

When European Studies Meets The American Civilizing Process: A Short Tribute to Stephen J. Menzell

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Abstract: *This paper proposes a comparative reading of Stephen Menzell's book *The American Civilizing Process* (2007) and of some major texts from the Norbert Elias's political sociology. It is based on personal teaching experience of using this corpus with students in the humanities and law since 2013 in the framework of a course entitled 'Historical Sociology of European Integration'. The author aims to highlight three dimensions that are innovatively explored in Stephen Menzell's book and which help to improve the understanding of European political development. The first point concerns the benefits of comparison in a long-term comprehensive approach. The second is related to the sociological treatment of political theories and ideas that is proposed by Stephen Menzell in his book and which should be transposed into the political sociology of the European Union, which too often counterposes apologetics and Eurosceptic perspectives about the European project. Finally, *The American Civilizing Process* proposes and explicitly assumes a critical perspective on the politics of the United States that also may inspire political reflections on contemporary European politics.*

Keywords: *Stephen Menzell, Norbert Elias, American and European Civilizing Processes, Historical and Comparative Sociology, European Studies, Sociology of the European Union*

Prologue: on (re-)commendation

I have learned the English word 'commendation' only very recently. I was then writing my paper for the 'Social character and historical processes' conference in honour of Stephen Menzell that took place in the so deliciously *retro* Newman House, at University College Dublin in January 2016. Anyway, I had already decided to seize the opportunity of this conference to give a modest speech as a token of gratitude, a tribute paper to our friend and colleague Stephen Menzell. I wanted to do so not only because Stephen had written several recommendation letters for me, one of three pages, which made me 'sound like God's gift to Belgian science' in Stephen's kindly teasing words. Seriously, I wanted to thank him more broadly for always being a model for me, a constant source of inspiration, humanely and intellectually, since we met fifteen years ago at a conference in Rennes thanks to his long-term (!) partner Eric Dunning. ^[1]_[#N1] The reader will perhaps find my attitude 'fan-ish and girly', but I definitely accept it. After all, (relatively) young ladies are not (yet) a majority among the *Figurati*, and Stephen took one of the best pictures of me ever. ^[2]_[#N2]

In Dublin, I thus decided to talk about Stephen Menzell's own 'big book', that is to say *The American Civilizing Process*. In what follows, I am sharing the reading of the book that I have already proposed to the Dublin audience and I am submitting to my readers some major points that I wanted to put forward. I am building on a comparative reading of the book and some of the major texts of Norbert Elias's political

sociology (or sociology of the political), notably the *magnum opus* *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012 [1939]), *The Germans* (1996), and ‘Changes in the ‘We-I’ Balance’ (2010 [1987]). I am also inspired by my teaching experience at the Université Saint-Louis in Bruxelles, where I used to read passages of the book with the students in the framework of a lecture entitled ‘*Sociologie historique de l’intégration européenne*’ (Historical Sociology of European Integration).

A pedagogical approach

In 2010, I was invited to write a critical review of *The American Civilizing Process* for the *Revue française de science politique* and of course I accepted (Delmotte 2011). A few months later, due to my new permanent position at the university (thanks to Stephen’s letters), I had the opportunity to propose a course in accordance with my research themes. I chose to call it ‘*Sociologie historique de l’intégration européenne*’ and immediately thought about the role I could give to Stephen’s book as a kind of both methodological and political conclusion for these lectures. Of course, I had some small problems: first and foremost with some historians among my colleagues, a minority of whom do not always easily accept that non-historians can talk about history. Secondly, I met with scepticism from some in-house sociologists, as I’m not a sociologist. Thirdly, the lecture takes place in a programme that aims to prepare students for European studies, and I am not really a specialist in EU history, nor an expert on the EU political system and its institutions. But for the fourth year in 2015–16, I have been trying to initiate my students to the socio-historical approach of the political (or, to put it better, to an historico-sociological approach to the political). More precisely, I encourage them to ‘test’ this approach in the field of long-term European political integration processes.

Briefly, the lecture is divided into three parts. The first theoretical part is about the history of the disciplines, origins and methods of historical sociology [3][#N3] from Alexis de Tocqueville and Karl Marx in the nineteenth century through to the quarrels between sociologists, historians and political scientists in the twentieth century. The second part analyses classical texts and new classics, from Norbert Elias to Stefano Bartolini (2005), on Europe’s political development from the emergence of the modern states at the end of the Middle Ages. The third and last part deals with current historiographical and political debates, for instance, on the comparative issue for historical sociology in general, or about the comparison between European and United States political development, democracy and legitimacy models. That is of course how we came to read passages from Stephen’s book and papers from the book (Mennell 2010).

At first, *The American Civilizing Process* disconcerts students a little bit, just like the lecture course itself and the very (excessively?) ‘theoretical’ approach I offer. It is true that the majority of students are not from sociology or even from political science; they are also students of law, journalism, literature (*Philologie romane*), philosophy, history or even Greco-Latin studies (*Philologie classique*). However, ending with ‘Mennell and the USA’ seemed to be a guarantee of success, primarily because *The American Civilizing Process* obviously fascinates students and forces them to see things differently, thanks to its erudition, humour [4][#N4] and strong critical flavour. Regarding this, don’t forget I am not from France, but from Belgium. In Belgium, global admiration for America has remained stronger since the Second World War than it is in France. The French are at the same time much more Euro-sceptical and Anti-American than ‘we’ Belgians are.

To put it briefly, what we try to grasp with the students, is how Mennell’s approach in this book gives a *plus-value* to the more ‘classical’ and mainstream analysis of European integration, but also in comparison with other socio-historical approaches, especially, although not only, with Elias’s process sociology. I have here particularly in mind *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012 [1939]), but also later texts, like my favourite

'Changes in the 'We-I' Balance' (1987) in *The Society of Individuals* (2010), which more or less explicitly deals with the growing integration of the European continent and of humanity as a whole in the long-term. I have always found this essay of great relevance to thinking about Europe in a globalised world (Delmotte 2012).

Thanks to this short teaching experience, and thanks to the students, I came to think that, if we have to sum up, *The American Civilizing Process* proposes a triple innovation or, to put it better, three characteristics that, taken together, enrich the socio-historical approach itself, its theory and methods in general, and more particularly or concretely the sociological understanding of some of the major issues for European integration. In what follows, I would like to highlight and discuss briefly what, for me, are these three dimensions innovatively explored in Stephen's book.

'*Comparaison est raison*' [5].[#N5]

As we know, historical sociology is not necessarily comparative. We could even say that the more historical sociology tends towards history (the discipline), the less comparative it is. To put it differently, historical sociology seems to be divided historically into two branches or trends. One of these is rather 'causality oriented', 'explanatory', often comparative and more or less influenced by Marx's theory (see Moore 1966; Skocpol 1979); while the other branch is more 'interpretive', 'hermeneutic', non-comparative and more or less influenced by Max Weber's work (see Déloye 2003: 23–8). The first is more 'nomothetic', interested in establishing 'laws' or at least generalities of social development; the second more ideographic, interested in understanding historical singularities and their very meaning (for instance among followers of the works of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, 1926–2006).

In this respect, Elias's originality was to pursue a strong sociological, explicative ambition, but initially within the framework of the study of a single, broad, historical context: Modern Europe. Most of the time, Elias even avoids both external and internal comparison. Exceptions are of course notable and precious. The discussion of the distinction between the notions of culture and civilisation in *On the Process of Civilisation* (2012: 13–57) is one of them. Another, in *Studies on the Germans*, examines differences in (German, French, English, Dutch) national habitus in Europe (Elias 2013a [1989]: 3–25). It remains true that in general Elias's historical sociology combines causal explanation and hermeneutics, an ambition towards generalisation with the study of singularity, in a way that is very comparable to that of Max Weber in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (2005 [1930]), or to Sigmund Freud's *Civilisation and its Discontents* (2010 [1930]), for a more speculative example. Of course, the methods, conclusions and even subjects are different, but Elias's *Process* (2012 [1939]) and these two books share a single historical but very large subject or field, an explanatory goal, and a comprehensive, interpretive approach.

In his book, Stephen Mennell's explicit aim is to use and develop Elias's process model in order to question the American model (Mennell 2007: 4–22). In other words, Mennell adds a coat, which is comparison. By doing this, he deepens our understanding of both American political development and the European civilising process, while also enriching the process model itself by testing it, and translating it (as had already been tried with Asiatic court societies).

As Mennell's readers know, comparison of the processes of development of Europe and of the United States of America reveals that the American model is neither wholly 'exceptional' nor just a carbon copy of the European one. Both images are caricatures. For a striking example opposing the second, 'carbon copy', hypothesis, American society is undoubtedly more violent, first and foremost owing to foreshortened state

formation and democratisation processes that did not allowed the monopolisation of violence to take root and be accepted (see Menzell 2007, especially the crucial chapter 6 on Violence and Aggressiveness, pp. 122– 57).

Another distinctive aspect is that the American society has always featured, and continues to feature, a plurality of competing aristocracies (Northern White Anglo Saxon Protestant [WASP] bourgeoisie and working upper classes, Southern Junkers or ‘plantocracy’, etc.), which were never unified by one or other group nor hierarchized like in the European model (see chapter 4: 81–105).

Transposed into the study of the recent and short-term history of Europe, the role of competing and leading ‘aristocracies’ (in the broad sense) is extremely interesting in understanding the process of building the European Union and how the EU actually works (instead of how it could or should be), namely in a sociological approach. The issue of currently existing European aristocracies (or Eurocracies) fits with the studies that have been carried out in the last few decades in the field of the political sociology of the EU, especially in France (see Rowell and Mangenot 2010; Majastre and Mercenier 2016). In many of them, the influence of Pierre Bourdieu is discernible (Cohen 2006; Dezalay and Rask Madsen 2006). These studies have contributed more broadly to ‘normalising’ EU studies (Saurugger 2009: 29–32). This means that recent research in political sociology, but also in international relations or public policy analysis, have begun to transform the EU into a ‘normal’ object of study for the social sciences, manageable through the classical tools, theories and concepts that were conceived in order to study nation-state societies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These new approaches however do not reduce the EU to such a model of society or to a (federal or multinational) state *en devenir*. They rather question, for instance, the role of social elites, of the lawyers and legal experts in particular (Vauchez 2007), or of the administration and bureaucracy (Georgakakis and de Lassalle 2007; Georgakakis 2012), in constituting new transnational arenas based on their own ‘social capital’. In all cases, when compared with mainstream visions in European studies, they cease to view the EU as a ‘*sui generis*’ phenomena, radically original, self-explaining and defined by its supposed ideals of integration and unity. New approaches no longer consider the EU essentially as a field of competition between national French, British, German interests and worldviews: federalism, post-nationalism, multi-nationalism, etc.

Dealing with ideas

Following this, the second point I want to highlight concerns the treatment of political philosophy and political theories and ideas in Stephen Menzell’s book. We remember that Elias, in a rather materialist way, almost ‘ignored’ ideologies, institutional models and political regimes, as if it was not “the” problem, or not *his* problem. Once again, a significant exception, although brief, is provided by *Studies on the Germans*. In that book, Elias analyses the German national habitus, which was marked by the lack of anti-authoritarian, liberal, democratic or dissident political figures, able to defend German Enlightenment values of equality and freedom in the political sphere (Elias 2013: 17–20, 192–97, 251–2). Going further, in *The American Civilizing Process*, the way political ideas and representations are sociologically treated – I mean the way political ideas are carefully, critically and seriously taken into account – is highly innovative from the very beginning of chapter 1, ‘American Civilization’, which deals with the founding fathers of America (Menzell 2007: 23–39). Here, Menzell highlights the importance of a double contradiction in their ways of thinking. The first concerns the conception of civilisation itself: on the one hand, civilisation is, in Thomas Jefferson’s vision, a sort of ‘Burkeian’ secular legacy; on the other hand, the same Jefferson considers civilisation as being built up on modern political institutions! A second paradox comes from the Virginian *Declaration of Rights*, which proclaims that ‘All men are by nature equally free and independent’. According to Menzell, this illustrates a conception that sees progress as innate, and as static, and thus finally as very situated and highly paradoxical

for a concept of movement! This second paradoxical concept (an innate and static progress) is even more fraught with consequences than the first paradoxical concept (a civilisation inherited from the distant past, yet a modern civilisation). One of the most important historical, political and social consequences is thus the ideological hegemony of self-government, which is carefully analysed by Mennell throughout the book.

Once again, such a sociological operation, on the significance of ideas and conceptions, should be transposed into the current political sociology of the EU because it opens a new field of research and a new perspective that has not yet been explored in the sociological turn that has been initiated by, for example, the works of Adrian Favell (Favell 2010 for a preview). Current sociological approaches sometimes remain very micro-sociological and empirical indeed, for these two dimensions have been long absent from European studies.

In addition, for a long time the field of European studies has been influenced by apologetics for the ideals of the supposed founding fathers of the European project (Jean Monnet, Robert Schuman), and often overestimated their role. In contrast, interesting research programmes in sociology and in history have recently been deconstructing such ‘myths’ (Cohen 2006a; Joly 2007) – but they sometimes do so to a point at which they remain or become in their turn highly normative. The scepticism regarding the ‘building Europe’ model and the ideals associated with it is finally tending to supersede their glorification. There are of course notable exceptions, for example, the work done by Chris Shore (2010) in his research on European cultural policies about the (highly paradoxical, unrealistic and thus illusory) idea of ‘unity in diversity’. However, there is much to do in that field. The political sociology of the EU has not yet learned the merits of a short piece of political theory, and above all of serious ideological self-detachment. The problem, in the end, is not only the journey in EU studies from glorification (which remains dominant) to criticism or disillusion. The problem in both cases is to be open about which standpoint is adopted: which values or which political concerns motivate the sociologist, his or her analysis, his or her choice of topic. It is from this that my third and last short point derives.

Civilising, criticising

The Weberian principle I have just mentioned does not concern the possibility of neutrality, but the conditions of the neutralisation of affects and values, and consequently the objectivity of social knowledge. Such a principle seems to be so evident that it is often implicit – but quite rarely honoured! Most of the time it is not, for various reasons. In Elias’s case, the rejection of any form of speculative thought, normativity or political discourse is often so strong that it can sometimes make auto-elucidation of values quite difficult (Elias 2013). Here again, *The American Civilizing Process* makes the point and achieves the promises contained, again and again, in *Studies on the Germans* (1996: 1), even more precisely than in *On the Process of Civilisation*. Mennell’s book, with the invasion of Iraq in 2003 as a background, proposes and explicitly assumes a hard critical perspective on US politics *and* tries in the same movement to understand how such developments had been made possible in the long-term. Mennell asks how it is possible that United States is hated and at the same time Americans do not seem to question *why* they are hated. This poses the question of the hated ‘Empire’, be it declining or not – which is more topical than ever for both the USA and Europe. In Mennell’s book, each chapter is more or less a ‘trial against’ America, but each (part of the) trial is presented as such and seriously conducted. Supposed equality and the asymmetric American dream; market society; racial violence; the genocide of Native Americans – about which ‘it is hard not to moralise’, he writes (2007: 193) –; the ‘Dubya addendum’ and the colonisation of the world; nationalism and the de-civilising role of religiosity in contemporary American society: Mennell *ne lâche rien!* All hands on deck, he denounces *and* explains, dissociates the two ambitions, and by doing this really honours both. In my view, such a clear perspective is too often cruelly lacking in EU studies.

These three short points are probably not original, and perhaps they will have occurred to all of Mennell's readers. However, I would like to add one more. *The American Civilizing Process* is not only a brilliant, stimulating book; it is also a courageous one, as the author renounces to any comfortable position by defending at least two additional theses. One is about the difficulty for sociology to develop in an American national context where the civilising process has promoted such a strong ideology of self-government and a comparable complex of superiority. It is certain that that Stephen did not only make friends among American sociologists and academics by alleging this. And/but at the same time, the author strongly insists on a final reality-congruent idea: 'we', Europeans – English, French, Latins, Jews, Muslims or whatever – are certainly not better than 'they', the Americans, are, whether we imitate them or turn our backs on them. Above all, we all are in the same boat, whether we like the idea or not, whether we want it or not. Once again: we all know this, but fail to draw the conclusions.

Epilogue: Better starve free than be a fat slave

I am afraid that I am not in a good enough position to write a proper 'commendation' paper. I will therefore borrow my words from others to conclude. In 2006 in Leicester (my first conference in Elias's 'home base!'), another Stephen (yes, they are all named 'Stephen', you have to get used to that) said to me with affection, about the one to whom we are paying homage: 'He's an eccentric'. That could be more or less true about any Englishman in the eyes of a poor continental human being, but it is particularly relevant here. For instance, it has always been hard for me to fully understand what exactly makes Stephen to laugh (so loud!).

But I would add: in Stephen's case, eccentricity also means freedom. It means to be an *ex-centric*, a free electron, someone *hors cadre*, who knows and respects rules but firmly refuses any kind of academic, political or social enslavement. That is why after a brief reflection I chose to conclude with one of Aesop's (620–564 BC) fables: *The Dog and the Wolf*. It was another eccentric, Jean de La Fontaine (1621–95), a very free *homme de cour*, if such a character exists, who whispered this choice into my ear.

A gaunt Wolf was almost dead with hunger when he happened to meet a House-dog who was passing by. 'Ah, Cousin,' said the Dog. 'I knew how it would be; your irregular life will soon be the ruin of you. Why do you not work steadily as I do, and get your food regularly given to you?'

'I would have no objection,' said the Wolf, 'if I could only get a place.'

'I will easily arrange that for you,' said the Dog; 'come with me to my master and you shall share my work.'

So the Wolf and the Dog went towards the town together. On the way there the Wolf noticed that the hair on a certain part of the Dog's neck was very much worn away, so he asked him how that had come about.

'Oh, it is nothing,' said the Dog. 'That is only the place where the collar is put on at night to keep me chained up; it chafes a bit, but one soon gets used to it.'

'Is that all?' said the Wolf. 'Then good-bye to you, Master Dog.'

'Better starve free than be a fat slave.'

To Stephen, I especially dedicate the so beautifully sounding French version by La Fontaine: *'Le loup et le chien'*.

*Un loup n'avait que les os et la peau,
Tant les chiens faisaient bonne garde.
Ce loup rencontre un dogue aussi puissant que beau,
Gras, poli, qui s'était fourvoyé par mégarde.
L'attaquer, le mettre en quartiers,
Sire loup l'eût fait volontiers;
Mais il fallait livrer bataille,
Et le mâtin était de taille
A se défendre hardiment.
Le loup donc, l'aborde humblement,
Entre en propos, et lui fait compliment
Sur son embonpoint, qu'il admire.
'Il ne tiendra qu'à vous, beau sire,
D'être aussi gras que moi, lui répartit le chien.
Quittez les bois, vous ferez bien:
Vos pareils y sont misérables,
Cancres, hères, et pauvres diables,
Dont la condition est de mourir de faim.
Car quoi? rien d'assuré; point de franche lippée;
Tout à la pointe de l'épée.
Suivez moi, vous aurez un bien meilleur destin.'*

*Le loup reprit: 'Que me faudra-t-il faire ?
– Presque rien, dit le chien: donner la chasse aux gens
Portants bâtons et mendiants;
Flatter ceux du logis, à son maître complaire:
Moyennant quoi votre salaire
Sera force reliefs de toutes les façons:*

*Os de poulets, os de pigeons,
 Sans parler de mainte caresse.’
 Le loup déjà se forge une félicité
 Qui le fait pleurer de tendresse.
 Chemin faisant, il vit le cou du chien pelé.
 ‘Qu’est-ce là? lui dit-il. – Rien. – Quoi? rien? – Peu de chose.
 Mais encor? – Le collier dont je suis attaché
 De ce que vous voyez est peut-être la cause.
 – Attaché? dit le loup : vous ne courez donc pas
 Où vous voulez ? – Pas toujours; mais qu’importe? –
 Il importe si bien, que de tous vos repas
 Je ne veux en aucune sorte,
 Et ne voudrais pas même à ce prix un trésor.’
 Cela dit, maître loup s’enfuit, et court encor.*

Notes

1. The *Colloque International Norbert Elias* took place at the Université de Haute Bretagne – Rennes II (13–14 October 2000) and gave birth to the very good book *Norbert Elias et la théorie de la civilisation. Lectures et critiques*, edited by Yves Bonny, Erik Neveu and Jean-Manuel de Queiroz (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2003). [♣.\[#N1-pt1\]](#)
2. Still in Rennes, and of course for *Figurations*, Issue 14. Time goes by. [♣.\[#N2-pt1\]](#)
3. I do not ignore that the expression ‘historical sociology’ is problematic in an Eliasian perspective: is not any sociology historical by ‘nature’, dealing with human and thus historical matters? Unfortunately, on the other hand, one cannot ignore the fact that every current in sociology as a whole has *not* taken the historical trend yet, above all in political sociology, despite some major efforts and a sensible evolution since the 1970s, and despite the pioneering works of Perry Anderson, Emmanuel Wallerstein and Charles Tilly. [♣.\[#N3-pt1\]](#)
4. I cannot resist quoting one of my favourite sentences in the book (from chapter 5 about ‘The Market Society’): ‘In perhaps the nearest Max Weber ever came in his writings to telling a joke, he recalled a story told him by a German doctor who had set up practice in a Midwestern town’ (Menell 2007: 108). So Menell-flavoured, isn’t it? [♣.\[#N4-pt1\]](#)
5. In French we usually say, on the contrary, that ‘*comparaison n’est pas raison*’. It signifies that the truth does *not* necessarily come from comparison, or that we cannot compare anything in order to really know something. Nevertheless, the expression is often used to highlight the use that can be made of comparison: evaluating one of the elements that is compared with others. [♣.\[#N5-pt1\]](#)

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Biography

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