

RVP International Seminar 2026 on *Self, Solidarity, and Civility**

Meeting Information

- **Date:** Wednesday, 19 August 2026
 - **Meeting Type:** Academic Seminar (Session 2)
 - **Topic:** Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 1 — *The History of Manners* (first 50 pages)
 - **Facilitator/Host:** João Vila-Chã (Professor)
 - **Attendees:** João (facilitator), Xin, Mohan, Shiva, Franklin, Maduabuchi (Dukor), Lidia, Dian, Yeping (Hu), Ravi Vincent, Nubong, Michał.
 - **Platform:** Online video conference
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Key Outcomes

The session combined community-building check-ins from participants across India, Britain/Sri Lanka, Peru, Nigeria, and Cameroon before transitioning into a structured seminar discussion of Elias's *History of Manners*. The group collectively interrogated Elias's redefinition of civilization as a dynamic historical process rather than a fixed moral achievement, with particular focus on the tension between his European-centric framework and the lived realities of participants from the Global South. Three synthesizing conclusions were offered by the facilitator: (1) the self is a historical achievement and ongoing process; (2) civility constitutes a somatized form of power inscribed in human bodies; and (3) solidarity is only achievable through explicit acknowledgment of interdependence.

Community Check-In: Global News Reports

India (Mohan)

- Described a Dalit landless agricultural laborers' movement approximately 100 km south of Chennai, developed by synthesizing **Paulo Freire's** conscientization

* Document elaborated with the Assistance of AI under the Supervision of Prof. João J. Vila-Chã. Before being distributed, the document was submitted to the revision/approval of the Participants in the Seminar.

methodology with **Ambedkar's praxis model** (three maxims: *educate, organize, agitate*).

- Movement is now self-sustaining; communities reclaimed land and run the organization independently.
- Confirmed Ambedkar studied under **John Dewey** at Columbia and was the principal architect of India's constitution.
- João noted a new Ambedkar Museum in Delhi, opened just before COVID, as highly recommended.

Britain/Sri Lanka (Shiva)

- Reported on the case of a young Black Cambridge professor who faced intense media scrutiny over alleged CV irregularities and PhD plagiarism accusations.
- The university (Liverpool Moore) formally declared there was no plagiarism, only "an error" in the thesis, but the distinction was not widely reported.
- Over **200 newspaper articles** were written against him; he resigned his position and was found dead approximately two weeks later.
- Significant protests erupted in Black British communities; the UK Prime Minister stated the situation "went beyond the limit"; political parties called for an end to such discrimination in academia.
- CV controversies included research fellowships being listed as visiting professorships at Ohio University and South African institutions.

Peru (Franklin)

- **El Niño** weather phenomenon approaching; described as unusually strong, potentially recurring every 20 years at peak intensity (versus a regular 4-year cycle).
- Most difficult months projected to be **January and February**; current winter temperatures already reaching 25°C.
- Heavy rains already occurring in southern Peru; alarm extends across Ecuador, Chile, and the Pacific coast of South America.

Nigeria (Maduabuchi)

- Country approaching a new election cycle characterized by ethnic tensions, Boko Haram activity in the north, secessionist agitation in the southeast, and economic deterioration (dollar dominance over local currency).

- Academic Staff Union of Nigeria (of which Maduabuchi is a member) faces salary non-payment despite announced increases.
 - Described a recent incident at his university: a professor caught a student cheating, allegedly leveraged the situation for sexual coercion, was subsequently beaten by a mob, and is now hospitalized; an independent inquiry has been demanded.
 - Referenced the ongoing Biafran secession agitation in southeastern Nigeria, tracing it to the 1967–70 civil war.
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Elias's Concept of Civilization — Core Analytical Discussion

Dian's Presentation

- Elias defines civilization **not as a fixed achievement or marker of cultural superiority** but as a long historical process through which patterns of conduct, emotional regulation, and social relationships gradually transform.
- Key mechanism: **external social constraints become internalized as self-restraint** as societies grow more complex and interdependent.
- Elias deliberately avoids a moralistic interpretation — he does not argue people become "better," but examines how particular forms of conduct emerge historically and become taken for granted.
- Dian connected this to Indonesia: younger generations are shifting paradigms, but older burdens of social expectation persist; she proposed exploring **neurodiversity** as a lens through which to further examine these dynamics within the seminar.

The Culture vs. Civilization Distinction (German/French/English)

- Elias establishes a methodological distinction: in German usage, *Kultur* emphasizes **inner depth, spiritual and intellectual values**; in French/English usage, *civilization* emphasizes **outward refinement, political progress, and social manners**.
- Xin drew a parallel to Chinese intellectual tradition: *culture* (文化) aligns with Confucian/Daoist/Buddhist modes of thinking and behavior, while *civilization* refers more to social institutions and material accomplishments — closely resembling the German distinction.
- Yeping noted that Elias explicitly rejects both **statism** (fixed universal standards) and **historical relativism** (complete relativization) as inadequate frameworks,

using cross-European comparison to demonstrate that even within Europe, civilizational standards diverge.

Power, Exclusion, and the Question of Who Decides

- Lidia raised the central critical question: **who holds the power to define which behaviors are "civilized" and which are "barbaric"?**
- Standards of civilized behavior were created by dominant social groups (e.g., court aristocracy) and subsequently spread through state, law, education, and colonial expansion until they appeared natural and universal.
- Risk identified: calling certain behaviors "barbaric" may describe not real moral differences but rather **the justification of social and political domination** by ruling groups.
- Franklin noted the tension in Elias's project: he attempts to be scientifically neutral, yet the category of "civilization" carries an inescapable **moral weight** throughout the text; the parallel concept of *Enlightenment* was raised as similarly ambiguous between sociological description and moral prescription.

Sociogenesis and Psychogenesis

- Maduabuchi summarized Elias's dual methodology: **sociogenesis** refers to transformation of social structures and consolidation of political authority (state formation); **psychogenesis** refers to how those structural changes become inscribed as individual habits, emotions, and forms of self-control.
- Xin elaborated three mechanisms by which society enters the individual: (1) **childhood socialization** — children absorb behavioral standards as natural without choosing them; (2) **growing adult interdependence** — adults must continuously self-monitor to maintain social status; (3) **external constraints becoming internal self-constraints** — a process not yet fully visible in the first 50 pages but structurally anticipated.
- Chinese parallels cited: classical children's texts (*Di Zigui*, the Three-Character Classic) as formal socialization mechanisms; the adult culture of *renqing* (social face/reputation) as lifelong behavioral monitoring; and the Confucian concept of *Shen Du* (moral self-watchfulness) as a near-exact analog to Elias's internalized self-restraint.
- Ravi Vincent added that behaviors once publicly accepted (spitting, nudity, open violence) became sources of **acute social discomfort** over time — what Elias terms **sociogenic fears**, rooted in social pressures rather than innate biological instincts.

Intellectual Background and Key Sources Referenced in Elias

- Ravi Vincent traced Elias's intellectual trajectory: doctoral dissertation supervised by **Richard Höningwald** (neo-Kantian), but Elias was dissatisfied with neo-Kantianism's absence of the social dimension and moved to sociology.
 - Key authors cited by Elias in the text: **Baron d'Holbach** (18th century, on free will as illusion); **Erasmus** (*On Civility in Children*, 16th century); **Giovanni della Casa** (*Galateo*, 1551–1558); **Elizabeth Charlotte (Madame Palatine)** (letters from the French royal court); **Jean-Baptiste de La Salle** (*The Rules of Christian Decorum and Civility*).
 - Core argument: rules originally practiced strictly by the **upper-class courtly elite** trickled down to the broader bourgeoisie through manuals like those of Erasmus and della Casa.
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Critical Perspectives from the Global South

African Ontology and the Limits of Elias's Framework

- Maduabuchi argued that the Western concept of civilization is **not directly applicable to Africa**: in African philosophy, civility is fundamentally a **moral issue** rooted in social and political life, not a European-style refinement process.
- The **bifurcation of African being** caused by colonialism has made African cultural dynamism negative — shifting African culture away from its pristine ontological roots.
- Parallel drawn between Elias and **Frantz Fanon** (*The Wretched of the Earth*): both address sociogenic and psychogenic dimensions of cultural transformation; Fanon describes post-colonial Africa as mentally disorganized in ways analogous to Elias's civilizing pressures, but from a decolonial perspective.
- Maduabuchi referenced **Walter Rodney's** *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* and Fanon to argue that the civilizing mission of Christian missionaries — including his own father's work as an interpreter for Catholic missionaries — had net negative consequences for African culture.
- **Chinua Achebe** and **Wole Soyinka** cited as examples of literary decolonization ("Africanity") — their works function as instruments of cultural reclamation, not merely literary production.
- Maduabuchi introduced his own theoretical framework: **theistic panpsychic animism** of African philosophy, grounded in Igbo ontology, as the basis for reconstructing African selfhood, solidarity (*togetherness*), and civility (*give yourself respect as you respect others*).

Nubong (Cameroon)

- Elias's framework, while historically sensitive, **remains tethered to the European trajectory** even as its own logic demands that civilization cannot be the exclusive property of any single culture.
- The colonial project justified itself through a **civilizing mission** that declared African peoples pre-logical, lacking ontology, and incapable of philosophical selfhood — a framing that erodes African identity.
- African ontology by contrast holds a multi-dimensional temporal perspective (past, present, future linked) that resists both the chaos/superiority dichotomy and linear Eurocentric framing.
- Referenced **Achille Mbembe**: all human societies participate in complex orders of change without implying a single center or universal ladder of progress.
- Levinas's concept of **the Other** invoked: Western philosophy since Plato has been too ego-centric, neglecting the Other whose recognition opens genuine relational subjectivity.

India (Mohan)

- The Western "civilized man" would experience **cultural shock** if relocated to South Asia — the entire transition from feudal to industrial to post-industrial society that produced European manners has no direct analog in colonized countries.
- Indian bourgeoisie educated in England have internalized the Western paradigm of thought, effectively reimposing colonial consciousness on domestic populations.
- Baptist missionaries in Northeast India declared local cultures "dark age" and dismantled cultural unities, a direct example of the civilizing process as cultural destruction.
- Central question posed: **Who is the civilized man?** Is the developed West civilized, or does it merely label the Global South as uncivilized? No universal criteria for "civilized" exist that are not themselves products of power.

Latin America (Franklin)

- Drew parallel between Elias and **Garcilaso de la Vega** (16th century, son of a Spanish official and Inca princess), who described the Spanish colonial encounter as a transition from "low culture" to "good culture" without explicitly using the term civilization.

- Crucially, Garcilaso applied the same logic **retrospectively to the Incas themselves**: the Incas had performed the same cultural superiority move on preceding Andean cultures, suggesting the civilizing impulse is not exclusively European but a recurring feature of imperial expansion. 5758
- Broader implication: Roman, Greek, Egyptian, and other empires similarly positioned themselves as bearers of higher values — the concept may be universal to empire, with Europe having provided the modern vocabulary.
- João noted Garcilaso de la Vega as the first translator into Spanish of **Isaac Abravanel's** *Dialoghi d'Amore*, a Renaissance text on love, elegance, and, ultimately, manners as well.

Michał's Historical-Contextual Reading (Poland/Silesia)

- Identified the original German title of Elias's 1939 Swiss publication as *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation*, and argued that book's true stakes are much beyond mere etiquette history.
- Elias wrote the preface in **September 1936**, in the context of rising Nazism, having fled Breslau (now Wrocław, Poland) when Hitler came to power.
- Silesia presented as a **typological case**: a 100×100 mile region where three different civilizations coexisted — Soviet-occupied Red Silesia, German Upper Silesia (with Bavarian Catholic social teaching influence), and Polish-German borderlands.
- Example of the city of **Cieszyn/Těšín**: residents changed citizenship six times within a single lifetime while remaining at the same address — their stable identity rested not on state affiliation but on language, customs, and national culture.
- Michał's father crossed the Polish-German border daily for his first job, sleeping on one side and working on the other — a lived embodiment of civilization as relational and contested.
- Introduced **Feliks Koneczny** (*On the Plurality of Civilizations*, late 1930s): identified eight major civilizations (Arab, Byzantine, Burmese, Chinese, Latin, Turanian, Jewish, and one other) that together build the civilized world, arguing that a single global civilization has never existed and that these civilizations will continue to compete.
- Presented documentation from the **Ravensbruck concentration camp** (Institute of Polish Memory publication) as evidence of Nazi Germany's use of

civilization symbols to justify atrocity — the ultimate collapse of the civilizing process into barbarism.

Synthesizing Discussion: Self, Solidarity, and Civility

- Yeping argued that the **consciousness of civilization** as developed in European modernity has become a consciousness of **superiority**, now reproduced globally through economic class (the 1%, AI elites, big business) rather than exclusively through national or racial hierarchies. 68
- The standardization of manners — using upper-class court behavior as the universal benchmark — functions as a **tool of justification** for domination across all cultures, not only in Europe.
- Yeping called for reading Elias **without ideological lenses**: the seminar's purpose is to grow intellectually by engaging seriously with what the author actually argues, rather than immediately filtering through pre-existing frameworks.
- Maduabuchi connected Yeping's point on consciousness to the seminar's tripartite theme: **self** is the overarching category that Elias largely neglects, and without a grounded theory of self, neither solidarity nor civility can be properly theorized.
- Lidia synthesized: civility **connects** sociogenesis and psychogenesis — it is the point where external behavioral expectations become internalized self-restraint; this self-restraint can support solidarity (mutual respect, trust, awareness) but can also **weaponize exclusion** when dominant groups use their own standards to marginalize others as "uncivilized."
- Lidia's critique: Elias's framework is **too linear and Eurocentric**, treating the Western civilizing process as a universal developmental model even when his own methodology should resist this. 73

Facilitator's Closing Synthesis

Three conclusions offered by João as the session's intellectual takeaways:

1. **The self as historical achievement:** Elias demonstrates that the self is not a given but a process — an ongoing historical construction (João noted Charles Taylor would strongly endorse this reading).
2. **Civility as somatized power:** Manners are not merely social conventions; they are the inscription of power into human bodies. Following Foucault, our bodies

are inscribed in discourse — power appropriates the body through the civilizing process.

3. **Solidarity through acknowledged interdependence:** Solidarity is possible precisely because humans are interdependent (echoing John Donne's "no man is an island"). Making interdependence explicit is a precondition for genuine solidarity.

João also shared that Norbert Elias received his **only full professorship at the University of Accra, Ghana**, in the early 1960s — a biographical detail he found deeply resonant given the seminar's Global South composition and the group's critique of Elias's Eurocentrism.

Action Items & Next Steps

- **All participants:** Continue reading the remainder of *The Civilizing Process*, Vol. 1 (*The History of Manners*) before Friday's session.
- **João:** Will send assigned page portions to each participant so that the full text is collectively covered by Friday; each person will present their assigned pages critically and conclude with a reflection from their own cultural/contextual standpoint.
- **Dian:** Continue developing the connection between Elias's framework and **neurodiversity** as a research focus.
- **Maduabuchi:** Continue developing the theoretical framework of **theistic panpsychic animism** as an African philosophical counterpoint to Elias, incorporating Igbo, Hausa, and Yoruba linguistic/ontological perspectives. 46
- **Nubong:** Further explore the tension between Elias's European trajectory and African ontological traditions in the research paper being prepared.
- **All participants:** Keep notes on challenges, questions, and evolving ideas throughout the week; the seminar's goal is intellectual and human transformation through serious scholarly engagement.