Introduction to the Special Issue of *Human Figurations* on Civilising Offensives

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This collection of papers explores the intellectual origins and continuing relevance of the theoretical concept of the 'civilising offensive'. It seeks to stimulate further inquiry and encourage comparative analyses and theoretical syntheses. The term was first coined in Dutch in the late 1970s as *het burgerlijk beschavingsoffensief* (De Rooy 1979) – the bourgeois civilising offensive – in reference to nineteenth century, middle-class attempts at improving the lot of the lower classes (both within western nation states and of native indigenous populations during the projects of imperial colonisation) and 'raising them' to a higher, civilised standard of conduct (see Kruithof; de Regt in this issue).

The concept and term gained traction in the Netherlands in the 1980s – a time when Norbert Elias was hugely influential among Dutch historians and social scientists – and the concept was utilised in a range of historical and contemporary studies which explored the relationship between different social groups whereby one (more powerful) group embarked on a targeted project aimed at 'civilising' the behaviour of another (less powerful) group (De Regt 1984; Mitzman 1987; Verrips 1987; van Ginkel 1996). The centrality of group dynamics in understanding civilising offensives has also led to the concept's synthesis with Elias's theory of established–outsider relations within Dutch research (Verrips 1987; van Ginkel 1996). While some studies cite the benevolent intentions of civilising offensives (Kruithof 1980) other scholars point to their pernicious or barbaric effects on popular and minority culture (Mitzman 1987; van Krieken 1999), or their relative ambivalence (Fletcher 1997; Powell 2007) often related to shifting balances of power within the civilising process. More recently the concept has been used in studying the Dutch state's response to immigration with a particular focus on Muslim populations, for example (Uitermark and Duyvendak 2008). Within the Netherlands *beschavingsoffensief* is now a well-established term used in everyday parlance, although its origins and original meaning have been somewhat blurred by its everyday, media and political usage (see De Regt, this issue).

The concept has also been disseminated beyond the Netherlands and attention towards it has gradually increased in the UK and other western countries (Powell 2013). For instance, the concept was taken up to great effect by Robert van Krieken in his analysis of the 'stolen generation' of indigenous Australians, an account which highlights the barbarity of both civilising offensives and civilisation itself. Steven Pinker (2011) also attributed the 'taming' of the American 'Wild West' to a civilising offensive influenced by religion, temperance and the women's movement in his recent and influential book, *The Better Angels of our Nature*. The concept has also been synthesized alongside the work of Foucault (see van Ginkel; de Regt this issue),

notions of moral panic (Rohloff 2011), Cas Wouters' informalisation thesis (Flint and Powell 2011) and Wacquant's theory of 'advanced marginality' (Rodger 2012).

While this scholarship has made important advances, these contributions have, to date, been somewhat piecemeal and further limitations have arisen from blurred links to Elias's civilisation theory, language barriers and disciplinary boundaries. There has therefore been a distinct lack of comparative work and cross-national dialogue up to now, which has hindered the development, critique and refinement of the concept. The aim of this special issue is to bring together an interdisciplinary, international and inter-generational group of scholars who have engaged with the civilising offensive in various ways to assess its continued relevance in understanding historical *and* contemporary social processes and group relations characterised by unequal power balances. Implicit within this is an attempt to problematise and nuance the concept in order to move beyond the over-simplistic conceptualisation of civilising offensives as elite, moralising projects targeted at the 'uncivilised' lower classes; and to link the concept back to Elias's civilisation theory. The papers that follow represent a diverse collection of writings and applications of the concept: from its origins and development in the Netherlands to attempts to civilise children; and from class-based civilising missions through to the governance of professional cycling.

In the first paper **Bernard Kruithof** explores the birth of the concept from its first use in 1979. Elaborating on his application of the concept to the activities of the Dutch Society for the Public Benefit in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, he shows how the propagation of 'civil engagement, solidarity and patriotism' were combined with a concern for domesticity and education in attempts at inculcating lasting habits in the lower classes and building national unity. His analysis of The Society's activities highlights the history of civilising endeavours in the Netherlands linked to the development of a middle-class national habitus in opposition to the habits and 'popular mentalities' (Mitzman 1987) of the lower classes. While the middle-classes were receptive to the behavioural standards and expectations disseminated by The Society, the lower classes were less enamoured. Crucially, however, Kruithof maintains that the civilising offensive continued through 'peaceful means and persuasion' via the promotion of domesticity and education, rather than a more coercive approach.

Complementing Kruithof's article, **Ali de Regt** details the intellectual origins of the concept and how its use spread from historical analyses, primarily focused on the nineteenth century, to more contemporary applications. At the same time the concept passed from a sociological to a moralising one as it was disseminated to the wider Dutch public, politicians and the media with its meaning changing in the process: the aspect of self-control, so central to the sociological concept, is often lost in everyday use and the concept takes on a more moralistic character. Analysing its popular use since the 1990s, de Regt shows how the concept was linked to all kinds of perceived contemporary social evils relating to indecency, violence, vandalism, hooliganism, rudeness and general inconsiderate behaviours within public spaces. She argues for the continuing relevance and usefulness of the civilising offensive in understanding the interventions in the lives of certain groups, but only when the concept is understood in its original sociological terms and linked to Elias's civilisation theory.

In the third paper, **Stephen Vertigans** focuses on policies towards children in residential care as part of a wider, longer-term civilising offensive targeted at young outsiders and anti-social behaviour. He points to the ambivalence and contradictions of policies in which 'individual developmental interventions are being implemented alongside the wider imposition of punitive measures'. For Vertigans, attempts to control and contain have served to reinforce boundaries and demonise young people in care, rather than foster their integration, with a resulting reduction in levels of empathy and an increase in spatial and dispositional barriers between the established and young outsiders. Punitive approaches informed by fears over moral

decline and welfare dependency have therefore contributed to a middle-class detachment from children and young people in care, both spatially and psychologically (see also van Ginkel in this issue).

Staying with the theme of childhood socialisation, **Paddy Dolan** focuses on the changing balances between civilising processes and offensives through an historical analysis of primary school education in Ireland from the mid-nineteenth century. He shows how the nature and tone of civilising offensives aimed at children changes as the status of the child rises and the expectations of teachers shift towards nurturing the 'release of a unique self'. Dolan situates these changes within broader unplanned social processes developing over generations which increased the social distance between childhood and adulthood. Through this example, he cautions that an over-emphasis on civilising offensives at the expense of civilising processes means the loss of much of the explanatory power of figurational sociology.

Next **Matt Clement** frames the Ridley Plan of the UK Thatcher Government as an explicit civilising offensive designed to decivilise the working class. He argues that policies arising from the Ridley Plan were intended to degrade the Trade Union movement in a bid to weaken the industrial classes, strengthen the bourgeoisie and pave the way for labour market deregulation and neoliberal economic policies. In this sense Clement marks these developments out as particularly important in understanding the current economic crisis and modes of neoliberal governance.

Rob Van Ginkel explores Dutch civilising offensives and asks whether the intention was and is to uplift or to contain? In contrast to Kruithof's historical account, he details how policies directed at the 'socially weak' have been characterised by both coercive and softer approaches over time with the re-emergence of more punitive, marginalising interventions of containment from the mid-1990s. Drawing on historical examples from the Netherlands, van Ginkel argues that the good intentions of the 'civilisers' often led to stigmatisation and spatial marginalisation and were more about disciplining than enlightening. He suggests the 'need to take into account the tension between coercion and consent when applying the concept of civilising offensive'.

John Connolly examines the civilising offensive of cycling authorities and states enacted against professional cyclists from the 1960s onwards with regard to the use of stimulants and 'doping' within the sport. With attention to the class dynamics associated with the development of the sport and its professionalisation Connolly details a resistance to the civilising offensive among cyclists. The slow and uneven penetration of the habitus of professional cyclists is attributable to the strength of mutual identification and solidarity among them alongside a 'fractured monopoly apparatus for doping prevention'. Connolly shows how the mutual suffering and interdependencies of cyclists are central in understanding their resistance to the civilising offensive. That is, 'how certain aspects of the habitus develop and endure to such an extent that the individual habitus resists, moderates and prevents the internalisation of constraints associated with civilising offensives'.

To conclude the special issue **Stephen Mennell** discusses the distinction between civilisation in the 'emic' and 'etic' sense, derived from anthropology, before applying this to some reflections on the potential for 'decivilising offensives': where the goal pursued represents a tilting of the balance *back* from *Selbstzwang* towards *Fremdzwang*. He discusses four possible candidates for the term 'decivilising offensive': genocides; the Stalinist civilising process; right-wing economic policy; and informalisation and provocation.

The papers, as a collective body of work, demonstrate the continuing value and promise of the civilising offensive as a theoretical, analytical and empirical concept. They also illustrate the importance of international and interdisciplinary studies, across a range of social and policy fields, and the inherent relationships between historical and contemporary studies. While each paper is specific in terms of its scope, subject and its analytical and normative framework, the papers combine to suggest that future research agendas on the civilising offensive should continue to be pursued.

Acknowledgements

Note

1. For an insightful and reflective summary of that event see Terry Wassall's blog:
   http://terrywassall.org/2013/11/24/civilising-offensives-what-i-learnt/
   [http://terrywassall.org/2013/11/24/civilising-offensives-what-i-learnt/] ⬆ [#N1-ptr1]

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