changing the largely pre-sociological ways in which people orientate themselves to the world (Mennell 2020). There is a rough parallel with the critique of ideology in Frankfurt School writings. But the key difference is that the Eliasian project located that element of Enlightenment thought in an explanation of the civilizing process that was part of the breakthrough to 'post-philosophical sociology' (Kilminster 2007). The idea of the 'dialectic of enlightenment' lacks the theoretically-framed empirical investigation of long-term social processes and accompanying power struggles that exists in Eliasian sociology.

## Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes

It is important to begin the final part of this discussion by defining those concepts. Elias used the term, civilizing process, to describe the following two trends – an overall increase in the relative power of internal as opposed to external constraints on violence and the widening of the scope of emotional identification between people. By contrast, in a decivilizing process, internal checks on violence weaken with the result that external controls such as state coercion become increasingly central in restraining the threat and use of force. In an attendant shift, levels of emotional identification decline and are increasingly confined to relations between the members of more provincial or particularistic associations. A core Eliasian thesis is that civilizing and decivilizing tendencies always exist in tandem in human arrangements but the balance of power constantly fluctuates. Those themes were first developed in the analysis of the process in which Europeans came to think of themselves as uniquely civilized. However, later investigations maintained that those concepts can be used in the analysis of social dynamics in all human groups. *Violence and Civilization* developed the point by using the approach to analyse overall directions of change in the modern society of states.

That is the context in which to assess Sculos's claim that 'Linklater's dialectical argument about the co-development of civilizing and decivilizing processes is simply not enough to explain the near-absolute dominance of structural barbarism in the contemporary world, barbarism but with a happy face'. The erroneous assumption is that *Violence and Civilization* assumes the near dominance of a global civilizing process centred on the two themes noted above. To develop the point it is important to note that there are three main parts of Sculos's critique. The first is that the idea of civilization or civilized practices is little more than a garland thrown over and disguising some gruesome realities of contemporary world politics. The second is that many of those realities such as sweatshops exist behind the scenes and are sidelined in a blindly optimistic analysis of global civilizing processes. The third is that such phenomena in addition to modern forms of slavery indicate that in recent times the nature of violence has less to do with killing or injuring than with exploiting other people. As Sculos explains, the 'problem [is that] harm has become superficially less acceptable and thus violence has changed its appearance, slipping more clandestinely into common yet illicit practices and processes'.

Those criticisms rest on a curious misinterpretation of chapter eleven of *Violence and Civilization*. The argument

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there is that the idea of civilization has been central to changing attitudes to physical violence that distinguish the recent phase of the modern international society from the earlier Western states-systems. One shift was evident in the critiques of chattel slavery and colonial cruelty that appeared in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with the rise of 'compassionate cosmopolitanism'; a second was the rise of the humanitarian laws of war in the modern period; a third is the expansion of the universal human rights culture especially since the end of the Second World War following the shock of the Nazi genocides. A fourth development which Sculos ignores is the dominance of 'organised irresponsibility' as embedded in global market arrangements that economic liberals regard as a vital civilizing constraint on state power and as the panacea for inter-state violence.

That part of the discussion of *Violence and Civilization* contended that certain restraints on violent harm have been strengthened while constraints on non-violent harm have indeed been weakened. It made the point which Sculos overlooked that many are critical of a 'specific liberal civilizing process that condemns the savagery of violent illiberal regimes and political movements but is relatively silent about the less tangible, unintended or cumulative forms of non-violent harm' (*Violence and Civilization*, p. 452). Those comments reflected the larger argument about the need to draw on process sociology to investigate competing tendencies in world politics and to develop criteria for understanding the dominant directions of global change. Sculos does not advance a serious alternative to that line of inquiry. Readers are urged 'to explain the near-absolute dominance of structural barbarism in the contemporary world'. That condition is simply taken for granted rather than explained. It is seemingly enough to state that the discussion in *Violence and Civilization* lacks the requisite 'ethical argument' and condemnatory tone to contribute to critical theory.

A final point is that Elias set out to explain the complex dynamics of the European civilizing process, noting in particular the recurrent tendency to move the distasteful and repugnant from public view. In his first writings on that process, Elias described the practice of carving meat behind the scenes as an illustration of the larger movement of concealing anything that reminded people of their 'animality' (*Violence and Civilization*: 199ff). In his later writings, he described modern attitudes to death and dying in similar terms. In short, process sociologists have long stressed the tendency for self-defining civilized people to conceal the disturbing or repugnant and to tolerate or ignore practices that are rarely, if ever, encountered and may not offend civilized sensibilities.

Sculos refers to sweatshops and modern forms of slavery that are part of the system of global exploitation. The contention is that an examination of the global civilizing process that does not stress their hideous qualities fails in crucial respects. But as noted earlier, the process-sociological perspective that informs *Violence and Civilization* seeks to understand how different tendencies co-exist in any civilizing process. From that perspective, there is nothing surprising about the reality that outrage at violations of human rights and large-scale indifference to the forms of exploitation are part of a similar process at the global level. Sculos overlooks the reference to contemporary conditions in which the 'inhabitants of affluent societies are largely insulated from the lives of the most vulnerable communities, where they have little in common with them and little cause to identify with them, where they do not depend on them for the satisfaction of their basic needs and wants, and have, as a result, little incentive to grant their representatives a significant stake in global decision-making processes that determine, amongst other things, the distribution of global wealth and unequal levels of protection from environmental harm' (*Violence and Civilization*, p. 452). Some self-defining civilized groups ignore or tolerate such realities while others protest against them and highlight the hypocrisies of their societies. Comprehending such tensions and contradictions is essential if advances are to be made in constructing different social arrangements. Process sociology contributes to the critical project by undertaking the relatively-detached, empirical analyses of such interwoven civilizing and decivilizing processes. There is no parallel in the establishment of critical standpoints in IR.

In conclusion, I thank Bryant Sculos for his thoughtful and challenging review. I hope that this response article clarifies the approach taken in *Violence and Civilization*. Above all, I hope that it will encourage students of international relations to explore the theoretically-informed empirical investigations of unplanned social dynamics that distinguish process sociology from other forms of social and political inquiry. It would be good to see more research on just how far it can contribute to taking IR to new levels.

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**Andrew Linklater** was Emeritus Professor of International Politics at Aberystwyth University. His most recent book is *The Idea of Civilization and the Making of Global Order*, Bristol University Press, 2021. He has nearly completed a book on symbols in long-term perspective, which will be published posthumously with the help of and contribution by his former student Dr André Saramago.