Civilisering en decivilisering: studies over staatsvorming en geweld, nationalisme en vervolging

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Summary

This book is concerned with political violence and state formation, nation formation and nationalism, persecution and ethnic conflict, and civilization and decivilization in the modern world. Violence can be considered one of the most fundamental and lasting problems of human societies. A certain degree of control of violence is an indispensable condition for any form of regular social life, but violence control and security are always relative conditions, and no society is immune against violence. People, individually and collectively, may enhance each other's safety by treating each other peacefully, but can also pose a threat to each other, and treat each other violently. According to a recent count (1993), the world has seen 225 international and civil wars since 1900, in which approximately 100 million people perished.

Political violence between and within societies is nearly always intimately connected with state formation. States are characterized by a monopoly of violence within their territories and usually possess large concentrations of various means of violence. These can be used to restrict and control internal violence and to maintain the safety of society, but also be employed for violent internal repression and persecution of parts of the population, and for war. Political violence is often also closely connected with nation formation and nationalism. State authorities usually justify their use of force by pointing to supposed national interests, or by appealing to 'the nation' or 'the people'. Violence directed against states is often legitimized in the same way. Adequate comprehension of processes of state formation and nation formation, and of nationalism, is therefore required for understanding and explaining many forms of political violence. State formation and nation formation usually go together in the sense that the state in the long run largely brings about the nation. But the connection may also work the other way around: nation formation and nationalism may contribute to state formation, to the development of new states, sometimes coupled to the disintegration and disappearance of older states. Though certainly not always, such developments often bring about violence.

Connections between political violence, state formation and civilization are
SUMMARY

complex and in some ways paradoxical. Within a society, civilization — i.e. the development, continuation and maintenance of civilized standards of behaviour and civilized manners — can only continue when the overall level of violence in society is relatively low. In other words, when the society is by and large durably pacified and the level of violence control is high. Both are dependent on the functioning of the state and its monopoly of violence. The state should be able to threaten the use of force, or actually use force, to prevent potentially violent escalation of conflicts in society, or contain them. As long as this is successfully done within certain limits, civilization can continue. If not, a decreasing level of pacification and increasing violence will lead to decivilization. At least, that is argued in this book. Complex connections also exist between civilization, nation formation and nationalism. National cultures can be seen as more or less specific variants of larger and more encompassing civilizations, and processes of nation formation presuppose and reflect a particular level of civilization. But there is also a certain tension between civilization and nationalism. When and where nationalism and a sense of nationhood imply a far-reaching belief in national singularity and superiority, coupled with disdain and contempt for others, it may undermine civilization and become a strong impulse for a process in which decivilization gains the upper hand over civilization.

Chapter I is about social science and historical sociology. After a brief exploration of the main aims and development of social science in the 20th century, three different traditions and general approaches are distinguished: scientific social science, interpretative social science, and the historical and comparative approach. As a historical-sociological perspective is typical of this book, a short summary of this tradition is given and its main distinguishing features are outlined. This in turn is followed by an exposition and discussion of Norbert Elias’ theory of the process of civilization, which forms the main theoretical guideline for the separate studies in this book. The theory is explained in some detail, especially with regard to the connections between state formation, pacification, and civilising processes, as perceived by Elias. Moreover, it is shown how parts of the theory are connected to earlier work by, among others, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Sigmund Freud, and Johan Huizinga. Elias’ work is not the unique intellectual creation of an isolated thinker, but deeply embedded in contemporary German and international social science. In a brief final section, it is explained in which ways the four main themes — state formation, nation formation, persecution and ethnic conflict, and civilization — reappear in the remaining chapters, which thus establish a link between them.

Chapter II is largely theoretical. The first half focusses on two related questions: how can we conceptualize ‘state formation’, and what should we understand by ‘nation formation’? With regard to the first question, the argument starts from Weber and Otto Hintze’s perspectives on the state, to proceed to the largely similar present-day views of historical sociologists like Charles Tilly and Theda Skocpol. Eventually, a sensitizing concept (in Herbert Blumer’s sense) of ‘state formation’ is proposed. State formation then refers to long-term processes through
which a relatively autonomous, centralized and differentiated structure of power and authority develops and maintains itself within a certain territory. This structure is founded and rests on a double monopoly of violence and taxation, and is continuously engaged in competition with other similar structures. States are typically the largely unplanned results of centuries of power struggles within and between human societies. As it turns out, it is far more difficult to conceptualize 'nation' adequately. There is no consensus in the relevant literature and some fundamental controversies surface again and again. Three of these are discussed: 'objectivist' versus 'subjectivist' definitions of the nation; the nation as ethnic group versus the nation as the social formation which corresponds with the state; and different views on relations between state formation and nation formation. As a satisfactory definition of 'nation' seems impossible, it is proposed that the focus should instead be on nation formation as a long-term process of integration – between social classes, regions, and rulers and ruled – of the formation and spread of a standardized culture, and of the formation of a national identity, national loyalties and a political collectivity. Like states, nations form and differentiate in cooperation and competition with each other. As a process of integration and inclusion, nation formation also implies at the same time aspects of boundary maintenance through the exclusion of others. These concepts of state formation and nation formation are used throughout the book.

The second half of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of nationalism as sentiment, ideology and social movement. Two different types of nationalism are distinguished and broadly outlined: 'moderate' and 'extreme' nationalism. In the literature, a similar distinction has been phrased as 'civilian' versus 'ethnic' nationalism. This distinction is certainly not meant as a clear-cut dichotomy – both stem from the general European tradition since the end of the 18th century and both manifested themselves in different forms and mixes throughout the 19th and 20th centuries in Europe. Nevertheless, more moderate nationalism has been predominantly associated with Western Europe, while more extreme nationalism has time and again been paramount in Central and Eastern Europe. Therefore, an effort has been made to relate the two types of nation formation and nationalism to large-scale, long-term historical differences in political, economic, social and cultural development in Western and Eastern Europe. In an epilogue to this chapter, the tension between civilization and nationalism is discussed once again, and some questions are raised concerning the issue of civilization and decivilization.

Chapters III up to VII can be considered as case studies. Chapter III first traces the early development of the Netherlands from about the 14th century till the late 16th century, when an incipient Dutch state manifested itself for the first time during the Dutch revolt against the Spanish monarchy. Although the revolt was accompanied by much political violence, and military battles were decisive for the frontiers of the new state, the society which developed after the end of the revolt in 1648 rather quickly became quite pacified. Inventories are made up of the internal political violence in the 17th and 18th centuries, and the 19th and 20th, respectively. Comparisons show a steady decline of internal political violence between the
first two and the last two centuries, and also changes in the patterns of violence over the centuries. Explanations are sought in the geopolitical and international position of the Dutch state-society within the state system of Western Europe, in the ways in which society was internally stratified, in the peculiar development of the state — highly decentralized for the first two centuries — and in the deeply ‘civil’ and ‘bourgeois’ civilization.

Chapter IV focuses on the long-term development of nationalism, nation formation and state formation in the German lands from the end of the 18th century. From its first beginnings around 1800 German nationalism had both ‘moderate’ and ‘extreme’ aspects and these are traced throughout the 19th century in relation to the processes of state formation and nation formation. As it happened, nationalism in Germany in the half century after the failure of 1848 lost quite a few of its ‘moderate’ aspects, connected with liberalism and democracy, while its more ‘extreme’ aspects, connected with the continuation of largely authoritarian rule after 1871, and a lasting predominance of ‘military-aristocratic’ standards of behaviour, became more pronounced. In the beginning of the 20th century, the German state-society, due to a different geopolitical and international position, a more hierarchical social stratification, and a different development of state and nation, was characterized by a far less ‘civil’ and ‘bourgeois’ civilization than the Netherlands. ‘Extreme’ nationalism, grounded in sentiments, ideologies and movements, contributed strongly to the outbreak of the Great War, and thereafter was continued under Weimar, to culminate in national-socialism. At present, the conditions for a definitive end to ‘die deutsche Frage’ seem more favorable than ever since 1848.

The subject of Chapter V is the persecution of the Armenians in the Ottoman Empire between 1894 and 1922. In the first section, the main facts are summed up, some points of departure for a general historical-sociological approach to persecution and genocide are sketched, and the concept of a ‘persecution process’ is introduced. The second section contains an outline of Ottoman history, with a focus on the development of the Ottoman state and the uses of violence in and by that state. Special attention is given to the long process of decline and loss of power and prestige, which accelerated in the 19th century through increasing external imperialist pressures from other states and internal revolts by largely Christian minorities of, among others, Serbs, Greeks, Romanians, and Bulgarians, who succeeded in establishing their own states. It is argued that successive Ottoman regimes felt increasingly threatened by these developments, were largely unable to halt the process of decline, and continued to react, although usually without success, by means of (military) violence. The Armenians, at the end of the 19th century the only remaining sizeable Christian minority besides the Greeks within the empire, fell victim to this pattern of Ottoman-Turkish response to loss of power. Although largely unfounded, they came to be categorically classified as potentially dangerous ‘enemies’. The first great wave of serious persecution, initiated by the central Ottoman regime under sultan Abdul Hamid, and mainly carried out through local pogroms between 1894 and 1896, is analysed in section 3. Section 4 is devoted to the
second, far more massive, wave of systematic genocidal persecution during the First World War. Since the end of the 19th century, different forms of secular Turkish nationalism had come into existence, and the Ottoman leadership which had gained state power through a violent coup in 1913, was deeply influenced by extreme, 'ethnic', Turkish nationalism. Under the pressure and the cover of war conditions, they decided, probably at the beginning of 1915, that the entire Armenian population was to be forcefully uprooted, robbed of their possessions, deported under dire circumstances to the southern Arab desert provinces, and killed. Their wartime allies, the German and Austrian governments, were keenly aware of what was going on – and some individual German military and civilians in Turkey tried unsuccessfully to intervene on behalf of the Armenians – but they decided, for reasons of state, to look the other way. Although the responsible Turkish leaders were tried in absence by a Turkish court, found guilty, and sentenced to death, Turkish governmental attitudes till the present have been characterized by a 'denial syndrome'.

Chapter vii is concerned with the persecution of the Jews in Germany between 1933 and 1939. Relevant long-term developments of the German state and nation having already been described and explained in Chapter IV, this chapter opens with a discussion of two different perspectives on the persecution and annihilation of the Jews, which have been labelled 'intentionalist' and 'functionalist'. A choice between these two is not made; instead, it is argued that for various reasons a combination of the two perspectives is to be preferred. After a brief sketch of the long-term overall development of the position of the German Jews within German society, three sections are concerned with the description and analysis of the persecution process from January 1933 till September 1939, when German armies invaded Poland. Extreme anti-semitic German nationalism is considered a driving ideological force in the whole process, but the most fundamental condition was that the national-socialists took over the German state, corrupted it deeply within a few years, and thus were able to mobilize all the power resources of the state against the Jews. It is argued that by the fall of 1939 the persecution process had progressed to such a degree that the last phase, i.e., of the annihilation of the Jews, was already quite near. In the final section of the chapter, an effort is made to connect the developments in Germany after 1933 to preceding processes of destabilization of the German state and its monopoly of violence, of the militarization, polarization and depacification of German society, and of corresponding civilising pressures and trends since 1914.

Chapter viii is about the recent disintegration of state and society in Yugoslavia. With a focus on relevant international and domestic developments, the process of disintegration is traced from the beginning of the eighties till 1995. Moreover, it is shown how preceding structural weaknesses and problems in Yugoslav state formation and nation formation during the 20th century and specific characteristics of society contributed to the present crisis. Ultimately, the disintegration was brought about by the increasingly polarised competition and power struggles of the political-bureaucratic, intellectual, and military elites of the country. When
parts of them turned towards extreme nationalism and the use of violence, the fate of Yugoslavia was sealed. Special attention is given to the destabilization and subsequent breakdown of the state monopoly of violence. In conclusion, it is argued that this triggered strong decivilising forces.

The last chapter, Chapter viii, offers comparative conclusions about three central issues: the genesis of processes of persecution and of ethnic conflicts – mainly with the aid of a relevant theoretical model devised by Abram de Swaan; about some interrelations between civilization and decivilization – with a few critical comments on Elias' theory; and, finally, about some connections between nationalism and violence. In a brief epilogue, it is argued that a greater international effort to prevent ethnic conflict, political mass murder, and genocide is required.