

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

Meeting Information

- **Date:** August 21, 2026
- **Session:** 3rd session of the RVP Seminar 2026
- **Topic:** *Self, Solidarity, and Civility* — focused on Norbert Elias, *The History of Manners* (Part 2) and a preview of Calhoun's article on civility
- **Facilitator/Host:** Prof. João Vila-Chã (Roma)
- **Attendees:** João (Portugal), Lidia (Poland), Mark (Washington DC), Maduabuchi (Nigeria), Oleksandr (Ukraine), Adrienne (Washington DC), Franklin (Peru), Mohan (India), Shiva (Sri Lanka), Isaac (Zambia), Xin (China), En (China), Nubong (Cameroon), Michał (Poland), Yeping (China), Ravi (India).

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Key Outcomes

The session delivered a full round of scholarly presentations on Norbert Elias's *The History of Manners*, covering the book's core arguments about the civilizing process, table manners, bodily functions, emotional control, aggression, and knightly life. Presenters drew connections to African communitarianism, Indian caste dynamics, Latin American social history, Sri Lankan ethnic conflict, and Chinese dynastic culture, demonstrating the book's global relevance and its limits as a Western-centric narrative. The session opened with Alexander's firsthand account of the ongoing war in Ukraine, grounding the seminar's themes of civility and solidarity in immediate geopolitical reality. The Calhoun article was deferred to the following Monday due to time constraints, and next week's reading will introduce Bennett's *Civility: A Cultural History* alongside Calhoun's article.

Ukraine Update — Alexander's Report

- **Military situation:** Russian forces are striking Ukraine with ballistic missiles daily; Ukrainian anti-missile stocks have been depleted and neighboring countries are unwilling to sell more because they need them for their own defense.

* 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.

- **Political situation:** Ukraine remains a democracy even under wartime conditions; the dismissal/reorientation of Minister Fedorov, who called for presidential elections, was noted — public consensus opposes holding elections during active war because Ukrainian law prohibits elections under martial law, though Oleksandr emphasized that political debate itself is healthy and natural.
- **Zelensky's support:** Approximately **65% approval rating** according to sociological data, which Alexander characterized as a strong result under the circumstances.
- **Personal impact:** Alexander's relatives remain in Dnipro; buildings of his own university have been destroyed by bombs and missiles; daily life involves constant news of death among acquaintances.
- **Occupied territories:** Ukrainians in Russian-occupied areas face what Alexander described as genocide — prohibition of the Ukrainian language, imprisonment in special camps, and death penalties for any attempt to assert human rights.
- **Peace prospects:** Ukraine has declared readiness for a ceasefire, but Russia refuses; Oleksandr stated that Putin's goal is to eliminate Ukraine as a state and eradicate Ukrainian national identity, and that Russian public support for Putin makes a near-term solution unlikely.
- **Solidarity expressed:** Shiva drew parallels to Sri Lanka's 30-year ethnic conflict (1982–2010), noting that minority freedom fighters were internationally labeled terrorists; he expressed solidarity with Ukraine.
- **João's statement:** João characterized the Russian invasion as “the most unspeakable, unjust, immoral, illegal war since 1945,” comparable only to Hitler's invasion of Poland on September 1, 1939, and called on world leaders — especially the United States — to demand Russia withdraw.

Participant Introductions and Context

- **Isaac Mutelo** (Zambia/Zimbabwe): Director of Research, Innovation, Industrialization, and Quality Assurance at Arrupe Jesuit University; teaches philosophy of religion, political philosophy, AI and robotics, interreligious dialogue; recently appointed **consultant to the Dicastery for Interreligious Dialogue** by the Holy Father (January of that year).
- **Mark Mihalski** (Washington DC): Teaches business, marketing, and management at CUA; strong interest in philosophy; proposed giving a future short presentation on **education reform in universities and AI**, targeting October in Poland.

- **Lidia** (Poznań, Adam Mickiewicz University): Currently in Washington DC; visited the **Library of Congress** and planned a return visit; reported Poland's situation as stable with no alarming news.
- **Michał** (Poland, Washington DC): Researching at the John Paul II Institute, focusing on John Paul II's legacy and its application to ethics, morals, and social development.
- **Adrienne** (Washington DC, born there): Noted Washington DC's transformation for its **250th anniversary celebrations** including a race event.
- **Franklin** (Peru): Tenured position at San Marcos University — the **oldest university in the Americas**; also affiliated with Universidad del Pacífico.
- **Dr. John Mohan Razu** (India): Background in theological institutions and philosophy/social ethics; currently **coordinating a Bible commentary** on Dalit, indigenous peoples, and migrants for Omega Publishers, aiming to complete New Testament books by year end — a Catholic-Protestant joint initiative.
- **Shiva** (Sri Lanka, based in UK): Senior lecturer in philosophy and law in Sri Lanka (15+ years); currently completing a **PhD in constitutional law**.
- **Ravi Vincent** (India): Organizing a **national conference in October** expecting over 5,000 youth; mission focused on youth ministry in India.
- **En Wang** (China): Faculty at Xi'an University focused on philosophy of science.
- **Maduabuchi**: Professor of philosophy at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, specializing in logic, African philosophy, and socio-political philosophy; formerly visiting scholar at University of Ghana.
- **Xin**: Shared experience of visiting the library and a nearby church in Washington DC.

Presentations on Norbert Elias — *The History of Manners*

Lidia — The Civilizing Process as Gradual Transformation (70-99)

- Civilization for Elias is neither a permanent achievement nor evidence of moral superiority; it is a long, uneven process in which social organization transforms into **bodily habits, emotional dispositions, and automatic self-control**.
- Elias draws on sources spanning centuries — Erasmus's *De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*, Giovanni della Casa's *Galateo*, manuals by Courtin and La Salle — treating apparently trivial practices (eating from shared dishes, using forks, blowing one's nose) as historical evidence.
- **Five core arguments presented:**

1. **Civilization as gradual shift, not rupture:** Erasmus stands “on the bridge” between medieval *courtoisie* and modern civility; change occurs through shifting **thresholds of embarrassment and shame**, not sudden invention. By the 17th century, behaviors acceptable in the 13th century had become vulgar.
 2. **Sociogenesis and psychogenesis:** Social changes (weakening of medieval hierarchy, emergence of court society, growing interdependence) produce new requirements that become inscribed in the individual’s body and emotional life through education and repeated practice.
 3. **Emotions as socially constructed:** Embarrassment and shame replace external supervision; individuals anticipate the gaze of others and self-restrain before being reprimanded. Correction shifts from public shaming (comparing people to animals) toward private, tactful intervention — already visible in Erasmus.
 4. **Bodily practices encode power:** The transition from shared dish to individual plates individualizes the meal space; the fork regulates contact between hand, food, and others. Table hierarchy (the highest-ranking person unfolds the napkin first) reflects aristocratic social structure; only with democratization can everyone perform the same gesture simultaneously.
 5. **Civility and solidarity:** Civility can protect others from discomfort and reduce direct aggression, but it also creates boundaries that exclude the “uncivilized.” Erasmus’s key virtue is **tolerance toward the shortcomings of others**.
- **Concluding insight:** The civilized body is a **socially produced body** — external constraints are practiced until internalized as self-restraint; civility can be understood as a form of **somatized power**.

Franklin — The spread and social function of manners

- Noted Elias’s insightful *excursus* digressions as philosophically valuable, comparing them to the seminar’s own method of productive tangents.
- Elias identifies the **target audience** of manners manuals: primarily people outside the court (new middle class) who wanted to emulate court behavior without being part of it — a conscious intention by authors to expand civilization downward.
- **Personal connection:** Franklin’s grandparents referenced *Manuel Carreño’s Manual* (Venezuelan author, mid-19th century), which contained nearly identical instructions on fork use and table conduct — demonstrating the global diffusion of European civility norms.
- Social recognition as motivation: people copied court manners to gain **social approval and respect**, even if they could never formally join the court; this spread manners beyond the bourgeoisie to other social layers relatively quickly.

- Noted the term *civilité* used by some as a marker of accomplished civilization — in tension with Elias’s insistence that it is always a process.
- Parallel between **table manners and speech manners**: a similar civilizing process governed how one addressed strangers or nobles.
- **Etymology of civility terms**: *politeness* (polis), *urbanity* (urbs/urban), *civility* (civitas) — all rooted in city life, suggesting that the “correct” life is urban life.
- **Critical application to Latin America**: The spread of European manners was “harmful” in Latin America, creating feelings of inferiority among rural and farming populations who lacked “city manners.” This urban-rural hierarchy of civility persists today.

Nubong — Bodily Functions, Shame, and the Shift in Reasoning (129-143)

- Elias’s focus in this section: **modesty, decency, and guidance** in everyday bodily life — coughing, holding back rheum, avoiding flatulence in public or holy places.
- Key tension: embarrassment as a **shifting frontier of shame** in society; what was once acceptable becomes socially unacceptable as the threshold of shame rises.
- **Christian civility code**: Elias introduces decency in bodily dressing and conduct; quotes advising against touching or exposing one’s body in company, especially across sexes.
- From the 18th–19th century onward, Johann Christian’s *Gallian Ethics* introduces the concept of **polite society** — a circle of cultured, refined, well-mannered people — as the new standard, creating a secular dichotomy between refined and unrefined.
- **African communal contrast**: In traditional African societies, the family is the base structure of social regulation, moving from family → community → society (bottom-up), unlike the European top-down model where the elite class sets standards that filter downward.
- Post-war period introduces a **relaxation framework** — people speak without embarrassment or shame; fake civilization emerges characterized by a discrepancy between adult behavior and childhood conditioning.
- **Critical deconstruction of Elias**: Nubong identified four weaknesses: (1) the **fallacy of linear progress**, (2) neglect of power and class, (3) the cost of self-compulsion, and (4) historicism.
- **Concluding questions raised**: Is shame socially constructed and therefore deconstructable? Is it possible to have a less shame-based relationship with bodily functions without abandoning social order? Does the globalized dominance of Western bodily norms constitute **cultural imperialism** imposed on non-Western societies?

Mohan — On bourgeois social ordering

- From the 15th century onward, the **French bourgeoisie and middle-class intellectuals** ordered social structure, including dictating behavior for those who served food — even servants were not allowed to cough and had to serve carefully; their seating was at a lower level.
- **Etiquette as a mechanism of class domination:** How the dominant class behaves, and how subservient classes must behave, is strictly regulated and monitored — etiquette is the major working mechanism of the dominant class.
- **India parallel:** Dress codes in India exclude those who do not conform — even millionaires may be refused entry to restaurants for violating prescribed dress codes; these codes were largely inherited from British colonizers.
- **Hands vs. forks:** In India, the majority of people — especially lower-middle class, villagers, and ghetto residents — eat with their hands; the history of manners depicts this as uncivilized, creating a system where the bourgeoisie continues to prescribe acceptable behavior and those who do not conform are excluded.
- **Caste-class interplay:** In India, lower caste automatically implies lower class; this double victimization compounds exclusion. Resistance to dominant cultural ethos is ongoing.
- **Key question raised:** What alternatives can be proposed? The book elicits awareness that domination through manners “cannot go on,” but does not itself provide alternatives.

Ravi Vincent — Bedroom Conduct, Religious Orders, and De-civilization (160-191)

- **Medieval shared sleeping arrangements:** Erasmus’s advice on bedchamber conduct addressed the reality of shared beds and shared rooms — instructions on lying quietly, not tossing, not pulling blankets, maintaining modesty.
- **Key texts cited:** *Stans Puer ad Mensam* (John of Garland, Latin medieval text on table manners for young people); *Book of Precedents* by Furnivall (didactic and moralistic instructions); *Pairi Brois* (French verse translation) and Jean Sulpice’s Latin original.
- **Biblical grounding:** Connected bodily discipline to 1/2 Corinthians — “the body is the temple of God” — arguing that bodily discipline was already scripturally mandated.
- **Religious orders as civilizing agents:** Jean Baptiste de La Salle used his Christian Brothers teaching order to transmit bodily modesty and modern privacy norms.
- **Rule of St. Benedict:** Monks slept dressed with belts so they could rise for midnight prayer — a spirit of constant watchfulness and humility; no requirement to undress.

- **Cluniacs vs. Cistercians:** Cluniacs initially followed St. Benedict strictly but gradually moved away from austerity; Cistercians (founded 1098 in France) sought a strict return to the simple life of the Benedictine rule.
- **Growing privatization of the body:** Started among upper classes in the 16th–17th centuries; illustrated by a scene from Gabriel de Mirol’s 13th-century romance where a servant girl is shocked to see her mistress bathing.
- **De-civilization in postmodernity:** Ravi raised the question of whether civilization is now **regressing** — deconstruction of traditional institutions, fear of anomie, irony of individual freedom. Examples: co-living hostels in Indian metropolitan cities (premarital cohabitation), and the **Devadasi system** (dedication of young girls to temple deities), officially banned nationally but still practiced in parts of northern India.
- **Call for reformers:** Every 50–100 years, the world needs a reformer; Elias himself functions as a reformer through his book; manners that do not harm others should be permitted.

Xin — Changes in Aggressiveness (191-205)

- **Six-section structure of Elias’s argument on aggression:**
 1. **Comparative method:** Differences in aggressiveness among Western nations shrink to near nothing when compared against societies at very different stages of affect control (e.g., war-bred societies from the Great Migrations era); aggressiveness is a **historical variable**, not a fixed human trait.
 2. **Medieval baseline:** War, hunting, and violence were public, celebrated, and pleasurable in medieval upper-class life — epic literature treated as genuine emotional evidence, not literary exaggeration.
 3. **Complicating the stereotype:** Secular knights often urged love of life over dwelling on death, showing emotional structure varied by social position even within the same century.
 4. **Violence beyond the nobility:** Ordinary medieval town life was also marked by frequent hostility and open cruelty — not a noble privilege but a general feature of medieval society.
 5. **Theoretical core:** Social structure itself demands and produces a given standard of emotional control; where central authority grows strong enough to enforce peace, the shaping of affects changes — **sociogenesis and psychogenesis as two aspects of one civilizing process**.
 6. **Transformation, not elimination:** Aggression was redirected into **spectating** (sport, boxing, theatre, film) — direct release becomes rarer while the pleasure

finds outlet through identification with performers within bounded limits; a 16th-century Parisian festival involving public cruelty to animals shows this transition was still incomplete relatively late.

- **Chinese parallels:** Tang Dynasty cockfighting for imperial entertainment; cricket fighting popular in Ming and Qing dynasties — people enjoyed watching small animals fight with no practical reason. These examples support Elias's pattern outside Europe: when people stop acting and start watching, societies are more connected and individuals have more self-control.

En Wang — Knightly Life and the Transformation to Court Society

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- **Medieval knightly emotional structure:** Social space centered on countryside, castles, hunting, warfare, and love; a relatively self-contained but strictly hierarchical world. 6
- **Three differences in emotional standards from medieval to modern:** (1) acceptance of violence and death; (2) unquestioning acceptance of social inequality; (3) open attitude toward sexuality and the body.
- **Driving force of transformation:** The rise of court society; knights who exercised power over their own territory gave way to courtiers living in urban environments with complex hierarchical networks — requiring more refined behavioral norms, calculated language, gesture, and eye contact calibrated to the precise rank of each interlocutor.
- **Greater self-control as survival:** Individuals had to internalize aggressive impulses to advance in court environments; ideals of courtly love eventually gave way to civility with comprehensive behavioral regulations. 6
- **Conclusion:** Elias demonstrates that individuals' feelings, behavior, and what we understand as human nature are profoundly shaped by the social structure and power relations of the historical period — not fixed or internally unchangeable.

Maduabuchi — Civilization as Transformation of Human Behavior (Appendix)

- This section functions as both an appendix and an introduction (to the 1968 edition), summarizing Elias's thesis: civilization is a **historical transformation of human behavior, emotions, and social relationships** — not simply the accumulation of education, science, technology, or religion.
- **Key theoretical terms:** (1) change in attitude and control of **affects** (emotions/impulses: anger, sexual desire, fear, excitement, aggression); (2) from external control to **self-control** (the "internal policeman"); (3) differentiation and integration; (4) community and classes.
- **Sociogenesis vs. psychogenesis:** Social structure (sociogenic mechanism) drives new requirements; personality structure (psychogenic mechanism) internalizes them. In

less complex societies, impulses are expressed more directly; in complex societies, individuals anticipate social rejection and regulate themselves.

- **Influence of Darwinism and the Age of Reason:** Maduabuchi identified the work as a form of **neo-Darwinism** — the evolution of human behavioral character — influenced by Comte, Spencer, and Marx; written during the age of reason when many parallel theories (social contract, evolution) were emerging simultaneously.
- **Marxist parallel:** The bourgeois-proletarian epoch that Marx critiqued is precisely the social context Elias describes; the evolution from slave-owner to patrician-proletarian to feudal-serf to bourgeois-working class maps onto faces of civilization.
- **Social contract theory parallel:** Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau's movement from barbaric state of nature to civil society overlaps with Elias's civilizing process, though Elias's novelty lies in the specificity of table manners and bodily conduct as the site of transformation.
- **African Igbo comparison:** Elias's model is associated with court society, voluntary restraint, centralized authority, and class differentiation. In Igbo society, social regulation derives from **kinship, lineage, age grade, marriage, communal ethics, and ancestral morality** — a hierarchical structure running from God through ancestors and deities to humans. Fear of divine wrath (not state power) enforces norms — a psychogenic mechanism equally effective but rooted in a panpsychic cosmology.
- **Key limitation:** Elias does not emphatically separate the individual from society — a point where his model actually **collapses with African communitarian values**.

Open Discussion and Integrative Commentary

- **Yeping:** Identified three stages in Elias — *courtoisie* (noble class), *civility* (public social behavior), and *civilization* (applied to “lower” classes or other nations); raised the question on page 83 of whether European society is really moving toward the standard its own watchword *civility* implies. Noted that **urbanization has replaced civility** as the dominant concept — to urbanize is now to civilize — and asked whether this represents real civilization or a misdirection.
- **Yeping (second contribution):** Cited page 78 — observing others' clothing is not just about body image but about **observing the soul**; this is the beginning of psychology and psychogenesis, and connects Elias to Freud and Foucault on social control and the formation of the self.
- **Mark:** Recalled reading Erasmus on table manners in Polish primary school; connected Romer's **exogenous growth theory** and the evolution from agricultural to urban living

to the three stages of courtesy-civility-civilization; noted the prehistoric handshake (open hand = no weapon) as a possible primitive precursor to civility.

- **Isaac:** Noted this was his first session; highlighted that Elias opens the possibility of **dialogue with African communitarianism** — Ubuntu principle (“I am because you are”; “a person is a person through other persons” in Nguni/isiZulu) can be aligned with self-restraint and civility, offering a non-Western framework that complements rather than contradicts Elias.
- **SYNTHESIS (João Vila-Chã):** A connection was established with George Washington’s *Rules of Civility*, Carreño’s Venezuelan manual, and Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self*. Accordingly, the history of manners was presented as integral to the **political history of nations** and to the archaeology of power structures developed by Freud and Foucault; declared the first week a success. Furthermore (added a posteriori for future reference):
- Norbert Elias’s *The History of Manners* represents a foundational work of historical sociology (among the 7 most important books in the history of Sociology) because it shows how ordinary practices—eating, using utensils, blowing one’s nose, spitting, bodily exposure, and speech—reveal long-term transformations in social structure and personality. “Civilization,” for Elias, is neither a possession of superior peoples nor a simple result of moral progress, technology, or hygiene. It is an uneven historical process in which growing social interdependence produces increasingly regular and internalized control of impulses and emotions.
- Elias’s method is distinctive as he treats etiquette manuals, schoolbooks, court regulations, and conduct literature as records and instruments of social formation. Their rules reveal what a society sought to curb, conceal, or cultivate; their repetition exposes the gap between desired conduct and established habit. By comparing such texts over centuries, Elias makes gradual changes in affect and behavior historically visible.
- His analysis is both *sociogenetic* and *psychogenetic*. *Sociogenesis* concerns changes in social organization: the decline of feudal fragmentation, the rise of court society, increased mobility, state formation, and denser networks of dependence. *Psychogenesis* concerns the corresponding formation of personality. External demands for tact, deference, cleanliness, and self-restraint gradually become shame, disgust, embarrassment, foresight, and self-control. Social compulsion is thus transformed into an inner discipline.
- This framework challenges the belief that modern manners arose chiefly from hygiene. Forks, handkerchiefs, individual plates, and taboos on touching greasy food first expressed changing thresholds of shame and repugnance; hygienic explanations often came later. The shift from medieval *courtoisie* to early-modern *civilité* captures

this process: courtly distinctions spread through bourgeois, clerical, and educational institutions until they became general norms.

- Elias also shows how privacy was historically produced. Bodily functions, slaughter, carving, dirt, violence, and uncontrolled appetite were progressively hidden from public view and moved “behind the scenes.” His lasting insight is that power works not only through institutions and ideas, but through the body itself: in gestures, utensils, habits, embarrassment, and the internalized sense that “one does not do that.”

Action Items and Next Steps

Next Steps & Action Items

- **Alexander & Michal:** Present assigned portions of **Calhoun’s civility article** — Monday, 9:00 a.m. Washington time.
- **Adrienne:** Deliver a formal comment on Calhoun’s opening lines at Monday’s session.
- **João:** Will distribute the main Reading for the upcoming week by end of day or early tomorrow; participants were reminded that the regular penum that each Member is expected to read is about 150 pages each week.
- **All participants:** The Moderator also recommended that each Participant should read Calhoun’s article before Monday. He also suggested that, according to possibility, everyone watches the movie *Odyssey* inasmuch as available locally for future inclusion in a moment of common discussion among all.

Washington DC, 21/08/2026