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Abstract

Social scientists have begun to offer varied diagnoses of why Brexit has happened, and what its consequences have been and will likely be. This article does so by drawing upon Elias-inspired notions of longer-term de-civilizing processes, shorter-term de-civilizing spurts, and short-term de-civilizing offensives. Brexit is conceived of as involving a set of interlocking phenomena and tendencies which are de-civilizing in nature, and therefore de-cosmopolit(an)izing too. Diverse empirical phenomena in the UK are made sense of through the unifying conceptual apparatus of ‘de-civilization’, allowing analysis to start to relate them to each other systematically. The article also uses this sociological approach to look ahead tentatively to what the post-Brexit socio-political landscape may look like in the future.

Keywords

Brexit, civilizing, cosmopolitan, de-civilizing, Elias, European Union

‘Brexit’ has come to mean different things to different sorts of people. For anti-European Union (EU) enthusiasts, it means a glorious escape into the condition of recovered national sovereignty from the shackles of the European super-state. For anti-Brexit critics, it means a disastrous form of socio-economic dislocation, and an ongoing cultural trauma likely to play out over many years. Social scientists have begun to offer varied diagnoses of why Brexit has happened, and what its consequences have been and may be (Outhwaite, 2017).

The EU is too complex and varied in nature to be susceptible to analysis in the highly simplifying terms offered by either its detractors or its cheerleaders. The same goes for the nature and consequences of the United Kingdom’s departure from the bloc.

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Nonetheless, any systematically *sociological* analysis of such matters necessarily must simplify, without becoming simplistic. To this end, I draw upon elements of the work of Norbert Elias. Eliasian concepts can help address contemporary socio-political questions in potentially unusual ways, analysing them in ways other than they might normally be examined (Kilminster, 2007).¹

I draw upon Elias-inspired notions of longer-term *de-civilizing processes*, shorter-term *de-civilizing spurts*, and short-term *de-civilizing offensives*. This cluster of notions obviously relates to the concept of *de-cosmopolit(an)ization*, inspired by the work of thinkers like Ulrich Beck (2002), which refers to dynamics whereby ‘cosmopolitizing’ trends go into reverse, and are thereby undermined or destroyed. While civilizing processes may go together with cosmopolitization trends, de-civilizing processes, spurts and offensives go together with forms of de-cosmopolitization. Brexit will be conceived of as involving a set of interlocking trends which are de-civilizing in nature, and therefore, by extension, de-cosmopolitizing too

While it is relatively straightforward to report on specific Brexit-related phenomena, it is markedly more difficult to *theorize* about these, including as putative expressions of shorter-term de-civilizing spurts, or to claim them as elements of, or as contributing factors to, longer-term de-civilizing processes (Fletcher, 1995: 288). One must seek to delineate precisely (a) how certain policy initiatives are construable as deliberate de-civilizing offensives; (b) the intended and unintended consequences of those offensives; (c) how they contribute to a de-civilizing spurt; (d) how such a spurt is also created by other factors; (e) how the de-civilizing offensives and spurt may in turn be involved in the creation of a longer-term de-civilizing process (or processes).

This article offers initial, but hopefully suggestive, pointers in these directions. It starts by indicating the general nature of civilizing offensives, spurts and processes, then turns to consider their de-civilizing antitheses. It then moves on to apply the latter concepts to specific Brexit-related phenomena that have occurred and may occur in the future in the UK.

On civilizing processes, spurts and offensives

Norbert Elias developed a multi-dimensional approach to both civilizing processes and counter-trends over more than fifty years, nested within a more general model of human sociality (Goudsblom, 1994). Civilizing processes are long-term, unplanned trends, involving a range of unintended consequences over decades or centuries. For Elias, all societies around the world have had ‘civilizing practices that, with different levels of success, enable their members to coexist without injuring, demeaning and in other ways harming each other’ (Elias, 1996: 31). Such practices can be found ‘wherever a stable and durable control of the means of physical force takes place’ (Fletcher, 1995: 286). Elias connected macro-level dynamics, especially state-formation processes, with more micro-level changes in habitus and the dispositions of individuals (Dunning and Mennell, 1998).

Elias’s (2000 [1939]) early masterwork, *The Civilizing Process*, was first published in German in 1939. It deals with the specific case of the west European civilizing process. From the later medieval period onwards, states progressively pacified their territories,

leading to more generally non-violent behaviours among the citizenry. Physical violence was increasingly ‘confined to barracks’ – that is, legitimately practised only by members of the armed forces and the police, or within specific, highly controlled contexts, such as sporting competitions (Elias and Dunning, 1986). Within state-pacified territories, proliferating and ever longer chains of interdependence emerged, conjoining ever more individuals and groups which hitherto had been relatively separate from each other. Increased social complexity, growing differentiation and integration of social functions, a more elaborate social division of labour, and increasing democratization and equalization of the social conditions of different groups, were all elements of the macro-level civilizing process (Powell and Flint, 2009).

At the more micro-level, ‘manners, culture and personality . . . change[d] in a particular and discernible direction, firstly among elite groups then gradually more widely’ (Mennell, 1990: 207). All persons were compelled to regulate their ‘conduct in an increasingly differentiated, more even and more stable manner’ (Elias, 2000 [1939]: 445). This went together with an increasing ‘rationalization’ of modes of thought. There were ever less ‘fantasy’ elements in thought systems and individual applications of them; an increasing divide between the more cognitively neutral thought processes of mature adults and the immature thinking of children, with adult cognition patterns displaying ever less magical features; and ever more sober, cool and self-critical components. Slowly there built up over time among all groups, more mutual senses of identification, including with ‘excluded, marginalised or secondary groups, such as the poor, workers, women, homosexuals, emigrants and minorities’ (Mennell, 2014: np).

A *civilizing spurt* (*Schub* in German) is a shorter-term phenomenon than a civilizing process, but both are unplanned and unintended by the actors involved (Elias, 1986: 46). Spurts involve relatively fast and intensive civilizing trends, which happen during decades rather than centuries (Elias and Dunning, 1986). The notion of *civilizing offensive* was developed by scholars coming after Elias, as a means of addressing his alleged neglect of deliberate attempts by elite groups to manage the conduct of specific groups or whole populations, and to steer what those elites take to be ‘civilization’ in particular planned directions (Mitzman, 1987; van Krieken, 1989, 1999). Such offensives may happen in relatively short timescales, although they may have longer-term consequences, both intended and unintended. They can involve either integrative campaigns to remould the nature and conduct of groups defined as worthy of being made ‘civilized’, or exclusionary campaigns to isolate so-called ‘dangerous’ Others, through demonization and possibly forms of physical sequestration and violence (Rohloff, 2008).

Some of Elias’s (1991, 2001, 2010) later writings deal with civilizing processes between states. These are made possible by, and may stimulate, various cross-border phenomena, including the multiplication and lengthening of chains of interdependence, increasingly systematic forms of communication across physical and cultural distances, and the creation and dissemination of shared frames of reference among diverse groups. The latter encompass what could be called ‘cosmopolitan’ moral and ethical orientations towards Others, promoting peaceful social relations between ‘us’ and ‘them’. Confederations of states can be both drivers and results of trans-societal civilizing processes (Linklater, 2010). We could add that the inter-state entities which became the EU were founded to make another disastrous European war impossible and to foster

cross-border solidarity (Wieviorka, 2012). The EU is an inheritor of a trans-European civilizing process (Elias, 1998) which survived Nazi barbarity (Elias, 1996). It is erected on foundations that include self-restraint, avoidance of physical violence, and (sometimes) cosmopolitan dispositions in thought and practice. This has to be offset against the 'barbaric' elements of European society, vis-à-vis its treatment both of internal populations, like the Roma (Powell, 2007), and of external populations, which have suffered physical and symbolic repression within the European colonies (van Krieken, 1999).

On de-civilizing processes, spurts and offensives

Elias's sociological vocabulary can also be used to understand de-civilizing tendencies. The 1939 book indicated that it was not driven by scholarly impulses alone, but was also a response to 'the experiences in whose shadow we all live, experiences of the crisis of Western civilization as it had existed hitherto', given that it now seemed seriously under threat from de-civilizing Nazi barbarism (cited in Goudsblom, 1994: 1). Writing in 1980, Elias was clear that the 'civilization of which I speak is never completed and constantly endangered' (cited in Fletcher, 1995: 285). Elias's insights have been elaborated by various later scholars. Civilizing tendencies may take centuries to build up, but they can be undermined relatively quickly (Mennell, 2002: 44). Civilizing and de-civilizing tendencies can occur simultaneously in particular societies, and analysts must discern the relative weight of each (Dunning and Mennell, 1996; Mennell and Goudsblom, 1998). There may be 'criss-cross movements, shifts and spurts in various directions' (Mennell, 2002: 42). Crucially, 'decivilizing processes [can] involve civilizing components, as well as vice versa' (Mennell, 1990: 219). A civilizing process could potentially 'unleash the forces it would label "barbaric"', 'suppressing mutual identification' between oppressor and oppressed groups, generating 'a form of "civilized" violence and terror' (Burkitt, 1996: 142). Acts of barbarism can be committed in the name of 'civilization'. Some 'societies are barbaric precisely in their movement towards increasing civilization', at least in terms of how such societies themselves define 'civilization' (van Krieken, 1999: 297).

At its most basic, a de-civilizing process is a trend whereby a civilizing process goes into reverse. But this is a 'deceptively simple statement' (Mennell, 2002: 32). In Elias's own work, several formulations of de-civilizing process are given. Elias (2000 [1939]: 532*n*) sometimes seemed to have in mind a sense of partial or total social collapse, with 'the armour of civilized conduct crumbl[ing] very rapidly' if certain societal conditions come into play, pre-eminent among these being a serious weakening of central state authority, leading to dangers becoming incalculable and people experiencing high levels of fear and insecurity. He also indicated that 'classes living permanently in danger of starving to death or of being killed by enemies can hardly develop or maintain those stable restraints characteristic of the more civilized forms of conduct' (Elias, 2000 [1939]: 506). In his writing on the Holocaust (Elias, 1996), a range of terms is deployed, all of which indicate the disappearance of a previously settled and relatively peaceful mode of existence: 'regression to barbarism', 'breakdown', 'decay' and 'relapse' (de Swaan, 2001). But as Goudsblom (1994: 13) indicates, all these terms seem imprecise and very morally loaded (if for understandable reasons), bringing into question their usefulness for sociology.

Later analysts have sought to define de-civilizing processes more sharply. Fletcher (1995: 290) usefully specifies various macro- and micro-levels of de-civilizing processes. At a more macro-level, de-civilizing processes can be caused by or associated with the reduction or destruction of state power over a given territory. There would also be a shortening, weakening, and breaking of peaceful chains of interdependence between individuals and between groups. A consequence of those dynamics would be risks and dangers becoming more incalculable, and social life becoming highly unstable. Conversely, de-civilizing processes may proceed from the movement of the state in totalitarian directions.

At the micro-level, Mennell (1990) reviews the various elements of 'civilized' behaviours, and then delineates the nature of de-civilizing processes, by indicating the logical opposites of those elements. De-civilizing processes are manifest in persons and groups experiencing erosion of previous standards of behaviour and emotion management. There would be 'a shift in the balance between constraints by others and self-restraint in favour of constraints by others . . . [and] less even, all round, stable and differentiated pattern[s] of self-restraint' (Fletcher, 1995: 289). Thresholds of shaming and embarrassing behaviours are lowered. Actions become driven more by impulse than forethought. Modes of thinking become characterized less by detached cognition, and more by moment-to-moment survival modes, as well as highly emotional and volatile involvement in immediate events. The 'fantasy content' in thought processes goes up, embracing such things as paranoid fears, extreme mythologies, wild conspiracy theories, and magical thinking.² The gap between childish and adult standards of reasoning, morality and behaviour shrinks.³

There would be a re-emergence of physical violence from 'behind the scenes' into the public domain, both in terms of violence being wielded by civilians on each other, and in the rise of brutalized military-style policing. As social relations become more aggressive, levels of mutual identification and understanding, between groups and between individuals, go down, at the same time as levels of cruelty, physical and mental, go up. There would be growing inequality or heightening of tensions in the balance of power between groups, especially more 'established' and more 'outsider' groups. Conflicts between such groups would in part involve struggles as to who gets to count as the 'insiders' and who as the 'outsiders': being defined as the latter would be multiply disadvantageous (Elias and Scotson, 1994). The civilizing trend towards 'diminishing contrasts' between the lifestyles of groups is replaced by increasing contrasts and 'fundamentally different myths and convictions', perhaps especially between higher and lower classes. Social consensus is ripped apart and rational agreements and compromises between groups are made increasingly difficult. Elites may turn to authoritarianism or outright totalitarianism, to regain or augment their control over the lower orders, such attempts being less constrained than hitherto by ethical scruples and human rights.

It does not necessarily require major societal breakdown for elites to gain control of state mechanisms, with the aim of turning the apparatus of government on target groups. Authoritarian governments, whether of a more 'democratic' or anti-democratic hue, have such orientations as their very *raison d'être*. Totalitarian governmental elites may operate such that hitherto 'civilized' mechanisms of the modern state apparatus are deliberately subverted for the purposes of harassing, imprisoning and possibly killing specific

groups, or even significant swathes of the population (Szokolczi, 2001). Both authoritarian and totalitarian elites engage in deliberate and systematic de-civilizing policy-based actions, that is, planned 'de-civilizing offensives', which can have intended and unintended consequences (Vertigans, 2010).

The activities of the Nazis against the Jews and other groups, which happened in not much more than a decade, are the obvious, and horrifying, example here. In Elias's (1996) magnum opus, *The Germans*, he analysed how the Nazi 'barbarization' of Germany society was one in which 'de-civilizing tendencies gained precedence over civilizing trends' (Dunning and Mennell, 1998: 352). Examined in Eliasian ways, the case of the Hitler regime indicates some wider features of de-civilizing offensives and their consequences, which could happen in other contexts. Specific targeted groups are sequestered symbolically and physically from wider society, and relieved of any legal rights by the state, which generally continues to act in 'civilized' ways towards the wider population. The social majority remain oblivious or indifferent to what is being done to the demonized minorities, especially in designated spaces of confinement, such activities being carried out in the name of 'the people'. Through means of compartmentalization and symbolic dis-identification, the 'intended victims must first be identified . . . [then] registered . . . isolated and made the object of a persistent campaign of vilification and dehumanization; hatred and loathing must be evoked against them among the population at large' (de Swaan, 2001: 268).

Meanwhile, state officials working in bureaucracies learn both to carry out such policies with ever more cultivated indifference, and also the ability to switch between an official realm of coldly processing orders, and the non-official and domestic realms of 'normal', still apparently civilized, life (de Swaan, 2001). Other state officials, tasked with the direct face-to-face handling of the despised groups, also draw upon bureaucratic procedures. Treatment of the target groups involves the systematic and controlled use of physical violence – that is, a 'civilized' deployment of de-civilized actions. One can conclude – as does Bauman (1989: 28) in his critique and extension of Elias's thinking – 'that the civilizing process is, among other things, a process of divesting the use and deployment of violence from moral calculus . . . ethical norms or moral inhibitions'. This is likely to be a feature of all 'modern' cases of genocide. To that general point, Elias's (1996) account of the Hitler regime adds the historically and culturally specific long-term factors underpinning the Nazis' de-civilizing offensives and the concomitant de-civilizing spurt of the period 1933 to 1945.

Moving towards de-civilizing dynamics in more recent history, Burkitt (1996: 302) has noted that long or lengthening networks of interdependence can lead to a loss, rather than a strengthening, of mutual identification, and thereby peaceable relationships, between groups. Thus, somewhat contrary to Elias's original formulation, it is possible in some circumstances to combine high levels of interdependence between groups with very unequal power ratios between them. This is seen in the case of the civilizing process in the USA, where a situation of high interdependency between whites and blacks goes together with high levels of social inequality. Increases in inequality can in turn have de-civilizing effects (Mennell, 2007, 2014). Wacquant (2011) attributes the de-civilizing creation of urban ghettos in the US over the last few decades to the deliberate retreat of state agencies from such locales, a development driven by neoliberal policy-makers.

This has generated de-pacified islands of violence, deep precarity, and behavioural volatility, existing as pockets within ‘civilized’ urban space. Ghetto inhabitants are penalized, incarcerated, and demonized by the state, media and wider public opinion. Spierenburg (2001) indicates the unintended consequences of enforced neoliberalization policies in the period after the collapse of the USSR, creating a de-civilizing spurt across Russia and its former satellites, both involving and being led by corrupt and authoritarian politicians and gangster capitalists. In sum, very short-term de-civilizing offensives can help to create somewhat longer-term de-civilizing spurts, which may in turn lead to much longer-term de-civilizing processes.

De-civilizing processes may also happen at the inter-state and trans-societal levels. One can detect the de-civilizing effects of the high levels of global(ized) interdependence and societal complexity which some might label neoliberal ‘globalization’. As Ampudia de Haro (2017) notes of the global financial system, which renders all national societies and the groups within them highly interdependent, ‘agents in the North such as financiers, traders and consumers may exhibit considerable “civilizing restraint”’ when it comes to their own daily conduct, ‘while simultaneously helping to inflict barbarity on peoples of the “South” through monetary relations which do little to mitigate against poverty, famine and mass disease’.

Elias’s later thoughts on inter-state and ‘global’ processes also contain indications of the de-civilizing sides of trans-societal dynamics. Confederations of states, such as the EU, are ‘less highly organized’ and ‘less well-integrated’ than sovereign nation-states, and struggle to overcome the parochialism of each member unit in favour of cultivating a higher-level and more detached (one might say ‘cosmopolitan’) set of outlooks and dispositions (Elias, 2007: 101). States will also very likely continue to fight each other and to loosen restraints on physical force when dealing with external enemies, and sometimes to tolerate, or even encourage, forms of physical brutality against such enemies, even while continuing to maintain mostly pacified social order within their own territories (Elias, 1996, 2007). Elias also noted ongoing tendencies for state elites to lack sufficient levels of ‘detachment’ that would allow them to avoid engaging in highly emotive responses to each other’s actions, leading to spirals of counter-action which can run out of control and result in increased insecurity and sometimes bloody conflict. Despite greatly increased interdependency among all nation-states today, there is no automatic connection between such a situation and increased levels of mutual understanding and peaceful inter-state relations. Indeed, increased interconnectedness could go together with or generate de-civilizing ‘counter-thrusts’ (or offensives), aimed at maintaining or augmenting national autarky, and thereby reducing tolerance for Others, internal and external, among national populations, while increasing narrowly chauvinistic frames of reference rather than more detached (cosmopolitan) orientations (Elias, 1991, 2001).

De-civilizing tendencies in the UK

I will now sketch some of the possible de-civilizing aspects of Brexit. All of them feed into each other, in complex ways that remain to be mapped in detail. They are all deeply interwoven with much broader and longer-term tendencies, especially in neoliberal discourse, policy-making, and forms of governmentality. Many of them are obviously not

confined to the UK, but rather are part of much broader globalized socio-political and socio-economic currents (Pratt, 2011). What follows is a simplification of a more complex and global reality.

Since 1979, the UK has undergone successive waves of neoliberalization, involving such phenomena as the breaking of trade union power and large-scale de-unionization of the workforce, widespread privatization of public services, and retrenchment of the welfare state. These waves (or spurts) were driven first by the policy offensives of the Thatcher governments of the 1980s, then the Conservative governments of the 1990s and 2000s, with the Labour government of the Blair and Brown years modulating neoliberalization in complicated ways (Bone, 2012). The most recent wave of policy-induced neoliberalization is widely referred to as post-2007/8 financial crisis ‘austerity’, involving the slashing of welfare, social service and local government budgets, and the retreat of the state from large swathes of British social life, at the same time as its policing and surveillance components were extended (Pratt, 2011). The apparent social effects of ‘austerity’ encompass widespread public distrust in politicians, oscillating apathy and anger in the electorate, and increasingly hostile attitudes to welfare recipients and immigrants. These all were cultivated and magnified by and through right-wing media. They are also widely understood to be constitutive of the social soil from which grew the socio-political discontent which animated the (narrow) majority Leave vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum (Goodfellow, 2019). One can construe the longer-term effects of successive neoliberal policy offensives, both before and during ‘austerity’, as a de-civilizing spurt (or series of these), building to a 40-year-old neoliberal de-civilizing process, which the Brexit referendum can both be located within, and also understood as prime expression of.

A major feature of neoliberalization is the policing of national borders, with the aim of allowing capital, elites and select key workers to flow freely across them, while severely restricting the mobility of the poor, disadvantaged and exploited, in the interests of extracting maximum profit and quiescence from both ‘native’ and ‘immigrant’ populations (Bauman, 2011). UK immigration and border-control policy has operated in line with these neoliberal diktats for several decades at least, but was notably increased in severity and harshness during the years 2010–16, when David Cameron was prime minister, and subsequent prime minister Theresa May was the minister in charge of the Home Office (the UK’s ministry of the interior). May’s drive to tighten immigration rules and explicitly to create a ‘hostile environment’ for those in the country deemed to be without the necessary paperwork, can be seen as a de-civilizing policy offensive.⁴ This was so both in terms of its symbolism – ‘foreigners’ and ‘immigrants’ rendered as objects of suspicion, as things to be processed, with a view to them being ejected from the country – and also its consequences – such as alleged widespread human rights abuses at detention centres, and non-compliance with EU and international rules and norms for those seeking asylum. The most notorious instance of such policies was the deportation of significant numbers of people of Caribbean origin, who had lived most of their lives in the UK, having arrived as children and citizens of the Commonwealth in the 1970s and earlier. Their paperwork was deemed by Home Office officialdom to be out of order (Cole, 2020). That government ministry itself had discarded landing cards proving people’s date of entry, and then required documentary evidence of this from people who

were children when they arrived. Official penalization of ‘immigrants’ was a de-civilizing policy offensive that helped cultivate a broader de-civilizing spurt, in terms of greater public hostility to those defined as ‘not British’, rising levels of reported racist crimes, and increased right-wing media denigration of migrants, who were framed as ‘benefit scroungers’ and a burden on health, social and educational services, and the (radically shrunk) public purse as a whole. This despite immigrants being net contributors to the UK economy, and a vital workforce for the very services they were alleged by politicians and propagandists to be leeching from (Goodfellow, 2019).

The de-civilizing offensive of her time as Home Secretary reached its rhetorical apotheosis when May became post-referendum prime minister, with her expressing in a now-infamous speech a few months after the referendum, in October 2016, that ‘if you believe you are a citizen of the world, you are a citizen of nowhere. You don’t understand what citizenship means’. May’s speechwriters could not have coined a pithier expression of a de-cosmopolit(an)izing political philosophy, where citizenship is rendered exclusively national, and attachments to the ‘foreign’ are regarded with deep suspicion (Democratic Audit, 2016). Although a contextual reading of the speech shows that such comments were in fact aimed primarily at the footloose ‘global elites’ of transnational capitalism, they were widely reported and publicly understood as generically ‘anti-foreigner’ in nature. They contributed to a growing sense of pessimism among citizens of EU countries remaining in the UK as to what the political and legislative contours of the country would be like once Brexit had occurred – namely, a markedly de-civilized socio-political terrain (Cole, 2020).

Brexit and de-civilization

The darkening perceptions as to the future of the post-departure UK, among both EU citizens and Remain voters, were bound up with a series of phenomena that can be understood as de-civilizing in nature and consequences. Such phenomena both expressed and contributed to what I will characterize as the *de-civilizing spurt* that has occurred in the UK, both during the referendum campaign and in the years after it. I will now outline a (non-exhaustive) list of these phenomena in the Eliasian terms indicated above, presenting them in clusters, on the understanding that they all feed into each other in complex ways requiring further elaboration.

- (1) *Reductions in levels of rationality in public discourse, plus increases in the ‘fantasy content’ found in widespread ideas and thought patterns.* The pro-Leave campaign in the referendum can be viewed as a de-civilizing offensive. The intervention in the referendum campaign of leading Brexiteer, former Murdoch journalist, and Conservative government minister Michael Gove, to the effect that ‘people in this country have had enough of experts’, has been widely publicly debated.⁵ It is often taken to be representative of a general disregard of, and disdain for, expertise and professionalism by pro-Brexit politicians, activists and supporters, primarily because most of the ‘experts’ generally were issuing dire warnings about the effects of Brexit on the economy, and so their views had to be discredited as being highly partisan (Scullion and Armon, 2018). This

disparaging of expertise was arguably underpinned by much broader currents of late-modern scepticism towards, and loss of trust in, professionals and experts of all sorts, with significant sectors of national populations turning towards 'alternative', often online, information sources, some of which, Rohloff (2008) notes, are of a de-rationalizing, and thus de-civilizing, nature.

As the referendum campaign became ever more bitterly divisive, and any hopes of consensual ways forward were lost, it accentuated a further element of de-rationalizing tendencies, namely 'a lack of maturity in considering the perspective of others, self-delusion, image-obsession, self-centeredness, and entitlement' (Scullion and Armon, 2018: 286). The campaign, and at least some public reactions to it, also exhibited the 'continuous oscillations between fear and euphoria' characteristic of a de-civilizing condition (Ampudia de Haro, 2017). Moreover, pro-Remain campaigners reported that people in some voter groups, especially those who were older and poorer, would refuse to engage in measured debate with them, instead going into angry monologues about the perceived problems of immigration, which had been explicitly linked by the Leave campaign to EU membership.⁶ This reflects Elias and Scotson's (1994) observation that the thinking of more socially insecure groups is more likely to be driven to 'extremes of illusion and rigidity' than that of more socio-economically secure groups – especially, we might add, when the thought patterns of the former are influenced by right-wing media's constantly reinforced discourses about the perils of immigration.

A common journalistic trope, apparently backed up by academic evidence, is that the pro-Leave message was framed in ways that appealed to voters susceptible to romantic notions of (primarily English) national identity and positive messages of 'regaining control'. This contrasted with the much more coldly factual and downbeat Remain campaign, based around numbers-based predictions of the economic catastrophe that Brexit would entail (Andreouli et al., 2019). The Leave campaign deployed at least one number in a more striking – and presumably ultimately successful – manner: the figure of £350 million, plastered on the side of campaign buses, that leaving the EU would allegedly save for the UK per week, which could then be spent on funding the NHS. Much derided by pro-Remain critics after the campaign as a wholly fictional figure, it nonetheless was a powerful, if irrational, rallying symbol, aimed at Brexit-friendly older voters who are dependent on the NHS, but who are also liable to understand it as a *National* Health Service, meant to serve 'us' and not 'them' (foreigners, Europeans, scrounging immigrants, etc.). In Eliasian terms, the £350 million was a condensed symbol of a 'wish fantasy', which magically resolves social problems by defining them as the fault of various Others, whose expunging from the national body-politic can afford an apparent solution to perceived crisis and dislocation (Rohloff, 2008). Mennell and Goudsblom (1998: 21–2) note that during times of marked social uncertainty – as 'austerity'-period Britain arguably was (and is), and as Weimar Germany certainly was – 'fears rise because control of social events has declined. Rising fears make it still more difficult to control events. That renders [some or many] people still more susceptible to wish fantasies about means of alleviating the situation.'

- (2) If there was a significant part of the population amenable to this sort of rhetoric and symbolism, there was also a ready supply of political figures able to provide them. This takes us to another feature of the Brexit de-civilizing condition: *the increased prevalence of ever more extreme right-wing political populism, including within the ranks of 'established' conservative political groupings, together with decreasing self-restraint by political leaders.* These are today global (de-civilizing) processes. The British/Brexit form of these can be seen in the leading Brexiteer personalities Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage (former leader of the UK Independence party, UKIP), who are both (for their followers) charismatic political leaders, as well as symbolic figures expressive of wider tendencies within the political right-wing. They each combine complex – and perhaps contradictory – mixtures of neo-nationalist and neoliberal ideas, often using the former to sell, or disguise, the latter to particular social groups.

In promising that the post-Brexit UK would be a sunlit nirvana of regained national freedom – embodied in the evocative campaign phrase ‘Take Back Control’ – both leaders are construable, in Elias’s (1996: 389) words, as ‘innovative political medicine’ men, with ‘function[s] and characteristics similar to those of a rainmaker’. They assured their audience that they ‘would give them all . . . they wanted most, just as a rainmaker promises a people threatened with hunger and thirst by a long period of drought that he will make it rain’.

This was of course Elias’s depiction of another charismatic politician who promised ‘the people’ national salvation: Adolf Hitler. The de-civilizing offensive instigated by him and his colleagues was also an exercise in creating de-civilizing offensives and thereby fomenting a de-civilizing spurt in public discourse and political culture. The constellation of UKIP activists and pro-Leave campaigners – some of the more prominent being failed or disgraced former Conservative Party politicians, who were galvanized by charismatic leadership – bear more than an accidental resemblance to ‘the majority of [National Socialist] party leaders [who] were . . . “half-educated”. They were . . . outsiders or failures in the older order, often filled with a burning ambition which made it impossible for them to bear their inadequacies’ (Elias, 1996: 315). In ways which resonate with the relations between pro-Brexit ideology and ideologues on the one side, and the social groups to whom they did and did not appeal on the other, Elias (196: 315) goes on:

The Nazi belief system with its pseudo-scientific varnish spread thinly over a primitive, barbaric national mythology was one of the more extreme symptoms of the moral and intellectual twilight in which they lived. That it could not withstand the judgement of more educated people, and with few exceptions had no appeal for them, was probably one of the reasons why such people often underestimated the seriousness of the belief itself and the genuineness of the feelings invested in it.

One might connect this insight to the widely reported phenomenon of more educated voters reacting with strong levels of disbelief and horror to the referendum result.⁷ An apparent political buffoon, and their potential appeal to large numbers of people whose

passions have been effectively roused, is often not taken seriously enough by the more socio-economically comfortable and intellectually oriented groups until it is too late to do anything to stop them.

Boris Johnson rose to win the prime ministerial job he had long coveted through a skilful – and lucky – playing of the opportunities opened to him by the Brexit political process. Johnson may be understood as simultaneously a leading instigator of the Brexit de-civilizing offensive and as expressive of wider de-civilizing tendencies. The latter may involve in political (and other forms of) life, the lowering of shame thresholds, plus the foregrounding of, and increasing tolerance by peers and publics alike towards unhindered and undisguised narcissistic personalities who are, literally, ‘shameless’ and applauded by their supporters as such (Scullion and Armon, 2018). In such a context, policy-making becomes ever ‘more impulsive. Rather than the product of long-term planning and research, it is increasingly likely to be developed in response to exceptional cases that are then seen as “the norm”’ (Pratt, 2011: 233). This seems to fit with Johnson’s reputation as an erratic decision-maker, whether as mayor of London or as prime minister.

It has been widely alleged that Johnson’s decision to head up the Leave campaign was driven not by deep conviction but by complete opportunism. In a highly neoliberalized socio-economic context, where ‘flexibility’ and short-termism are cultural dominants, politics and other domains become more subject to tendencies of ‘discontinuous reinvention’ (Sennett, 2007). This helps to create a political culture where previous political commitments are ignored in favour of the immediate moment. This is a situation of constant reinvention, where it seemingly does not matter that ‘a leader purports to believe in something one week and in a counter-belief the week after’. Thus, ‘when those in positions of high office show little self-restraint, and sufficient numbers of the populace do n[o]t care, the norms democracy depends on are vulnerable to “charlatan” leaders and populist causes’ (Scullion and Armon, 2018: 287), whether that be in 1933, 2016, now, or in the future. The caprices of the leaders, rather than careful forward planning by professionals, become the dominant political mode, another element in the de-rationalization of the public sphere.

For such leaders, and especially those from elite backgrounds such as Johnson, the great apparent distance between their policy choices and rhetorical positions on the one hand, and the societal consequences of these on the other, promotes indifference to those consequences (Bauman, 1993). What a political leadership does has all sorts of effects down the long and complicated chains of social interdependence, both within and without the nation-state’s territory. Thus the ‘structural difficulty in establishing a cause–effect pattern of responsibility is too often used to shrink, disguise or escape from legal [or moral] responsibility for offenses, frauds and reckless [choices that have] an impact’ on other people in multiple ways (Ampudia de Haro, 2017: n.p.). It is therefore not surprising that populist politicians – who are living in material comfort, are socialized within elites living at great social distance from lower social groups, are lacking empathy for those less fortunate than themselves, but whose political life depends on galvanizing significant disaffected sectors of the populace – regard politics as a game without ‘real’ consequences, at least for them. When capricious, ‘trickster’-like figures are in charge of a polity, there is high likelihood of further de-rationalization of public discourse and policy-formation.⁸

- (3) Political decisions do have consequences, including the effects of de-civilizing offensives. One such is *increased levels of demonization and scapegoating of targeted groups*. Again, this is a tendency that is global, and in the western European context pre-dates Brexit by several decades at least. Over that time there has been ‘a discernible shift in civilising projects from indigenous to immigrant populations; a civilising offensive based on an “imagined” national identity and a reframing of what constitutes . . . [national] citizenship’ (Powell, 2013: 9).

Politicians, journalists, and other ideologues work to disseminate folk devils – scrounging or criminal immigrants, fake asylum-seekers – thereby dehumanizing ever wider circles of people, from traditionally targeted groups (visible minorities like blacks and Muslims), outwards to those previously partly included in the national we-group but now cast into the category of ‘outsiders’. In post-referendum political, journalistic, and online discourses, ‘outsiders’ now more strongly than hitherto includes white ‘Europeans’, and not just more obviously despised ones such as poor Romanian immigrant workers, but also increasingly bourgeois people of the higher-status northern and western countries of the EU (Goodfellow, 2019). The current Home Office scheme to identify and classify as legally or illegally resident all EU citizens remaining in the UK puts for the first time both more privileged and more disadvantaged groups in the same category of Otherhood, creating an entity comprising several millions of people who will be subject to second-class status in relation to ‘genuine’ British citizens (Scambler, 2020). The legal reclassification of ‘Europeans’, rendering them all as Others, reflects the fact that in governmental parlance being *British* means being *not-European*.

This situation both feeds on and extends decreasing levels of mutual identification between (at least some sectors of) the ‘established’ population – those whose passions were particularly ignited by the referendum campaign – and those now deemed ‘outsiders’. The tendency in such cases historically is towards ever more punitive measures against the out-group, increasingly depriving them of rights and privileges. This involves types of de-civilizing offensives that the Home Office was already well equipped to carry out (Vertigans, 2010). One may also expect the journalistic outriders of right-wing politicians to identify and accentuate what Elias and Scotson (1994) called the ‘minority of the worst’, namely in this case specific Europeans caught in deviant or criminal acts, their perfidy presented as expressive of their group as a whole. White (and other ethnic) Europeans are likely to find themselves represented in ways that European Muslim populations have already become familiar with.

- (4) Perhaps the most obvious feature of de-civilization is the (re)appearance of open verbal and physical intimidation, and physical violence in public spaces, running in tandem with discursive and symbolic forms of violence in media, online, and everyday interactions (Pratt, 2011). There has been a notable increase in reports of victimization of EU citizens since the referendum, taking both physical and verbal forms.⁹ Right-wing media talk of (allegedly) liberal, metropolitan, cosmopolitan elite Remainers being traitors to ‘the nation’ by seeking to stop Brexit runs alongside and feeds into the encouragement of violent political extremism. The murder of the Remain-campaigning Labour MP Jo Cox during the referendum campaign,

by a man with far-right and pro-Brexit sympathies, is just the most spectacular instance of the cultural climate of fear and intimidation faced by those publicly committed to the EU. The relative failure of attempts by Remainer moral entrepreneurs to achieve wide public acceptance of the idea of Jo Cox as a cosmopolitan martyr, indicates the power of right-wing media to influence strongly who gets to stand as a moral icon in Brexit Britain (Inglis, 2018).

- (5) There is also an observable tendency towards *decreased respect for the rule of law*. The Brexit-oriented current government explicitly seeks to abolish the presence of European human rights legislation in UK statute books, with a concomitant opening up of possibilities for various human rights abuses, such as arbitrary detentions of EU and national citizens, and arbitrary preventions of EU citizens crossing into the country by the UK border authorities (Yuval-Davis et al., 2018). The declining level of protection of citizens of all backgrounds as a result of Brexit raises the possibility that the most important question surrounding Brexit is less what happens *when the UK withdraws from the EU*, but rather what transpires – in the guise of the presence within the British nation-state of the European legal apparatus, guaranteeing certain rights and freedoms – *when the EU leaves the UK*?
- (6) With the rights of its citizens lacking sound guarantees, the actors who run the EU are increasingly likely to look askance at the de-civilizing tendencies gathering pace within the UK. This points to phenomena Elias engaged with in his later work: *deteriorating relations between neighbouring governmental elites* (and possibly national populations too). Elias (2010) analysed the Cold War stand-off between the superpowers as involving a set of inter-state de-civilizing trends. One may discern in Elias's diagnosis some possible elements of the future EU–UK relationship: decreasing amounts of mutual identification and sympathy, and increased levels of distrust, back-stabbing and emotionally charged thinking, characterized by rumours, conspiracies and wild imaginings. The EU was in large part intended to make another European war impracticable and unthinkable. It is still somewhat unlikely that the post-Brexit UK and the EU will be pulled into military conflagration, their rancorous relationship more likely being characterized by the rhetorically bellicose, but pragmatically pacific, constellation of behaviours that Elias and Dunning (1986) located in international sporting events. Nonetheless, in the post-Brexit world (dis)order, anything is eventually possible, including de-pacifying trends that may in the long-term create a 21st-century version of earlier forms of European inter-state military rivalry, with all the barbarizing consequences that those have entailed.

Conclusion

This article has examined a series of Brexit-related phenomena through the prism of the Elias-inspired notion of de-civilizing dynamics, both short-term and deliberate offensives, somewhat longer-term spurts, and unplanned longer-term processes. There are several potential benefits to looking at such matters in this way: (a) diverse empirical phenomena are made sense of through a unifying conceptual apparatus, allowing them to be systematically related to each other; (b) a focus on de-civilizing phenomena

complements analysis of Brexit as involving de-cosmopolit(an)izing trends, of the sort gestured to by Beck (2002); (c) an Elias-inspired approach emphasizes the processual nature of Brexit phenomena, allowing us to locate them historically, in terms of factors that variously preceded, happened during, and occurred in the immediate aftermath of, the Brexit referendum. This approach also allows us to look towards a possible longer-term de-civilizing process in the UK.


The immediate future probably includes the accentuation of existing de-civilizing tendencies and the appearance of new ones. One such factor could be the rise of a new (neo-)fascist political entity, either a new party or an extreme faction within the Conservatives or (what remains of) UKIP. This may come to enjoy significant popular support, primarily in England and Wales, as parts of the population come to be radically disillusioned with the unfulfilled, and unfulfillable, promises made by the Brexiteers, and as that disaffection is channelled by ideologues against 'Europe', EU citizens in the UK, and 'migrants' in general. This is made more likely within a social order unsettled by the Covid-19 pandemic and governmental handling of it. If an avowedly fascist party comes to prominence, with a charismatic leader given ample media coverage, then Eliasian sociology, especially the diagnosis offered in *The Germans* (Elias, 1996), will be more relevant than ever. Current political events in the USA are also suggestive of an 'American' set of de-civilizing tendencies with some similarities to the UK case (Mennell, 2014).

Future Elias-inspired analyses of the multiple consequences of Brexit must also turn to re-civilizing and re-cosmopolit(an)izing phenomena and counter-trends, which may come from at least two directions: first, younger people, especially the large proportion with university degrees, whose socio-political affiliations are widely agreed to be more Europhiliac and more generally 'cosmopolitan' than those of their elders; second, the significantly cosmopolitan and pro-EU nationalist movement in Scotland, and the nascent non-sectarian movement in Northern Ireland, which makes the conjoining of the two political entities in the island of Ireland at least plausible. In these cases, political arguments are being made about the UK eventually turning back towards 'Europe' and its cosmopolitan ideals of peace and civility, and of nations leaving the UK altogether, in order to achieve similar aims, through the apparently paradoxical means of cosmopolitan nationalism. Eliasian sociology can now play a major role in analysing these dynamics.

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Notes

1. There are possible pitfalls involved in applying Eliasian concepts to contemporary, emergent, constantly evolving, and controversial phenomena:

- (a) Elias was 'explicit in stating that shifts in social norms and behaviour only become evident over a long historical period', so it is unclear whether de-civilizing processes are at work in relatively short time-frames (Powell and Flint, 2009: 166). Conversely, both civilizing and de-civilizing offensives and spurts are relatively easily identifiable, because of their shorter time-scales and clear connections to political initiatives. As Elias (1996) himself investigated these phenomena in 1930s Germany, there is a clear warrant at least to apply the concepts of offensives and spurts to shorter-term socio-political dynamics, such as Brexit currently is. Only time will tell if Brexit is eventually part of, and helps to generate, a markedly longer-term de-civilizing process.
 - (b) Eliasian sociology is meant to take a coolly distanced, and certainly non-party political, stance towards events (Kilminster, 2007). This positioning may be taken to be in contradiction to the explicitly critical approach to Brexit adopted here. However, Elias's (1996) study of 19th- and early 20th-century Germany also 'takes sides', standing against Prussian militarism and Nazi barbarity. His later work (Elias, 2010) was intended to contribute to the cultivation of increased human self-understanding, and thereby to more peaceful inter-state relations. In both cases, there is distinctive socio-political 'engagement' informing long-term historical-sociological analysis, a stance that I take inspiration from here.
2. For the possible (re-)civilizing effects of fantasy, see Stiegler (2003).
 3. For critical assessment of how different elements of de-civilizing processes may or may not run in tandem, see van Krieken (1999).
 4. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/apr/26/theresa-may-go-home-vans-operation-vaken-ukip>
 5. See: <https://www.chathamhouse.org/expert/comment/michael-gove-trouble-experts>
 6. See: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/may/23/vote-leave-campaign-fear-brexite-referendum>
 7. See: <https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/why-remainers-were-shocked-by-the-referendum-result-but-leavers-less-so>
 8. See: <https://www.britsoc.co.uk/about/latest-news/2018/june/brexit/>
 9. See: <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/brexit-hate-crime-racism-immigration-eu-referendum-result-what-it-means-eurospectic-areas-a7165056.html>

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