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## **STATE, SUBJECT AND THE TRAUMATIC EFFECTS OF THE CIVILIZATION**

We are accustomed to using the words “individual” and “society” to refer to autonomous, independent entities. We could, for example, think of a person as an isolated human being, self-contained, and of society as a structure that goes beyond the level of individuals, relating only to what belongs to everyone and is for everyone. In this sense, the mind, the body and society would be separate from each other and there would be no involvement between them. We sometimes think of these words as referring to completely different things. Within this logic of exclusion, in which we take on one side of the equation, *either* the individual *or* society, the tendency is to treat either one of these two elements as if it were the whole picture.

A society is made up of individuals, who constitute and who are constituted by society. A city is inhabited by citizens. At the root of the relationship between the individual and society lies the human body. The only way to think about this relationship is via the body and its occupation of space. Just as public spaces situate the places occupied by the bodies of individuals, bodies also circumscribe various other territories. Thus, social structures are determined not only by individuals, but also by their bodies and everything that they involve, namely, feelings and drives.

In Brazil public spaces like squares, neighbourhoods and streets are constructed via political acts of inclusion and exclusion. Bodies are the targets of violent acts perpetrated by the State and by society. That is to say, certain public spaces are appropriated only by people who belong to a single social class. Thus, the institutions that should ensure equality for all citizens and facilitate civilized co-existence in a given community, identify in the bodies of individuals the features that determine whether they are included (the establishment) or excluded (outsiders). Consequently, feelings of competitiveness, hatred and fear are generated between individuals. The civilizing pact between the individual and society, therefore, is not harmonious, but rather characterised by antagonisms, conflicts and rivalries.

In this paper my aim is to discuss the impact on the relationship between the individual and society when this relationship is challenged by a destructive situation. If social ties are rooted in the body, what happens to the body when there is a breakdown in the relationships between the individual and society? Situations of extreme violence fracture the relationship between the individual and society, causing a re-configuration of this relationship. What are the effects on society and what are the consequences for individuals when the civilizing pact is ruptured? Do these effects manifest themselves in the body? These questions will be considered from the starting point of a dialogue between the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud and the sociology of Norbert Elias.

Despite the fact that Freud and Elias are theoreticians from different areas, they share many points of view. For both of them the body, the individual and society are terms that should be correlated with each other. In other words, the subjectivity of individuals is constituted via different symbolic marks that society inscribes on their bodies. A person is born into a complex network of social relationships. The parents' wishes constitute a symbolic place where their children become subjects; society provides the individual with a means of being autonomous in his relationships with others; and the State provides the conditions of equality necessary to pursue a freer existence.

Civilization from the individual from his state of physical vulnerability and psychic helplessness and protects him within social institutions. It provides the individual with a symbolic place via the formation of ties with his peers. However, situations of extreme violence have consequences for the autonomous and collective dimensions of individuals, that is, they destroy their place and their social relationships. "The annihilation of the citizen entails the annihilation of the subject" (Endo 2005). Consequently the individual is forced to produce new subjective configurations in order to avoid descending into a state of barbarism or total destruction.

Let us now consider how the sociologist Norbert Elias interprets the outbreak of violent situations within the relationship between the individual and society. Born in 1897, in a town that is now part of Poland, Elias lived to be 93 years of age. Born into a Jewish family, in 1935 he was forced to seek exile in England. Elias personally experienced the horrors of the Second World War, since his mother was murdered in the gas chambers of Auschwitz.

Throughout his work, Elias researched the effects of civilizing processes on the relationship between societies and individuals. His main thesis, developed in the book *The Civilizing Process*, deals with the connection between the development of social structures and the changes in the structure of personality. When society changes, the possibilities for establishing subjective identities also change. According to Elias, throughout the history of social relationships, there is been an alteration in the balance of the relationship between the individual and society,

especially when the levels of violence and aggression increase. For example, the shift from a feudal, warlike society to the monopoly of violence in the hands of modern States, led to the pacification of social ties. But all this happens at the expense of the internalization of violence in the form of the self-control that each individual imposes on their impulses, their bodies and their habits.

In the view of Elias, influenced by the psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud, civilization is constituted by individuals abandoning the desire to satisfy some of their impulses. "Civilization has its price" (Flechner 1997: 56). This means that the civilizing process transfers to the sphere of private life behaviour and emotions that can no longer be expressed in the public sphere. "The battlefield has been transferred, in some sense, to within the individual" (Elias 2012: 203). Everything concerning the body must be banished from the eyes of others. The civilizing process establishes, behind the scenarios of individuals' daily lives, situations that were formerly outward-facing. As a result, individuals come into conflict not just with other people but also with themselves and their own bodies.

The civilizing process has modified the relationship between individuals and society over time. It has increased the identification between individuals and rendered more complex the network of interdependencies. With the imposition of self-control, the threshold of shame and embarrassment with regard to habits that have become socially prohibited has also increased. Also as a consequence of the civilizing process, individuals have become more capable of predicting the behaviour of others, in the sense that they can now identify a dangerous situation with greater foresight. Viewed over a long period of time, social relations have become more harmonious and controllable. But the price of this has been paid by the body.

Nevertheless, the development of civilization is not a linear process, but is rather achieved via confrontations with de-civilizing processes. As Elias states, "the civilization that I am referring to is never complete, and is always under threat. It is endangered because the safe-guarding of the most civilized patterns of behaviour and sentiment in society depends on specific conditions" (Elias 2005: 161). That is to say, the civilizing process is not achieved without some retrograde steps. We encounter extreme moments of the de-civilizing process when situations of violence predominate that sever the ties between the individual and society. The theory of the civilizing process has had to be reformulated in order to include barbarism as an effect of civilization.

Some of the possible symptoms caused when civilization goes backwards and heads in the opposite direction. The de-civilizing process: i) severs links between people; ii) shortens chains of interdependency; iii) increases the level of danger, violence and cruelty in the public sphere; iv) reduces identifications, reduces the pressures that control impulses; v) reduces the patterns of difference between children and adults; vi) aggression expresses itself more freely (Mennell 1990).

What are the effects of the de-civilizing process on the bodies of individuals? Freud can help us answer this question.

Sigmund Freud, a Jewish neurologist, died in 1939, but he also experienced the horrors of the war. He was obliged to seek exile in England and his two sisters were murdered in Nazi concentration camps. It was the First World War, however, that first roused Freud from the illusion of civilization, leading to his disillusionment. Freud wrote that a war “disregards all the restrictions known as International Law, which in peace-time the states had bound themselves to observe (...). It tramples in blind fury on all that comes in its way as though there were to be no future and no peace among men after it is over. It cuts all the common bonds between the contending peoples, and threatens to leave a legacy of embitterment that will make any renewal of those bonds impossible for a long time to come.” (Freud 2003a: 315). Wars no longer served to show the effects of the progress of civilization.

Freud’s clinic was affected by the war via its patients, particularly the former soldiers, who arrived there with symptoms that he termed traumatic neuroses. Themes like death, repetition, violence, destruction and aggression came to be considered as part of the human condition. Let us consider how Freud deals with the theme of violence in relation to subjectivity.

The human being is born into a state of physical and psychic helplessness. He depends on another individual to satisfy his impulses and needs and in order to situate himself subjectively in a given place in the world. Gradually the individual establishes identifications with his peers and introjects aspects of these experiences into his own personality. This results in the formation of the ego and the super-ego, psychic apparatus that protect the individual from his helplessness.

Furthermore, we live by a universal symbolic law that protects individuals against acts of violence perpetrated by others. The State and society, analogously to the ego and the super-ego, protect the individual via the civilizing pacts established with his peers. However, the state of helplessness remains as a mark of the psychic apparatus. In a situation of extreme violence, in which social ties are severed, the individual is returned to this place of psychic helplessness, and has to cope alone with the high intensity of violence that affects his mind and body. The symptoms that result from a traumatic situation stem from a lack of psychic preparedness, because the individual’s mind is not ready to react to experiences of intense violence.

Civilization must protect individuals from the impulses to destroy social ties. We are protected by a universal symbolic law that obliges us to give up some of our desires in order to establish a connection with others. Within the legal framework, this law regulates relationships between members of a given society. For the civilizing pact to be feasible, both individuals and nation-States must give up

the power of privileges. We should all be subject to a universal law that balances the scales so that they are not tipped in favour of either of the parties within the individual-society relationship. But when a situation of violence fractures this relationship, it is the body, as a fundamental element of this relationship, which ends up being affected.

As previously stated, the ego and the super-ego function as psychic apparatus that protect the individual from destruction, transforming impulses that come from within and external forces. However, in a situation of violence, the amount of energy that affects the individual externally acts as a force for destruction, fracturing the possibility of the individual representing this violent event. The ego is not capable of producing psychic associations to deal with the intensity of the traumatic violence.

Freud, in an exchange of correspondence with the physicist Albert Einstein, for example, commits himself not to accept violence that annihilates social ties. In 1932 (Freud 2003b), on the eve of a situation in which barbarism will overpower civilization, Freud presents us with a question, without however providing an answer: what are the psychic effects of a situation in which entities that serve to regulate human violence are not in evidence?

Situations of war or extreme violence rupture the apparatus that protects the individual and society, fracturing the civilizing pact of social ties. The State, instead of providing protection and citizenship, violates the rights of individuals and subjects them to the threat of death, to the annihilation of the possibilities of individuals establishing themselves as subjects. State violence destroys memory, public places, and the spaces of social circulation, all of which enable the individual to become an autonomous subject within a collective history.

This violence that affects the individual becomes traumatic because it eliminates his sources of protection. A tyrannical State that ruptures the civilizing pact strips the relationship between the individual and society down to its very foundations, that is, to the body. The psychic, then, shifts from the symbolic to the corporeal domain. The ego alone can no longer deal with the intensity coming from the external world. It thus returns to its primordial state of unpreparedness. In the face of such excess, the ego is left in complete physical and psychic helplessness. It is incapable of finding symbolic representations to process the events it is presented with. Paralyzed by the violence that it is abruptly confronted with, without the necessary readiness and protection to react, the ego can only seek to rebuild itself via the body.

Subjects are reduced to the body's ability to survive. The violated ego loses its autonomy and becomes a slave to a traumatic situation that it cannot control. In the face of the impossibility of resolving an external conflict that it cannot escape from, the ego turns in on itself. "In terror, taken by surprise, the powerless ego leans on the body, as if it were a literal version of itself" (Endo 2005: 89).

The ego embodies itself, transmitting the psychic suffering to the body via the production of symptoms.

Pain in the body is a way of reconstructing oneself, of inscribing this alien and unrepresentable violence. It transforms the external problem into a corporeal problem and recreates, via symptoms, some kind of possible representation of that violence. It is now the violated body's turn to take on the responsibility for re-establishing the ego intact. It is a body displaying symptoms that manifests traumatic violence within itself. An illness providing a cure.

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## Summary

### State, subject and the traumatic effects of the civilization

This article aims to provide a discussion between the Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and Norbert Elias's sociological work on the subject of violence as a paradoxical element of the constitution and the disruption of the relationship between individual and society. According to Freud, civilization discontents determine that the cultural bases are held in an individual's conflict with the body, the external world and the others. The subject of violence is also found in Norbert Elias's work. Violence emerges from the pact rupture between state and individual and destroys the ability of the citizen to become a person.

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What are the implications for the psychic economy and social structures in the face of an emergency situation of violence in the public sphere? The paradoxical relationship between violence and civilization, articulated by Norbert Elias to the civilizing process, provides us with elements to answer Freud, when the psychoanalyst questions the implications caused by institutions that should give protection to individuals.