

BOOK REVIEW

---

**Book Title:** The Civilizing Process: Sociology and History from the Perspective of Norbert Elias

**Author:** Norbert Elias (1897–1990)

**Patcharawalai Suppaha\***

Mahachulalongkornrajavidyalaya University

E-mail: Doremeuram@gmail.com

\*Corresponding Author

The book *The Civilizing Process* by Norbert Elias is considered a classic work in the field of sociology. It presents a significant perspective on the relationship between human behavior and social structures, arguing that human behavior does not arise naturally or solely from individual intention. Rather, it is the result of long-standing and dynamic social processes.

Elias analyzes changes in personal behavior, such as public manners, feelings of shame, and self-control—highlighting how these aspects have evolved in accordance with historical contexts, especially during the transition from the medieval period to modern Europe. He posits that the centralization of state power, the rise of courtly classes, and hierarchical structures all played a key role in “cultivating” behaviors considered “civilized.” Crucially, Elias shows that such behavioral changes did not occur suddenly but gradually developed alongside the formation of nation-states and shifts in economic, political, and cultural life. Urban and courtly living, in particular, contributed to greater behavioral regulation, eventually leading to internalized constraints embedded within individuals rendering external rules less necessary.

This book not only questions the “normal behavior” of modern society but also encourages readers to reflect on the roots of behavioral regulation and provides a new perspective on how structural power shapes the ideal of being a “civilized” and “good” person in the Western sense.

Elias explores human behavior through the lens of the *civilizing process*, a gradual transformation driven by long-term structural changes such as the centralization of state authority, shifts in class systems, and the expansion of court society especially in late medieval to early modern Europe.

He illustrates how these transformations compelled individuals to adapt their behavior—regarding eating, emotional expression, language use, and everyday etiquette—into social standards everyone was expected to follow. The court served as the epicenter in defining what was “civilized,” emphasizing emotional discipline, shame, and self-regulation ingrained in individual consciousness.

What makes this book particularly compelling is its systematic integration of historical data with sociological theory. Elias uses original documents on etiquette such as court behavior manuals and historical records as evidence to demonstrate how individuals in modern society have internalized social pressure through training mechanisms in family, school, religion, and politics.

This perspective expands our understanding of social discipline, not merely as external regulations, but as an internalized mechanism rooted in a prolonged historical process.

One of Elias's most significant contributions is his integration of sociology and history. He tightly weaves the two disciplines by using historical records to explain sociological concepts, giving his analysis both structural depth and temporal context an approach known as *historical sociology*. This allows for a rich and contextualized interpretation of human behavior, grounded in long-term social developments.

Elias's diverse use of historical sources goes beyond theory and quantitative data. He delves into original documents such as etiquette manuals, letters, court records, and contemporary cultural texts to conduct a nuanced social psychological analysis. This approach highlights the gradual shifts in behavior, emotional control, and communication, making his findings both credible and tangible.

### **Introduction of a New Conceptual Framework**

Elias's concept of the *civilizing process* has influenced the development of theories on self-regulation and has become foundational in critical sociology. It raises important questions about power, discipline, and norms that subconsciously regulate human behavior. His ideas later influenced theorists such as Michel Foucault and many modern scholars.

Despite its wide acceptance, this book does present certain limitations:

**1. Western-Centric Context:** Elias's work primarily focuses on French and German societies. While this offers deep insights into these specific contexts, it raises the question of whether the theory is applicable to other societies with different social, cultural, and historical structures—such as those in Asia, Africa, or South America where state and cultural development may follow different paths.

**2. Use of the Term "Civilized":** The term "civilized" can potentially imply a hierarchical view of cultures, especially if not interpreted carefully. It might suggest that Western standards of being "civilized" are the ideal, inadvertently promoting Eurocentrism or cultural superiority.

The Civilizing Process is a highly valuable contribution to the fields of sociology and the humanities. It lays the foundation for understanding human behavior as a socially constructed phenomenon rather than a natural one. The book not only presents a compelling theoretical framework but also invites critical analysis and diverse interpretations. It is particularly well-suited for students and scholars in sociology, history, anthropology, and cultural studies.