

‘So close to the United States’: Reflections on the American Civilising Process¹

Stephen Mennell²
University College Dublin

Abstract.

The perception of the USA by rest of the world, and especially by Europeans, tends to be too much influenced by the image of the Protestant settlers of New England. This paper discusses the history of the USA in the light both of Norbert Elias’s theory of civilizing (and decivilizing) processes and of Darcy Ribeiro’s *The Americas and Civilization*, which helps to set the USA in a more distinctively western hemispheric perspective. Although, unlike many Western European countries, the USA never had a single monopoly ‘model-setting elite’ and had no nobility, it did have several competing aristocracies. The Northern *Bildungsbürgertum* dominates perception of the USA at the expense of the Southern *Junkers*, whose political and cultural legacy nevertheless continues to be of great significance, notably in the comparatively high level of violence that afflicts present-day America. The peculiarities of state formation processes — the formation of a (relatively) effective monopoly of the legitimate use of violence — in the USA and their continuation in empire formation are examined. Ironically, the USA has become a model-setting elite for

1. Received: April 26th, 2009. Accepted: June, 12th, 2009.

2. Stephen Mennell is Professor of Sociology at University College Dublin, Ireland, a Member of the Royal Irish Academy and a Foreign Member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences. A member of the board of the Norbert Elias Stichting, Amsterdam, he has written a standard study of Elias’s work (*Norbert Elias: An Introduction*, revised edition Dublin: UCD Press, 1998) and is General Editor of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias in English, now being published by UCD Press. His most recent book is *The American Civilizing Process* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).

Sugerencia para citar este artículo:

Mennell, G. (2009). ‘So close to the United States’: Reflections on the American Civilising Process. *Subje/Civitas*, 4. Consultado el [fecha] en <http://www.subjecivitas.com.mx/num4/mennell-so-close.pdf>

the whole world at a time when its popular egalitarianism represents a kind of false consciousness in a factually increasingly unequal society; when the USA may be undergoing a process of de-democratisation; and when American misperceptions of the wider world, together with diminishing foresight by American governments are becoming a serious problem in world politics.

Reflections on the American Civilising Process

Norbert Elias said that sociologists must be 'myth-hunters', tracking down popular beliefs that are ill founded (Elias, 1978. pp. 50–70). Whether simply exposing such beliefs to contrary evidence deployed by academics is sufficient to kill off myths and bring them home for mounting on the walls of our university departments is highly debateable. Nevertheless, we have a duty to call them in question, and enter into debate with those who want to keep them alive in the big-game reserve of public opinion.

In my recent book *The American Civilizing Process* (Mennell, 2007), I set out to see how far Norbert Elias's theory of civilising and decivilising processes needed to be modified in the light of American history and how far it applied unchanged to the development of the USA. His theory (2000 [1939]) was originally developed mostly on the basis of the social development of Western Europe. But I think that broadly speaking, it stood up well to American evidence, and shed interesting light on several aspects of Americans' conventional narrative of their history.

I want to start by calling in question three interrelated myths. They are popular beliefs about America that are widespread among Americans themselves, and are also surprisingly widely accepted among Europeans. I think it is highly unlikely that they meet with such general acceptance in Mexico or more broadly in Latin America. As Porfirio Diaz is famously said to have remarked: 'Poor Mexico! So far from God, and so close to the United States.'

First, the common assumption that the USA is essentially European in character, what Louis Hartz (1964) called a European 'fragment society' and by extension that Americans are 'people like us' (Mennell, 2007. pp. 1–4). This is particularly influential in the United Kingdom because the Americans (or most of them) speak English, and in my experience that is enough to convince most British people that 'Europeans' are much more 'foreign' than are Americans. Yes, the USA did begin as a fragment of Europe that broke away politically a couple of centuries ago. But so did the countries that we now call 'Latin America', and we still tend to think of them as distinctly un-European in overall character (see Huntington 1999). Charles Jones (2007) has drawn attention to this anomaly, arguing in effect that the USA is a lot more like Latin American and a lot less like Western Europe than we are accustomed to think. To simplify a complex argument, Jones suggests

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

that the USA and its hemispheric neighbours to the south share a number of historical experiences that give their societies certain common features and set them to some extent apart from Western Europe. These include the legacy of conquest and of slavery (both of which have contributed to race and racism as salient traits), marked religiosity, and relatively high rates of violence. We may add a rapacious attitude to natural resources, born of the abundance that confronted settlers.

Second comes the related myth of 'American exceptionalism', in which the distinctive features of the American way of life are generally compared not with Latin America but with Europe. From John Winthrop's vision of the New World as a 'city upon a hill' (Winthrop, 1994 [1630]), a beacon for Old Europe, there has been a proud sense that America is different: it is not Europe. But debates about American exceptionalism often resemble the proverbial dispute about whether a glass of water is half full or half empty. If one looks at human beings from a sufficiently high level of abstraction, they and their societies can all look alike. If one chooses a very low level of abstraction, the differences between human groups are so numerous that any pattern is lost in a mass of detail. Every country has its distinctive peculiarities, while sharing many common characteristics with other countries. In most cases, the peculiarities are matters for unreflective national pride, or the specialist concern of historians and social scientists. The cases where they become of wider concern, notably the questions of the German *Sonderweg* or of American exceptionalism, are those in which the debate takes on a strong *moral* flavour, negative or positive.

Finally, the most pernicious of myths is the notion that the USA is by its very nature a benevolent moral force for good. Sometimes this is stated quite explicitly. I witnessed one American academic's reaction to the thesis of Michael Mann's book *Incoherent Empire* (Mann, 2003): she said, with an air of bewilderment, 'But America is a force for good in the world!', as if that were simply axiomatic. Nor was that an isolated case. General Brent Scowcroft (National Security Advisor under President George Bush the Elder) wrote that:

...we are losing our aura of 'specialness', the belief that the United States is a different sort of great power than the others. As a result, people are increasingly unwilling to give us and our policies the benefit of the doubt. We are increasingly treated as any other wholly self-interested power.

Even people as close to the centre of American power as Scowcroft still cannot quite believe that the USA is no more than a self-interested power like any other. This kind of individual and collective self-deception is dangerous, and it certainly does not provide a realistic basis for understanding either the position of the USA in the world today or American social character. The USA is not uniquely evil, but neither is it uniquely good:

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

like other countries, it does a mixture of good and bad, and, as international opinion polls show, for most people outside the United States the bad has perhaps become steadily more evident in recent years.

The Problem of 'National Habitus'

Differences between countries in history and pattern of social development leave their mark on the character and habits —the *habitus*³— of their people. By *habitus*, I mean simply the largely unconscious and taken-for-granted *learned* assumptions and patterns of behaviour that people belonging to a certain country or other social grouping tend to share. Pierre Bourdieu (1984) famously depicted the differences in *habitus* as reflected in differences in the tastes of members of different classes in French society. I mean something similar in the different experiences between nations. As Norbert Elias wrote:

These differences are precipitated in the language and modes of thought of nations. They manifest themselves in the way in which people are attuned to one another in social intercourse, and in how they react to personal or impersonal events. In every country the forms of perception and behaviour, in their full breadth and depth, have a pronounced national tinge. Often one only becomes aware of this in one's dealings with foreigners. In interactions with one's compatriots, *individual* differences usually impinge so strongly on consciousness that the *common* national coloration, what distinguishes them from individuals of other nations, is often overlooked. First of all, one often expects that people everywhere will react to the same situations in the same way as people of one's own nation. When one finds oneself in a situation in which one is compelled to observe that members of different nations often react in a quite different way to what one is accustomed to at home, one mentally attributes this to their 'national character'. (Elias, 2008 [1962]).

People's *habitus* typically bears the marks of their country's history and government, of the state under which they live: 'In the conduct of workers in England, for example, one can still see traces of the manners of the landed noblemen and gentry and of merchants within a large trade network, in France the airs of courtiers and a bourgeoisie brought to power by revolution' (Elias, 2000. p. 384). Or in The Netherlands, one can see the effects of the long dominance of *Regenten* class, the merchant patricians of the cities (Elias, 1996. p. 10-13).

3. *Habitus* is the word that Elias always used in German —it was common currency in the inter-war years— but until Bourdieu popularised the term, in English, he (and his translators) tended to use terms such as 'personality makeup'.

In this essay, I want to argue that the equivalent central historic experience shaping American national character is of their country constantly becoming more powerful relative to its neighbours. This has had long-term and all-pervasive effects on the way they see themselves, on how they perceive the rest of the world, and how others see them. Let me now illustrate this argument in relation to: American manners; the incidence of violence in American society; and the development of the American state and empire.

Manners in America

Manners are interesting because they tend to mirror the power ratios between the people concerned. And American manners are popularly supposed to reflect the generally egalitarian character of American society. The truth is a little more complicated than that.

In the earliest days of English settlement in North America, society was relatively flat. The settlers included very few members of the upper class of the parent society in England —no aristocrats or members of the gentry to speak of. The early elite consisted of university-educated clerics and lawyers, along with merchants —people who would have perhaps been considered prosperous middle-class at home. But equally, few members of the very poorest strata made the journey across the Atlantic. In spite of that, the settlers did bring with them the acute status-consciousness of English Society, and in the course of the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a fairly considerable colonial gentry emerged, consciously modelling itself on the English gentry. After Independence, this gentry was largely eclipsed —*except in the slave-owning South, of course*. The agrarian republic that Alexis de Tocqueville visited in the early 1830s represented American society in its most egalitarian phase, the age of Jacksonian Democracy. Tocqueville pictured at length the relatively easy and informal manners to be seen in the relations between men and women, masters and servants, even officers and other ranks in the army. In a telling comparison with Britain, he wrote:

In America, where the privileges of birth never existed and where riches confer no peculiar rights on their possessors, men unacquainted with each other are very ready to frequent the same places, and find neither peril nor advantage in the free interchange of their thoughts. (...) their manner is therefore natural, frank and open. (Tocqueville, 1961 [1835–1840], Vol. I. pp. 202–230).

In contrast, English people encountering each other by chance were typically reserved, from fear that a casual acquaintance —struck up when travelling abroad for instance— would prove an embarrassment when they returned to the rigidly demarcated social boundaries at home.

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4
JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009
ISSN 1870 6932

Yet the later nineteenth century, the Gilded Age of rapid industrial growth and the formation of vast fortunes, was in America too a period of intense social competition, as waves of *nouveaux riches* battered down the gates of the old social elites. This is well depicted in the novels of Edith Wharton. Status distinctions became more marked, manners books sold in large numbers to people who wanted to emulate not just the ways of the old upper classes America, but also the manners of the European upper classes. There were even attempts to introduce the practice of chaperoning, though not with much success —egalitarian traditions still retained some force.

This period may seem an aberration. With some fluctuations, the twentieth century saw the trend reversed, and 'informalisation' became dominant (Wouters 2007). It is not just a matter of easy 'have a nice day' manners; it also extends to relations between the sexes (Wouters, 2004).

It is important to stress that, although the connection is no doubt indirect and complicated, this trend of informalisation ran broadly parallel to trends in the distribution of income and wealth in American society which, from 1913 until the last decades of the twentieth century and with some fluctuations, became relatively flatter compared with the Gilded Age. Today, however, we are living in a new Gilded Age, when in America (and to a lesser extent in Britain) the income and wealth of the top one percent particularly has increased astronomically, while the poor get poorer and the standard of living even of what the Americans call 'the middle class' (which includes skilled manual workers in steady employment) is static or falling.⁴ Nor are rates of social mobility as great as is commonly believed: a recent study (Blanden *et al.*, 2005) shows them to be lower in the USA (and the UK) than in Canada, Germany and the four Scandinavian countries. I have spoken of the disparity between perception and reality as 'the curse of the American Dream' (Mennell 2007. pp. 249–265).

I cannot point to any evidence that the factually gross inequality of American society is, yet, reflected in a distancing in everyday manners. I have said that manners reflect the power ratios between people, and more egalitarian manners are generally taken as an index of a widening circle of 'mutual identification'. But the late Leona Helmsley's notorious comment, that 'paying taxes is for little people', is only one bit of the abundant evidence of a callous disregard by the American rich for the welfare of the poor and middling sort of people. What prevails may not be a widening circle of mutual identification among all strata of the American people, but rather a kind of 'upwards identification':⁵ the American myth-dream of equality is actively promoted through the fostering of 'patriotism' —me-

4. The work of the French economist Thomas Piketty and his collaborators (e.g. Atkinson and Piketty 2007) has been especially valuable in shedding light on long-term trends in the distribution of income and wealth in Europe and the USA. See the fuller discussion in Mennell 2007: 249–65.

5. My thanks are due to Johan Goudsblom for suggesting that term.

aning American nationalism— among the middling and lower strata, but callous attitudes prevail among the holders of power to the large numbers of disadvantaged people. Their lot is still seen, in an attitude that we used to consider characteristic of the nineteenth century, as 'their own fault'. Egalitarian manners are perhaps becoming an instance of what Marxists call 'false consciousness'.

The USA differs historically from many countries in Western Europe in that it never had a single national model-setting class that succeeded in monopolising the moulding of manners and habitus. America never had a nobility, but it had in effect several competing aristocracies. Among these, Massachusetts, with a passing footnote to Quaker Philadelphia, still looms too large in Europeans' perception of what shaped American social character. In New England, certainly, there took shape something like the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, an elite of educated professionals and merchants. To them, and to the pressures of commercial and professional life, can be attributed to a certain extent the egalitarian strain in American habitus, not showing open disdain towards their fellow citizens, even if they were inwardly confident of their superior education, understanding and feeling. Visiting the USA in the 1830s, not long after Tocqueville, Harriet Martineau (1837, Vol. III, p. 10) commented upon the great cautiousness that was entrenched early and deeply in Northern people; she described as 'fear of opinion' something very similar to what Elias (2006 [1969]) termed the habitual 'checking of behaviour' in anticipation of what others would think. She thought she could distinguish Northern from Southern members of Congress simply by the way they walked:

It is in Washington that varieties of manners are conspicuous. There the Southerners appear at most advantage, and the New Englanders to the least; the ease and frank courtesy of the gentry of the South (with an occasional touch of arrogance, however), contrasting with the cautious, somewhat *gauche*, and too deferential air of the members from the North. One fancies one can tell a New England member in the open air by his deprecatory walk. He seems to bear in mind perpetually that he cannot fight a duel, while other people can. (Martineau 1838, Vol. I, p. 145).

Which brings us to the other great rival aristocracy, that of the slave-owning South. In the perception of the USA by Europeans, the New England legacy has always played too prominent a part, and the legacy of the South too small a part. Even the great Latin American historian and sociologist Darcy Ribeiro (1971) was too prone to draw a dichotomous contrast between the preponderance of the wage-earner class in North America and the hacienda system, serfdom and slavery in Latin America. To remember the South is to remind ourselves that this is not a dichotomy, but a continuum, in which the southern states are both geographically and conceptually closer to Latin America. And that is important, in view of the shift in the centre of gravity of American politics away from the North and towards the South since about 1970.

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

From Independence to the Civil War, Southerners held the lion's share of political power in the Union.⁶ The reference to duelling among them is highly significant. As Norbert Elias argued, in nineteenth-century Germany the quality of *Satisfaktionsfähigkeit* —being judged worthy to give satisfaction in a duel— became a principal criterion for membership of the German upper class (Elias, 1996. Pp. 44–119). And although the greatest plantation owners may have been more conscious of looking towards their counterparts in England or France, the more appropriate comparison is between them and the Prussian *Junkers* (Bowman, 1993). One similarity is that they both provided a large part of the officer corps of the national army. At home, they both ruled autocratically over a *Privatrechtstaat* —they had the right to adjudicate and enforce their judgements on their own estates, with little or no interference by agencies of the government. State authorities did not intervene in relations between white masters and blacks, whether during slavery in the antebellum period or during the long decades of the Jim Crow laws and lynching between the end of Reconstruction and the interwar period. Nor did they intervene in what is now called 'black on black' violence. This absence has cast a long cultural shadow to the present day.

But neither were white-on-white quarrels very much the business of state authorities. The social arrangements of the Old South were also associated with the prevalent code of 'honour' (Wyatt-Brown, 1984), and questions of honour were commonly settled by the duel. Many European travellers, from Harriet Martineau to the great geologist Sir Charles Lyell, were astonished by its prevalence: it was remarked that in New Orleans alone, someone died in a duel on average every day. The code of 'honour', in its various forms in Europe and America, has been widely discussed. Roger Lane contrasts the Southern 'man of honour' with the New England 'man of dignity', who would very likely take a quarrel to court rather than fight a duel. The propensity to litigation through the legal apparatus of the state is a function not only —not mainly, indeed— of culturally conditioned individual dispositions, but also of the degree of internal pacification and the effectiveness of the state monopoly of the legitimate use of violence in a given territory. Yet the difference between the codes of 'honour' and 'dignity' is associated with different personal and emotional styles: the Southerner, like the *Satisfaktionsfähig* gentleman of the *Kaiserreich*, displayed a 'hard', unemotional style; it has been suggested that a legacy of this can be seen in the hard, speak-your-weight-machine delivery of many American military spokesmen today.

6. For more than three quarters of that period of 72 years, the President had been a slaveholding southerner; after the war, no southern resident was elected President until Lyndon Johnson in 1964. In Congress, 23 of the 36 Speakers of the House and 24 of the 36 Presidents Pro Tempore of the Senate had been southerners; for half a century after the war, none was. Before the war, 20 of the 35 Justices of Supreme Court had been southerners, and they had been in a majority throughout the period; only five of the 26 justices appointed in the five decades after the war were from the South. See McPherson 1990: 12–13.

Other competing elites deserve to be mentioned —the relatively autonomous social elites of many American cities in the past, the plutocracy that arose after the Civil War and today exercises overwhelming economic and political power. Perhaps we should also mention the significance of Hollywood and the heroes and heroines of popular culture. But I want simply to return to the point that in our perceptions of America past and present, the New England model plays too large a part, and its rival from the South far too little —something that is of great importance given the massive shift in the power ratio in favour of the South since about 1970.

And there remains one great irony about American manners and habitus. If the USA has not, to the same extent as many countries of Western Europe, witnessed the formation of a monopolistic model-setting upper class, it can also be said that today America and Americans serve as just such an upper class for the rest of the world, including Europe. It was not always so. As Allan Nevins pointed out, until around 1825 British visitors to the USA were mainly working and middle-class people, especially businessmen, who tended to speak with respect of the manners of the social equals they met. After 1825, however, more upper class and professional visitors arrived from Britain, and there is in general a more marked note of condescension in their reports about what they saw and the people they met. Subsequently, this trick of perspective was further complicated by the changing balance of power between Britain and America. By the inter-war years of the twentieth century:

For the first time, the great majority of British visitors showed themselves distinctly respectful of the rich, powerful, and exceedingly complex nation beyond the seas. During the period we have described as one of Tory condescension [1825–1845], the travellers have tended to look down on the Americans; during the later period we have described as one of analysis [1870–1922], they tended to look at the United States with level gaze; but now they frequently tended to look up at America! (Nevins, 1948. P. 403).

Today, some Americans think of the widespread appeal of American popular culture, and the constant emulation of American styles —from clothes to food to speech— as a form of 'soft power' wielded in the American interest. It may be as well to remember, though, that the *ancien régime* bourgeoisie desperately aped the courtiers —but that did not prevent them resenting the aristocracy. Nor did it prevent the French Revolution.

The Problem of Violence in America

About the question of violence in the USA there is an enormous literature —as well as a lot of popular perceptions which themselves incorporate some myths.

Contrary to public perception, historical criminologists now agree that the long-

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

term trend in violence in Western societies is downwards. In England, longer-term data is available than anywhere else, and in a celebrated piece of research Gurr (1981) showed that the chances of getting murdered were about 40 times greater in thirteenth-century Oxford than in the mid twentieth century. The decline was not a smooth curve: there are shorter-term fluctuations. For instance, most countries experienced an upturn in violence from about 1960, and a renewed downturn since the 1990s. *Trends* in homicide in the USA run very much parallel to those in western Europe and European countries overseas such as Australia and New Zealand. Data compiled by Eisner (2005) show this very strikingly.

But it is necessary to distinguish between the *trend* and the *level* of violence (Mennell, 2007. pp. 122–154). What is distinctive about the USA is the level: there are simply *more* homicides there than in comparable countries. Although other forms of violence ought really to be considered separately, homicides per annum per 100,000 population are used as a general index of violence because a homicide is a relatively unambiguous crime, and thus the measurement of homicide tends to yield comparable figures from one country to another, whereas lesser forms of violence are greatly affected by differences in legal definitions and indeed by legal changes over time. By this measure, the USA has something like four times as many murders as comparable countries.⁷

Here again, another popular myth comes into play: the phrase 'crime and violence', current among politicians and the general public, implies that the two are almost synonymous. Yet, as Zimring and Hawkins (1997) have shown, in the USA 'crime is not the problem'. One is considerably more likely to have one's house burgled in London than in New York. Zimring and Hawkins showed that homicides in America are not highly correlated with ordinary crimes such as burglary, theft and so on. Murders were not to any exceptional extent committed in the course of *instrumental* crimes —those associated with the pursuit of money in particular. What accounts for the unusually high incidence of homicide in the USA is the high incidence of *affective* violence —that is murders committed impulsively, under the influence of strong emotions. Why should Americans be less able to control their murderous emotional impulses than Europeans? One answer is that they are not, but that a fist fight outside a pub after closing time (or a domestic dispute) that generally results in cuts and bruises is more likely to end up with someone dead in a society awash with handguns. While there is most likely some truth in that, it does not tell the whole story. For in this case it is more than usually difficult to talk about 'Americans' in general. There are very marked geographical variations in the incidence of homicide.

The case of high rates of killing in inner-city ghettos —especially black ghettos—in the 1960s to 1990s is familiar. Loïc Waquant (2004) has attributed the 'decivilising

7. Not all countries: South Africa, Russia and some of the states of Eastern Europe have higher rates still, but they share the common feature of having passed through severe political and social upheaval over the last decade or so.

process' that took place there to two interrelated processes: on the one hand, the collapse of legitimate steady employment and its replacement by unemployment, insecure casual employment and the illicit economy notably of the drug trade; and on the other hand, the concomitant withdrawal of the agencies of the state —from police to post offices— from the ghettos in the Reagan years and after. Correlated with this has been the replacement of a 'welfare safety net' with a 'penal dragnet', which has swept huge numbers of young American men, more especially African-American men, into jail (Pettit and Western, 2004).

Less familiar, but historically related, is the fact that a very disproportionate part of American homicide occurs in the South, and in those parts of the West that were preponderantly settled from the South (Lane, 1997. p. 350). The relative weakness of the institutions of the state is the common factor. I do not, of course, mean a 'state of the Union', except incidentally, but am using the concept of 'state' in the standard sociological sense formulated by Max Weber (1978 [1920], Vol. I, p. 54): an organisation which successfully upholds a claim to binding rule making over a territory, by virtue of commanding a monopoly of the legitimate use of violence. The process of monopolisation was much delayed and less thorough in the South than the North, as already implied when discussing the Southern tradition of 'honour'. The tradition of 'taking the law into one's own hands' remained strong. In many southern States, it was for a long time actually legal for a man to kill his wife's lover (Stearns, 1989). (In the 1920s, Georgia struck an early blow for women's liberation by also making it legal for a woman to kill her husband's lover.) Lynching, mainly of African American men, declined after the 1920s, but did not die out until the 1960s; county by county in the South, there is a high correlation between the incidence of lynching in the past and that of homicide at the present day (Messner, *et al.*, 2005). It is significant that by far the greatest use of the death penalty occurs in those states and counties where vigilante activity (Brown, 1975) and lynchings were most common in the past, and a very disproportionate fraction of those executed are African Americans (Zimring, 2003. pp. 89–118).

Pieter Spierenburg (2006) has advanced the provocative thesis that, in the history of state-formation processes in America, 'democracy came too early'. In most parts of Western Europe, there took place over many centuries gradual processes of centralisation, eventuating in the concentration of the means of violence in fewer and fewer hands, and ultimately in the establishment of a relatively effective monopoly apparatus in the hands of kings. Gradual it may have been, but the struggles among a warrior elite were bloody, as more and more players were deprived of their capacity to wage war independently of the central ruler. The process was in its final stages when European colonisation of North America began. Once stable and effective royal monopolies of violence had been established, as they were in general by the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries, the people's aim in subsequent struggles —most spectacularly in the French Revolution—

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

was not to challenge or destroy the monopoly as such, but rather to 'co-possess' the monopoly. In other words, the aim was to assert a more broadly based control over those who exercised the monopoly, to democratise it.

In North America, however, 'there was no phase of centralisation before democratisation set in', and 'democracy came to America too early'. By that he means something quite factual:

...the inhabitants had lacked the time to become accustomed to being disarmed. As a consequence, the idea remained alive that the very existence of a monopoly of force was undesirable. And it remained alive in an increasingly democratic form: not [as in medieval Europe] of regional elites carving out their private principality, but of common people claiming the right of self-defence. (...) Local elites and, increasingly, common people equated democracy with the right of armed protection of their own property and interests (Spierenburg, 2006. pp. 109–110).

Spierenburg acknowledges that it would be an oversimplification to suggest that the transition from struggles to destroy the monopoly apparatus to struggles to co-possess it did not take place at all in the USA, but 'the best one can say is that the majority of the population wanted it both ways': they 'accepted the reality of government institutions but at the same time they cherished an ethic of self-help'. 'Today', remarks Spierenburg, 'the idea that individuals cannot and should not rely on state institutions in order to protect their homes is alive and well. Members of the Michigan Militia explicitly say so in [Michael Moore's 2003 documentary film] *Bowling for Columbine*' (2006, p. 110).

The Formation of the American State and Empire

There is a tendency to think about the United States as if it were an emanation of the human spirit, as if its existence and its constitutional arrangements were a bloodless product of the Enlightenment, John Locke, the genius of the Founding Fathers, and the pure democratic spirit of 'No taxation without representation!' (Though John Kenneth Galbraith remarked that while eighteenth-century Americans objected to taxation *without* representation, they objected equally to taxation *with* representation.⁸)

In fact, the formation of the territorial unit that we now know as the USA was a bloody business, not at all dissimilar to the formation of states in Western Europe. If we look back a thousand years, Western Europe was fragmented into numerous tiny territories, each ruled—that is, protected *and* exploited—by some local warlord. Thinking of Afghanistan after

8. Quoted by Gordon (1998, p. 43).

the tender loving care of numerous foreign interventions is perhaps the closest present-day equivalent. Out of the patchwork, over a period of many centuries there gradually emerged a smaller number of larger territories. It was a violent 'elimination contest' (Elias, 2000. pp. 263–278). It is a mistake to see the process as driven by 'aggression', as if the personality traits of individual warriors were the determining force. In an age when the control of land was the principle basis of power, a peace-loving local magnate could not sit idly by while his neighbours slugged it out: the winner, who gained control over a larger territory, would then be able to gobble up the little peace-loving neighbour. War and 'aggression' thus had a survival value. The process was Janus-faced: as larger territories became *internally* pacified, the wars *between* territories came to be fought on a steadily larger scale.

The story of state formation in North America is similar. One difference is that the struggle for territory after the beginnings of European settlement was initially driven exogenously by conflicts between the great powers back in Europe, as much as by rivalries endogenous to North America. In the early stages, the process somewhat resembled the struggle for territory in nineteenth-century Africa. Most of the early wars there were branches of contemporaneous wars in Europe, whether the Anglo-Dutch wars, the War of the Spanish Succession, the Seven Years War or whatever. Through these contests, first the Swedish colonies and then the Dutch were eliminated, and later French and Spanish power was broken. The various Indian tribes were also involved in these struggles as allies of the European powers, and were simultaneously engaged in an elimination contest amongst themselves. Gradually, however, the struggles came to be shaped much more by endogenous forces.

This is not the place to retell the story of how American Independence came about, except to say that the taxation to which the settlers did not wish to contribute without representation arose from the costs of military control over a much larger territory after the effective elimination of the French from Canada and the trans-Appalachian region. But there is another side to the story besides this familiar one. The British had intended to reserve the Ohio Valley for their Iroquois allies, but settlers were already pressing westwards. As has been recognised at least since Theodore Roosevelt wrote *The Winning of the West* (1889–99), the War of Independence was also a war over the control of conquests. The colonials were also colonisers.

I shall not dwell upon what has been called the American Holocaust (Stannard, 1992), save to say that westward expansion at the expense of the Native Americans was driven by the pressure of land-hungry migrants pushing forward in advance of effective federal government control of the territory, in contrast with policies followed in the settlement of Canada and Siberia. The scenes with which we are familiar from the Western movies are a glamorised version of a process of conquest and internal pacification.

Americans are fond of pointing out that they *bought* much of their territory rather than conquering it by force of arms. That is certainly true of the Louisiana Purchase,

Subje/Civitas

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

which in 1803 doubled the federal territory. It arose, however, out of a particularly favourable conjunction in European power politics, when it suited Napoleon to be rid of extraneous responsibilities. It is also true that another huge acquisition of land took place when the United States paid Mexico for a vast swathe of territory. But that was only after it had impressed upon Mexico that this was an offer it could not refuse, by invading that unfortunate country and sacking its capital city. 'Poor Mexico! So far from God and so close to the United States', as President Porfirio Díaz later remarked. Ulysses Grant, who served as a young officer in the Mexican War, regarded the war as 'one of the most unjust ever waged by a stronger against a weaker nation. It was an instance of a republic following the bad example of European monarchies, in not considering justice in their desire to acquire additional territory.' (Grant, 1885. p. 37)

There is no point in moralising about this and many other episodes. My point is not to denounce 'bad men' for what happened; that would be to fall into the same trap of individualism that infects the present American government's view of the world today. My point is rather that American development was as a whole a relatively unplanned long-term social process. It is one instance of what Norbert Elias (1991, p. 64) encapsulated in his couplet...

From plans arising, yet unplanned
By purpose moved, yet purposeless

On the other hand, the balance between the 'accidental' and the 'intended' tilts towards the planned pole as one party gains a great power advantage within a power ratio.⁹ The interplay between the two can be seen in the acquisition of the first United States Empire in 1899 (Zimmerman, 2002), which followed neatly on from the 'closing of the frontier' declared in the 1891 census. The United States invaded the Philippines, with British support—the American fleet sailed from Hong Kong—because both powers feared that either Germany or Japan would do so if the USA did not.

The Monroe Doctrine of American overlordship in the western hemisphere is a similar story. In 1819, the British proposed a joint declaration to oppose Spanish recolonisation of South America. In the event, John Quincy Adams, as Secretary of State, insisted on its being in America's name alone. But there was no question of its applying to Britain's subsequent seizure of the Falkland Islands – the USA did not then have the power to prevent it. By the early twentieth century its power had greatly increased, and the Roosevelt Corollary to the Monroe Doctrine was used in justifying numerous American military interventions in Latin America throughout that century. By the early twenty-first, what I have called the 'Dubya Addendum' (Mennell, 2007. pp. 211–212), propounded in the 2002

9. See: Elias (1978), chapter 6, 'Games Models'.

National Security Strategy of the United States, declared that the USA had the right to intervene against its opponents anywhere in the globe, and came very close to claiming for the American government a monopoly of the legitimate use of force throughout the world. In other words, in terms of Max Weber's definition of a state, the present regime has come close to declaring the USA a world state. In some ways, indeed, the USA does now act as a world government (Mandelbaum, 2006). It claims extra-territorial jurisdiction for its own laws in many fields, while itself refusing to be bound by the corpus of international law that most other countries accept. Its military expenditure is now as large as that of all the other countries in the world combined. It has in effect garrisoned the planet, dividing the entire globe into US military commands.¹⁰ It now has military bases in two-thirds of the countries of the world, including much of the former Soviet Union.¹¹ In my conclusions I shall attempt to unpack some of the implications of all this.

Conclusions

Make no mistake: the benefits would be enormous if the USA (or anyone else, for that matter) were to succeed in its declared ambition of achieving the internal pacification of the whole world. Those of us who live in relatively peaceful, secure and democratic societies find it difficult to imagine how much of the rest of humanity does not. The greatest evil they face is the lack of everyday security – vulnerability to violence and sudden death, as well as hunger and disease, dangers posed to them by other human beings as well as by natural forces. If they could be guaranteed a high and consistent level of security, of the kind we ourselves enjoy, then we might witness for the first time a true worldwide 'civilising process'. For, as Elias says:

...if in this or that region the power of central authority grows, if over a larger or smaller area the people are forced to live in peace with each other, the moulding of the affects and the standards of emotion-management are very gradually changed as well (Elias, 2000. p. 109).

The question is whether this is possible, and whether it is something that in the long term could be achieved by the USA acting alone, rather than by the countries of the world acting in concert through multilateral bodies such as the United Nations.

For the foreseeable future, US military dominance is beyond challenge. Yet through

10. For their boundaries, see the maps in the endpapers of Kaplan (2005). They have since been modified to create a new US Africa Command.

11. In 2004, it had bases in 130 out of 194 countries (Johnson, 2004).

the sheer scale of its military expenditure, the US may end up doing itself what, it has been claimed, President Reagan did to the USSR: bring about its collapse by arms spending beyond its means. The wisdom becomes increasingly apparent of President Eisenhower's farewell speech to the American nation (1961), when he warned against the growing power of what he named 'the military-industrial complex'. The military-industrial interests now seem to own the American government. Their activities would appear to run exactly counter to the requirements of a world civilising process. The Americans are not the only suppliers of weaponry to the unpeaceful parts of the world, but they are the largest. Such supplies often seem to be used to play off various armed interests against each other, as in the current case of American encouragement of violent conflict between Sunni and Shia (and indeed between rival Shia factions). These *divide et impera* tactics are seen as in the short-term interests of the USA, but they lead in exactly the opposite direction to the requirements of a long-term civilising process.¹²

There are several other reasons to doubt whether the present strategy of the USA for pacifying the world can be successful. The first is that the rest of the world will inevitably resent being unilaterally dominated by a monopoly power, over the exercise it has effectively no democratic control. (Democracy is coming too late, or not at all, to the American imperium.) American anti-imperialists such as Mark Twain and Carl Schurz made the same point a century ago. They said that the USA could not in the long term dominate the people of its colonies without giving them representation. They would either have to be given independence or made citizens and given the vote. Today's American dominion is much more extensive. In these circumstances, American governments might gradually decide that, after all, the prudential course might be to make use of the structures of the United Nations.

But let us step back from these questions of power politics and international relations, and focus upon a more specifically sociological aspect of the problem: Americans' misperceptions both of themselves collectively and of the world beyond the frontiers of the USA. These misperceptions, I would argue, are related to the long-term shift in the power ratio between the USA and its global neighbours. When some people have a large power advantage, the experience affects in quite specific ways how they perceive themselves and others.¹³ This can be seen at every level from the microcosm —the partners

12. A more peaceful version of such tactics, which Elias (2000: 312–44) called 'the royal mechanism', involving central rulers throwing their weight on the side of the second strongest social group against the group that poses the greatest challenge to central authority, has played a significant part in many processes of state formation. And indeed it has often been used by the USA in building up its own power in the world. Nevertheless, in its violent form it is counter-productive.

13. In this passage, I am implicitly applying Norbert Elias's model of 'established-outsiders relations'; for the explicit version, see: Mennell (2007), pp. 311–314.

in a marriage, for instance— right up to the macrocosm of international relations. Van Stolk and Wouters (1987) found that women seeking refuge from their violent partners took much more notice of their men than the men did of the women, and the women were much more attuned to their men's wishes and needs than the men were to theirs. When the women were asked to give a character sketch of their partner, they could do so with considerable precision, nuance and insight, while the men could not describe their wife's except in terms of clichés applicable to women in general. It appears to be a general characteristic of unequal power balances that the weaker party 'understands' the stronger better than vice versa. As a British-born person now resident in Ireland, it is obvious to me that Irish people in general have a very detailed and knowledgeable understanding of their more populous and powerful neighbouring island, of British affairs and British people; in contrast, British people tend to know very little of Irish politics and to think about 'John Bull's other island' in terms of thoroughly outdated stereotypes. Billions of educated people outside the USA know an immense amount about America, its constitution, its politics, its manners and culture; all these are extremely visible to the rest of the world. But it is as if they were looking through a one-way mirror.¹⁴

America's huge power advantage seems to function something like a black hole in reverse: a mass of survey evidence suggests that a large proportion of Americans do not see out at all clearly, and tend to think about the 'outside world', if at all, in stereotypical and indeed Manichean terms. Gore Vidal (2006, p. 6) notes that there is always 'a horrendous foreign enemy at hand to blow us up in the night out of hatred of our Goodness and rosy plumpness'. There is still a deficit in collective self-understanding that the historian David Potter identified in the 1960s. He noted that it was the 'curious fate' of the United States to exert immense influence in the modern world 'without itself quite understanding the nature of this influence'.

In the twentieth century the United States developed what was perhaps the first mass society, but the American cult of equality and individualism prevented Americans from analysing their mass society in realistic terms. Often they treated it as if it were simply an infinite aggregation of Main Streets in Zenith, Ohio. (Potter, 1968. p. 136)

This brings me back at last to the three interrelated myths I mentioned earlier: of the essential 'Europeanness' of the USA; American 'exceptionalism'; and the inherent 'goodness' of America. A more realistic view is that the development of the American state-society has its peculiar mix of ingredients but also great similarities to the processes that have unfolded in many other countries, and that none has more than its fair share of moral virtue.

14. I am again indebted to Johan Goudsblom (1986) for the analogy of the one-way mirror.

Each of the myths, however, is sustained by the current dominant power position of the USA in the world. At the beginning of European settlement, thinking of the potential of the supposed wilderness, John Locke remarked 'Thus in the beginning, all the World was America' (1960 [1690]: Second Treatise, Sec. 49). Since then, America's vast achievements—in technology, science, government and culture—have helped to transform the world, very often for the better. At times it seems that in the end, too, all the world *will be* America.

Yet in humanity as whole there are many people who view that prospect with trepidation. It may at least be thought that Americans need to take a more critical view of themselves and their society. But their affectively highly charged We-images of themselves and their country—products, once again of its success and power—make that very difficult. Even the very many American citizens who feel some unease at the role played by the USA in the world, and who have some access to outsiders' they-images of America, often find it emotionally difficult to accept others' criticisms. The situation is not without danger. America's reaction to the 2001 attacks on New York and Washington now known as '9/11' can be understood in terms of Tom Scheff's (1994) concept of 'shame–rage spirals'. The attacks were intended above all as a national humiliation, which duly triggered rage, which in turn triggered wild fantasy-based aggression. The problem is that American power in the world has probably now passed its peak, and the USA is likely to face further national humiliations over the following decades, with consequent risk of further episodes of irresponsible behaviour. Will the world have to learn to manage the danger posed to it by an enraged USA, and, if so, how?

Bibliography

- Atkinson, A. B. and Piketty, T. (Eds.) (2007). *Top Incomes over the Twentieth Century: A Contrast between Continental European and English-Speaking Countries*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Blanden, J. P. Gregg, and Machin, S. (2005). *Intergenerational Mobility in Europe and North America: A Report supported by the Sutton Trust*. London: Centre for Economic Performance, London School of Economics.
- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Bowman, S. D. (1993). *Masters and Lords: Mid-Nineteenth Century United States Planters and Prussian Junkers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, R. M. (1975). *Strain of Violence: Historical Studies of American Violence and Vigilantism*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Eisenhower, D. D. (1961). Farewell Address to the Nation, 17 January. In: *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*. Washington, DC: United States General Printing Office, 1960, pp. 1035–1040.

Subje/Civitas

18

Estudios Interdisciplinarios
sobre Subjetividad y Civilidad

NO. 4

JULIO-DICIEMBRE | 2009

ISSN 1870 6932

- Eisner, M. (2005). *Modernity Strikes Back? The Latest Increase in Interpersonal Violence (1960–1990) in a Historical Perspective*. Paper presented at the Fourth Workshop on Interpersonal Violence. Erasmus Universiteit Rotterdam.
- Elias, N. (1978 [1969]). *What is Sociology?* (Translated by Stephen Mennell and Grace Morrissey). London: Hutchinson. [Volume 5 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias. Dublin: UCD Press, forthcoming]
- Elias, N. (1991). *The Society of Individuals*. Oxford: Blackwell. [Volume 10 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias. Dublin: UCD Press, forthcoming].
- Elias, N. (1996). *The Germans: Studies of Power Struggles and the Development of Habitus in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*. Cambridge: Polity Press [Studies on the Germans, Volume 11 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias. Dublin: UCD Press, forthcoming].
- Elias, N. (2000 [1939]). *The Civilising Process* (Revised Edition). Oxford: Blackwell. [to be published under the title *On the Process of Civilisation*, Volume 3 of the Collected Works of Norbert Elias. Dublin: UCD Press, forthcoming].
- Elias, N. (2006 [1969]). *The Court Society* (Collected works, Volume 2) Dublin: UCD Press.
- Elias, N. (2008 [1962]). National peculiarities of British Public Opinion. In: Norbert Elias, *Essays on Civilising Processes, State Formation and National Identity* (Dublin: UCD Press [Collected Works, Vol. 15]).
- Elias, N. and J. L. Scotson (2008 [1965]). *The Established and the Outsiders* (Collected Works Volume 4). Dublin: UCD Press.
- Gordon, J. S. (1998). *Hamilton's Blessing*. New York: Penguin.
- Goudsblom, J. (1986). Dutch Sociology in the 1950s: A View from Behind the One-Way Mirror. In: R. Kroes and M. van Rossum (Eds.), *Anti-Americanism in Europe*. Amsterdam: Free University Press, pp. 112–120.
- Grant, U. S. (1885). *Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*. New York: Smithmark.
- Gurr, T. R. (1981). Historical Trends in Violent Crime. *Crime and Justice: An Annual Review of Research*, 3, 295–353.
- Huntington, S. P. (1999). *The Clash of Civilizations*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Johnson, C. (2004). *America's Empire of Bases*. www.tomdispatch.com. Consulted: 15 January 2009.
- Jones, C. A. (2007). *American Civilization*. London: Institute for the Study of the Americas.
- Kaplan, R. D. (2005). *Imperial Grunts*. New York: Random House.
- Lane, R. (1997). *Murder in America*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press.
- Locke, J. (1960 [1690]). *Two Treatises of Government*. New York: Mentor.
- Mandelbaum, M. (2006). *The Case for Goliath: How America acts as the World's Government in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Public Interest.
- Mann, M. (2003). *Incoherent Empire*. London: Verso.

- Martineau, H. (1837). *Society in America*, 3 vols. London: Saunders & Otley.
- Martineau, H. (1969 [1838]). *Retrospect of Western Travel*, 2 vols. New York: Haskell House.
- McPherson, J. M. (1990). *Abraham Lincoln and the Second American Revolution*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Mennell, S. (2007). *The American Civilizing Process*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Messner, S. F., R. D. Baller, and M. P. Zevenbergen (2005). The Legacy of Lynching and Southern Homicide. *American Sociological Review*, 70, 4, 633–55.
- Nevins, A. (ed.) (1948). *America through British Eyes*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Pettit, B. and B. Western (2004). Mass Imprisonment and the Life Course: Race and Class Inequality in US Incarceration. *American Sociological Review*, 69, 2, 151–169.
- Potter, D. M. (1968). Civil War. In: C. Vann Woodward (Ed.), *The Comparative Approach to American History*. New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 135–145.
- Ribeiro, Darcy (1971). *The Americas and Civilization*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Roosevelt, T. (1995 [1889–99]). *The Winning of the West*, 4 vols. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- Scheff, T. J. (1994). *Bloody Revenge: Emotions, Nationalism and War*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Scowcroft, B. (2007). The Dispensable Nation? *International Herald Tribune*, 7 August.
- Spierenburg, P. (2006). Democracy came too early: A Tentative Explanation for the Problem of American Homicide. *American Historical Review*, 111, 1, 104–114.
- Stannard, D. E. (1992). *American Holocaust*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Stearns, P. N. (1989). *Jealousy: The Evolution of an Emotion in American History*. New York: New York University Press.
- van Stolk A. en C. Wouters (1987). *Vrouwen in tweestrijd*. Deventer: Van Loghum Slaterus.
- Tocqueville, A. de (1961 [1835–40]). *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. New York: Schocken.
- Vidal, G. (2004). *Imperial America: Reflections on the United States of Amnesia*. London: Clairview.
- Wacquant, L. (2004). Decivilising and Demonising: The Remaking of the Black American Ghetto. In: S. Loyal and S. Quilley (Eds.), *The Sociology of Norbert Elias*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 95–121.
- Weber, M. (1978 [1920]). *Economy and Society*, 2 vols. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Winthrop, J. (1994 [1630]). A Modell of Christian Charity. In: G. Gunn, (ed) *Early American Writing*. New York: Penguin, pp. 108–12.
- Wouters, C. (2004) *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890–2000*. London: Sage.
- Wouters, C. (2007) *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890*. London: Sage.
- Wyatt-Brown, Bertram (1982) *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Zimmerman, W. (2002) *First Great Triumph: How Five Great Americans made their Country a World Power*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Zimring, F. E. (2003) *The Contradictions of American Capital Punishment*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Zimring, F. E. and G. Hawkins (1997) *Crime is Not the Problem: Lethal Violence in America*. New York: Oxford University Press.